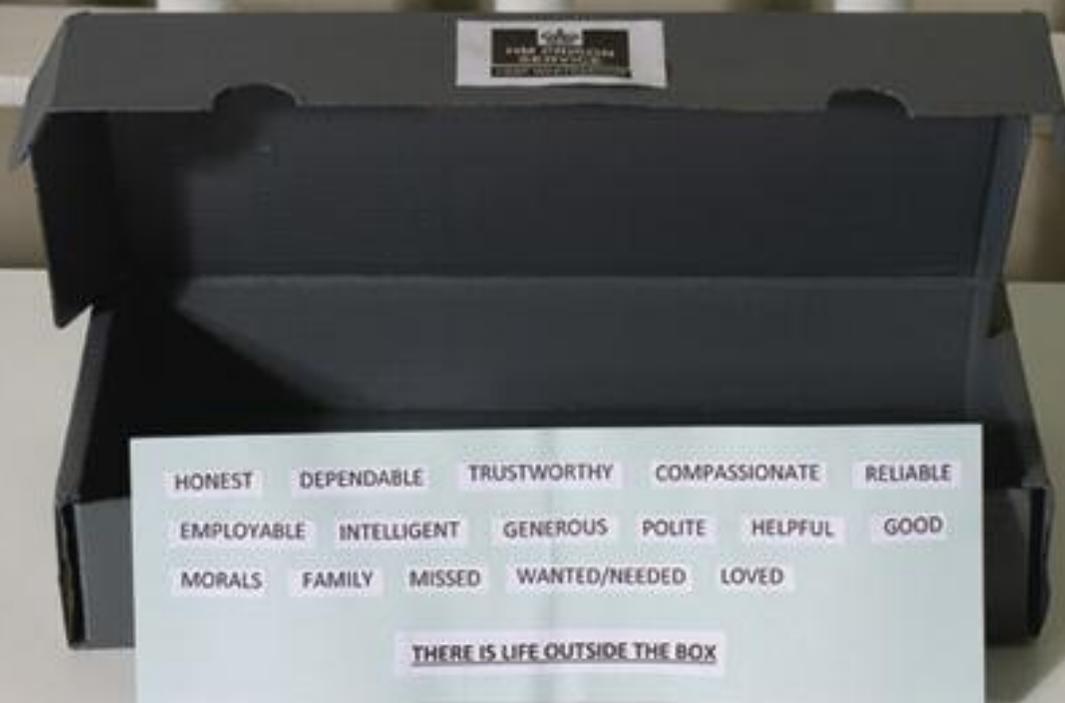


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21st CENTURY HARRIET TUBMAN?

Interview with Susan Burton

Susan Burton is the founder of A New Way of Life Re-entry Project (ANWOL), Los Angeles. She is interviewed by **Bryonn Bain**, Associate Professor in the Department of African-American Studies, UCLA

Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Rise up early in the morning and present yourself to Pharaoh, as he goes out to the water, and say to him, 'Thus says the Lord, 'Let my people go, that they may serve me.

-Exodus 8:20

Two decades before a bloody civil war called for an end to chattel slavery in the American south, a relentless freedom fighter named Harriet Tubman risked life and limb to liberate scores of African descendants from imprisonment on slave plantations. For the over a dozen dangerous trips she made on the *Underground Railroad*¹ — a sacrifice considered suicidal by countless others afraid to make the journey, Harriet emerged in the history of the Black radical tradition and global resistance movements as the 'Moses' of her people.² Over a century and a half later, Tubman's torch is carried in the hands of another liberator — a woman released from prison and serving those others have left behind.

On an unforgettable February morning, I walk into a busy office in South Central, Los Angeles. A half dozen ethnically-diverse, women staffers gather around a table, trying to reconcile speaking requests from both near and far. That legendary church in Atlanta. Some classroom at Princeton. Somewhere across the pond in Portugal. At the head of the table, the woman at the center of this avalanche of invites dons a vibrant orange dashiki with black and blue trim, and listens to the discussion with the warmest smile and most gentle patience.

I stand at the entryway in anticipation of her embrace. A week earlier, we just missed each other on separate visits to the largest federal detention center in the country, *the Metropolitan Detention Center* in Brooklyn, New York City — a facility that would soon come under scrutiny by human rights activists and the city council after a power outage left men inside without heat for four days amidst a freezing polar vortex .

But here in the City of Angels, the staff of *A New Way of Life* was strategizing around how to navigate an impossibly hectic schedule. As soon as we lock eyes,

she welcomes me with a cool *hello* and the hug. I was hoping would not be an intrusion on the more important business of a woman regarded around the world as one of the great freedom fighters of our time. Her name is Susan Burton.

Ms. Burton is the founder of *A New Way of Life Re-entry Project (ANWOL)*. While countless voices in the rising movements for racial and gender justice call for 'changing the narrative' around mass incarceration, Ms. Burton and her organization are changing *the Narrator*. Since 1998, ANWOL has secured and provided housing, case management, pro bono legal services, advocacy and leadership development for more than 1,000 women and children who are rebuilding their lives after prison. In her inspiring memoir, *Becoming Ms. Burton*³, she shares her personal story of healing, redemption and resilience, for which she has received overwhelming acclaim. In fact, the day before this meeting, her publisher's website crashed after a twitter shout-out from legal scholar and author of *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander, caused her book release announcement to go viral — before over 10,000 copies had to be printed.

This is the new normal for the formerly incarcerated *CNN Hero* who is quickly become regarded as one of the leading civil and human rights activist of our time. Without any hint of hyperbole, her name is now being referenced to the likes of Angela Davis, Ida B. Wells, Sojourner Truth, and yes, even Harriet Tubman.

BB: *Becoming Ms. BURTON*: now has over 11,000 copies in print. Congratulations!

SB: Thank you.

BB: I know it's been a long journey to get here. Can you tell us a bit about your journey towards becoming Ms. Burton?

SB: I was born in a housing project. My mother and father, through the conditions of the South, came

1. Blackett, Richard (October 2014). "The Underground Railroad and the Struggle Against Slavery". *History Workshop Journal*. 78 (1): 279.
2. Clinton, C. (2004). *Harriet Tubman: The road to freedom*. Little Brown & Company.
3. Burton, S. (2017) *Becoming Ms. Burton: From Prison to Recovery to Leading the Fight for Incarcerated Women*. New York: The New Press

to California looking for a better life for themselves and had six children. I was the only girl. I had five brothers. The household was full of stuff. There was laughter, there was fun, but there was also lots of trauma, violence and childhood — different levels of abuse.

And I endured, and I endured, and I endured all types of abuse up until the time I lost my son. My son, KK. He was five years old. He was accidentally killed by an LAPD detective and at that point I kind of fell off⁴. My body couldn't hold any more pain, disappointment and especially the grief of losing a son so I began to drink and that escalated to illegal drug use. It was during the time that our communities were saturated with cocaine that escalated to crack and I succumbed to using it and was imprisoned for that.

For 20 years, I traveled in and out of incarceration because of a drug addiction — really because of medicating the pain, the loss, the grief and the disappointment of life⁵. And in 1998 I found a place on the west side, in Santa Monica, that gave me treatment for my addiction and counseling for the grief and trauma and early childhood abuse⁶ and I became stronger.⁷

And that led me to look at what happened in that westside of Santa Monica area — how people were not sent to prison for the things that we were sent to prison for in South LA. And I began to think that if women had a safe place to go, if they had a place, that if they would find safety and a welcoming community like I experienced in Santa Monica, then just perhaps they wouldn't go back to prison.

I saved my few little dollars from a minimum wage job and got a house. And I would begin to greet women at the bus station, as they got off the bus and welcome them back to the community, and offer them a bed at my home, which I called *A New Way of Life*.

BB: What was the reaction of women at the bus station when you first approached? Did they expect you to be there?

I had five brothers. The household was full of stuff. There was laughter, there was fun, but there was also lots of trauma, violence and childhood — different levels of abuse.

SB: They did not expect me to be there. Some women were cautiously suspicious. Some women were glad to have a place to go⁸ and some women declined so it was a mixture of responses to the offer of a safe place. prison.⁹

BB: What are the major challenges women coming home from prison in South LA experience?

SB: First of all, every woman that comes back to south LA gets off a bus at the downtown Greyhound bus station on Skid Row and there are lots of predators waiting for women to step off that bus. You're very vulnerable. You are a woman, so we carry certain attributes. Period.

So, you know people are just so ill-prepared to begin their lives without an ID, without a safe place to go. Women have so much [responsibility] around keeping the family together that they carry that burden of motherhood — getting back into the community to make a life, make a way and being vulnerable to relationships that might have been why they were incarcerated in the first place- hailing from the abuse of not only before incarceration but while incarcerated — beginning to understand how to make better choices, safer choices.¹⁰ You know women are much different from men.

BB: So, from the point at which you decided to purchase a home, meeting women coming home from prison, what were some of the major challenges you faced to get *A New Way of Life* from that point to where it is today?

SB: Bryonn, I was so happy to be able to make my life count and useful. I didn't realize the enormity of the challenges that I was taking on. It was so nice to see women and have that community of sisterhood in the household. I didn't really understand the enormity of the challenges I was facing because we were a community, we were all healing, we were all important to one another and so the outside prejudices and

4. Unarmed blacks are killed by the police at five times the rate of unarmed whites. At least one in three blacks killed by police were identified as unarmed. In 2015, police killed at least 102 unarmed black people, nearly two each week. Of these cases, only ten resulted in police being charged, and only two cases saw convictions of the officers involved. One officer received a four-year prison sentence. The other officer was sentenced to jail for one year, though he was allowed to serve his time exclusively on weekends.
5. The United States, with 2.2 million people behind bars, imprisons more people than any other country in the world.
6. More than 60 percent of incarcerated women report having been sexually assaulted before the age of eighteen.
7. It is estimated that as many as 94 percent of incarcerated women were victims of physical or sexual abuse.
8. In large urban areas such as Los Angeles and San Francisco, up to half of those on parole are homeless.
9. Nearly 80 percent of formerly incarcerated women are unable to afford housing after release. Most public housing authorities automatically deny eligibility to anyone with a criminal record. No other country deprives people of the right to housing because of their criminal histories.
10. The majority of incarcerated women are mothers of underage children. Over 40 percent of these mothers, report that, upon incarceration, they were the only parent in the household.

discriminatory practices didn't impact us to get in the way of our healing or our thoughts about what we meant to each other in that community.¹¹ But going outside of that community and trying to get a job or trying to get a woman's child back, there were serious problems.

And I began to understand that after you do your time, you continue to do time with the level of practices and policies and laws that are in place and that led me to begin to do some advocacy and policy work to address the discriminatory policies¹² and practices that all people who have been convicted of a crime face.¹³

BB: So, you say in your book — specifically in the letter that you write to incarcerated men and women, you say there are no *throw-away* people and you say your life matters and that's a big part of the message you've shared all around the country and internationally — I hear you've been invited to speak from Princeton to Portugal — So when you met Ingrid Archie was that a part of your message? What was that meeting like? And how did that relationship begin?

SB: So, I first met Ingrid Archie in 2007 and she was a bright-eyes bubbly young woman and she had a little girl tagging along behind her, holding her hand. And they came into the home, and I would take her with me to meetings and we would share our story and we began to understand that sharing our story was an important part of getting the message across and our own personal power to voice. And she did well and she moved out and we always had this closeness and the bond and especially her little daughter.

Unfortunately, in 2015 Ingrid had to return because she ran into a store while she left her daughter

in the car — and she was re-arrested¹⁴ for child endangerment even though the child was not hurt and I often wonder had Ingrid been in another part of town or if she had not been Black¹⁵ would she have been given services — parenting classes, counseling instead of three years in prison and labeled a child endangerer?

BB: The numbers that I've seen show that 75 per cent of the women involved with *A New Way of Life* don't return to prison?

SB: For a third of the cost of incarceration — we can house a woman for a year and she's much more functional, she's much more able to provide for herself and her family, she becomes a tax paying, contributing member of our society.¹⁶ We spend \$75,000 a year to incarcerate a woman. And for \$16,000 women can be here at *A New Way of Life* and return to her power, beyond her power and to being a functional member of our society.

BB: The work you've been doing for decades now has such an impact that I've heard multiple people in completely different situations refer to you as the Harriet Tubman of our time — that says so much. But I know a part of why you're motivated by this work is because of the real lives that your impacting rather than the glorious claim of that kind of connection. How do you feel when you come

across women like Ingrid, other women and see that because of the work you've been doing their lives have been so transformed? How does that feel?

SB: It feels so powerful to be a person in the midst of being a change agent — leading women to their purpose and leading women to their power and ultimately their freedom. You know, Ingrid is not a throwaway person and her children are not throwaway

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11. Black women comprise 40 percent of street prostitutes, though 55 percent of women arrested for prostitution are black, and 85 percent of women incarcerated for prostitution are black. Two-thirds of those working as prostitutes disclosed having been sexually abused as children—and more than 90 percent said they never told anyone. Only 1 percent reported having received counseling.
12. Every year in L.A. County, 45,600 people are released on parole. A survey revealed that over 40 percent of L.A. employers would not hire a person with a criminal record.
13. In the United States, one in three adults has a criminal record—though black men are six times more likely than white men to be incarcerated. Over 60 percent of the formerly incarcerated will still be unemployed a year after release. Those who do find employment are typically in low-level jobs, earning 40 percent less pay than adults with no criminal background.
14. The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation has one of the highest recidivism rates in the country, with nearly half of women with a felony conviction returning to prison—and a 61 percent recidivism rate overall. The majority of people returned to prison within the first year of release.
15. Black women represent 30 percent of all incarcerated women in the United States, although they represent less than 7 percent of the country's population.
16. In most states in America, anyone convicted of a felony loses the right to vote until their sentence plus parole or probation is complete. Voting rights may be permanently revoked in ten states (Alabama, Arizona, Delaware, Florida, Iowa, Kentucky, Mississippi, Nevada, Tennessee, and Wyoming), even after someone has been released from prison and completed parole and probation—and while still requiring payment of taxes. Eight states (Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, Missouri, South Carolina, and South Dakota) restrict voting for anyone convicted of a misdemeanor. Only two states, Maine and Vermont, allow voting from prison.

children and by Ingrid finding that path it also empowers her to become an efficient parent and lead her children in a way that they'll become great women. Her children are girls.¹⁷ And her 15-year old has an appointment to shadow Senator Holly Mitchell. Her daughter wants to aspire to be an elected official and we're able to support that and Ingrid is able to facilitate that because of who she is and who she's becoming.

BB: I want to shift a little bit and talk about some policy. We are living in a real exciting time with lots of changes happening, also a lot of challenges at the federal level. You have this whole tension between the federal government refusing to get rid of prohibition of marijuana, of cannabis whereas, half of the states in the union from California to Colorado and so on, have decided to decriminalize marijuana. We are looking at it specifically in the sense — from Prop 64 to this recent ballot initiative last year — the issue has come up quite a bit. What are your thoughts on the impact of the war on drugs. Specifically, as it relates to women who have been involved with *A New Way of Life* — to what extent have drug-related crimes been a part of their journey ending up here?

SB: So, we really are able to understand that we are living in a country that's divided. There are the people who are liberal and want equality and fairness and then there are the people who are bigots and racists and capitalists. And we're coming out of a time that our communities, urban communities were under a hell of an attack through the war on drugs and that (those) attacks I believe, just devastated the women in our communities and drove them in droves, by the thousands, into prisons across this nation.¹⁸ And now we're realizing what happened and we're beginning to repair that damage that happened through the war on

drugs. While we're having a divided country, a lot of the women who come into *A New Way of Life* have had drug convictions and non-violent crimes. But there are also the women who come into our communities and come into our homes that have had crimes that they've been tagged 'violent'.¹⁹

I don't see either of those women being different in the way of being able to recover from whatever happened in their past and many times these women were defending themselves²⁰ and someone got hurt and they got labeled 'violent'.²¹ But each one of them have healed and each one of them are capable of being great members of our society, great parents²² and contributing members — and I think that this country when it makes a distinction between a person whose been convicted of a non-violent versus a violent crime, I think their making a big mistake because one instant

cannot label a person, one instant cannot label a person deserving or not deserving because we really need to check that out and look at that and understand what we're doing making a distinction between the deserving and the undeserving.²³ Again, there are no throwaway people and we're all able to recover from that instant or from that way of being.

BB: Why do you think politicians, elected officials are trying to make that distinction so much — in conversations and how they frame some of the legislative proposals? What do you think is behind them in trying to label non-violent drug-related offences as something different from folks who have other kinds of offences?

SB: So, politicians are not deep investors or risk takers. And right now, in this era of decarceration or mass incarceration — depending on how you look at it, it's safe to say let's help the non-violent ones. It's not safe to say let's help everybody. You know, somebody

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17. Most women are behind bars for social or victimless crimes—while the real victims, which the flawed system perpetuates, are the children. The number of children under age eighteen with a mother in prison has more than doubled since 1991. Approximately 10 million American children have or have had a parent in prison.

18. The majority of offenses committed by women are nonviolent drug and property crimes, motivated by poverty and addiction. Most women offenders are under thirty years old, and are disproportionately low-income, black, and didn't complete high school. The lifetime likelihood of imprisonment for white women is 1 in 118; for black women, it's 1 in 19.

19. Approximately 90 percent of women imprisoned for killing someone close to them had been abused by that person.

20. It is estimated that as many as 94 percent of incarcerated women were victims of physical or sexual abuse.

21. Being abused or neglected as a child increases the likelihood of arrest as a juvenile by nearly 60 percent, and the likelihood of adult violent crime by approximately 30 percent.

22. More than 75 percent of incarcerated women had at least one child as a teenager.

23. Sixty-five million Americans with a criminal record face a total of 45,000 collateral consequences that restrict everything from employment, professional licensing, child custody rights, housing, student aid, voting, and even the ability to visit an incarcerated loved one. Many of these restrictions are permanent, forever preventing those who've already served their time from reaching their potential in the workforce, as parents, and as productive citizens. "The result is that these collateral consequences become a life sentence harsher than whatever sentence a court actually imposed upon conviction." —American Bar Association president William C. Hubbard.

always has to get thrown under the bus. And that's just not fair, or is it the best most effective approach when we look at cost and long sentences. I had a woman who came to *A New Way of Life* who had been incarcerated 47 years.²⁴ It doesn't take that to rehabilitate. Forty-seven years.

BB: And you make the point about just the cost — obviously the deep cost to our communities, to our families, there's the human cost of it. But it doesn't make sense, even in the logic of these bigoted capitalist folks, who actually are committing these resources you talked about, is not an effective use of resources. If over 95 per cent of the folks in prison are coming home, you'd rather invest in truly rehabilitating and educating, giving folks opportunities or keeping folks in this system that doesn't work. So, I'm curious to know if you think that using some of the resources — the taxes that are gonna be taken from the decriminalization of cannabis — using those resources towards community programs like legal aid, like drug treatment, addiction treatment, like community gardens and beautification of the community — if that's one effective step towards using those resources in a more responsible way?

SB: So here we are in 2018 and on January 1, legalization of marijuana has taken place in California and there's a tax on there that will benefit the community. But, I think back to all the people that languished in prisons and were criminalized for this marijuana that's legal now²⁵, and the pain that we suffered on the back of marijuana being illegal. So, we can't undo the past but, we can step into a future that will help our communities become whole, safer, and resourced.²⁶

I also think about how people capitalized on the incarceration of folks for marijuana and now that it's

legal, while we'll get some resources but who is also capitalizing off the marijuana industry now? Is it the same people who provided services and capitalized off the incarceration of folks? So, I guess we'll take the tax dollars and resources and try to make the most of it in our communities — but these other questions really linger in my mind.

BB: NPR did a story a couple weeks ago where they talked about how all these major corporations were setting up to take advantage of the legalization — and they were put in place whereas — they spotlighted one sister in Oakland who had been in and out of prisons around multiple marijuana charges and she was having a hard time just getting the license to be someone

who could actually benefit from the legalization. So as this contradiction happens, it seems like we should be concerned about who is going to make the most of it, who's gonna benefit actually from what seems like progress — But we've seen it before.

SB: We've seen it before.

BB: And the bait and switch is happening — so I think being cautiously optimistic is a way to approach it.

SB: So, we'll take the tax dollars, and try to do the most

and the best that we can with them. But I have to interject and say — we know how to make our community safe — we know how to do that. Hopefully these tax dollars will resource us to do that.

BB: The Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation in California — what can it do to more effectively incentivize rehabilitation — to support rehabilitation?

SB: Ah, the Department of Corrections! When I was imprisoned it was called 'Department of Corrections' — then they put 'Rehabilitation' on the end of that, but it never did go back and correct its core mission which is to *punish*.²⁸ So, I believe we need to go

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24. Women commit far fewer murders than men, but receive far longer sentences. A woman who kills a male partner receives, on average, a fifteen-year sentence, while a man who kills a female partner typically receives two to six years.

25. Only around 15 percent of those serving time for a drug-related offense are given access to a drug treatment program with a trained professional.

26. Though drug use and selling occur at similar rates across racial and ethnic groups, black and Hispanic women are far more likely to be criminalized. Black women are more than twice as likely to be incarcerated for drug offenses as white women.

27. Because of the crack epidemic and the harsh, racially discriminatory policies of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act, one in three black men will see the inside of a jail cell. The average time served by African Americans for nonviolent drug offenses is virtually the same as the time whites serve for violent offenses.

28. States with the toughest crime laws saw the largest spikes in prison population over the past two decades. California's Three Strikes law, one of the harshest sentencing policies in the country, sent people to prison for life for offenses as minor as petty theft. At one point, "strikers" made up a quarter of California inmates, serving extreme sentences that didn't fit the crime, on the taxpayers' dime.

back and look at that core mission and build out from there — you can't just tag a word on the back of a department and think that it's done. Its core mission is to punish and it needs to go back there and begin from there to push out its function from its mission.

BB: I know we can't wait for any department to do the work we need to do. I think that's why I am so honored to know you and to have the opportunity to just share this time with you. Thank you.

SB: Well, I am just one person... And I can't do this work alone. You are in the community and working in the prisons and on the campus too. So, I thank you.

Though our interview was over, Ms. Burton's day was just beginning — with a host of meetings and community events to come. While her hectic schedule highlights the overwhelming work being organized to end mass incarceration, it also speaks to something else: Ms. Burton's unyielding commitment to advocating for women and families.

Ms. Burton is a true change agent and has the results to prove it. 75 per cent of all women who attend *A New Way of Life* do not return to prison. The women go on to serve in their communities, find fulfilling work, and build meaningful relationships with their families and communities. From meetings with legislators to lectures at Princeton to Portugal, Susan Burton shares the same message: 'There are no throwaway people; everyone's life matters.' She believes her work is to lead women to their power, their purpose, and ultimately, to their freedom. And it is that steadfast leadership and commitment to others liberation that has drawn comparisons to Harriet Tubman.

In a 1886 interview, Tubman said: 'There was one of two things I had a right to: liberty, or death. If I could not have one, I would have the other... I should fight for my liberty as long as my strength lasted.'²⁹ And now over 130 years later, Susan Burton carries the torch with the same fire and unyielding power as the architect of the Underground Railroad that paved the way for the one she has forged.



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29. Bradford, S. (1993). Harriet Tubman: The Moses of Her People. 1886. Bedford: Applewood.