



Women Prisoners: 'We've paid our debt'

by Rachna Khatau

When women are released from prison, they are given \$200, a box of belongings and a bus ticket to skid row. On the tough streets of south Los Angeles, drug dealers know how to pick out these women. Dealers prey on them the moment they step off the bus, and 80 percent of these parolees will head right back to prison for a repeat offense. With little to no rehabilitation programs on the inside, Susan Burton took it upon herself to help female prisoners right when they get out.

Susan Burton thrived on helping people for years through A New Way of Life Reentry Project, which she founded in 1998. Since then, she has provided housing and support for more than 200 formerly incarcerated women as they found their way back into society. But before Burton could help others, she was in desperate need of help herself.

Burton's saga began 25 years ago when her five-year-old son Kay Kay was accidentally killed by a police officer. "It was my first experience with death," Burton said. "There was an abundance of cocaine in the community and I used that as a resource to deal with the loss."

After three years on crack cocaine, Burton ended up in the L.A. County Prison system. For 15 years, she bounced back and forth between jail and prison, lacking the one thing that could help her turn her life around - grief counseling and drug rehabilitation. Every time she left prison, she was met with ugly words from prison guards, words she knew to be true.

"Upon release there would be an officer saying, we're going to keep a bed warm for you, you'll be back," Burton said. "I would vow that I wouldn't be back. But the reality is, without support, people will go back."

The annual prison budget in California is more than eight billion dollars a year, according to reports from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. With that kind of budget, Burton said, rehabilitation and counseling programs should be afforded.

According to Burton's research, 45,000 people in Los Angeles County return to prison each year – a statistic that infuriated her.

"Taking resources out of our schools, taking resources out of our communities. To do what they do there, it's criminal," Burton said.

Burton's brother was finally able to afford rehabilitation for his sister and knew she needed his help. "She was a total embarrassment," David Burton said. It took Burton only 90 days of rehabilitation and 60 days of counseling for her to get clean and start to turn her life around.

Once she was clean, Burton realized that she was not alone and there were several immediate challenges facing women that were trying to reenter society - finding affordable housing, securing lasting employment, and getting their children out of foster care. Burton saw many families torn apart when children were adopted "right out from under them."

"Watching [women] lose their children," was the hardest thing Burton witnessed. "Watching them literally do everything that was required of them except having the economic ability to meet the challenge of housing. I really connected with losing my own child at that moment and I knew women needed opportunities," she said.

So in 1998, Burton opened a first of three homes to help women like herself. One of her current residents is Delila Hurtado, 31, who is currently expecting her seventh child. None of her children live with her because four of them were born with crystal meth in their systems. Her husband is currently in prison.

"My boys don't know me," Hurtado said. "They were born and taken from me. But I'm trying everyday just to make things work so I can see them and be with them. Because the only thing I'm scared of is dying, and them not knowing who I am."

Since living at A New Way of Life, Hurtado has been sober for six months and received parenting certificates required by the Department of Children and Family Services to get her kids out of foster care and possibly prevent her next child from being taken away.

Hurtado cried when she spoke of Burton. "I'm one step closer to my kids now, and it's all because of Sue. None of this would have happened if it weren't for Sue."

Antoinette Price and her husband are Burton's latest success story. The Price's entire family of five was separated for one and a half years when both adults went to prison for the same crime at the same time and their three sons were all placed in different foster care homes. When she got out of prison one year ago, Price went straight to Burton for help. Price went through rehabilitation for crack, marijuana, and alcohol use and found gainful employment.

She was rewarded when, last month, her children and her recently released husband were all able to move into a house together. "No more parole, no more DCFS," Price said. "The case just closed last month on the 24th and we're done, we're like members of society again."

Including Price's three, since 1998, Burton has reconnected 40 children with their mothers.

Burton's next conquest is with the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors. In November Burton and other rehabilitated women went before the board to ask that they remove the box on job applications asking about prior convictions. They assert that the box is unfair and creates even greater bias against former convicts than the societal biases that currently exist.

"I've been out of the prison system, in June, it was 10 years," Burton said. "I've gotten a certificate of rehabilitation, I've established myself in the community, I've obeyed all laws, but still I have to check a box."

Susan Burton believes in the ability of women to rehabilitate and reenter society. She knows that she serves as the example of women who can get sober, get a job, and work to make their community a better place, and Burton vows to keep fighting.