

PRISON ABOLITION IN PRACTICE: THE LEAD PROJECT, THE POLITICS OF HEALING AND “A NEW WAY OF LIFE”

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In 1982, in a residential neighborhood in Los Angeles, a speeding police car hit a five year old boy and killed him. Susan Burton, the mother of this five year old, experienced the agony of losing her son because of this preventable “police incident”. Without a supportive family or community around her, and a police force that failed to offer even an apology for killing her son, this loss added to already difficult factors in Susan’s life to produce a devastating effect. Turning to means deemed “illegal” by the State to lessen her pain and grief resulted in Susan’s imprisonment on drug related charges. For the next decade, Susan was in and out of prison, her life becoming one of millions caught in the vicious cycle of the penal system. Fifteen years later, she was finally admitted to an effective rehabilitation program and was on the road to her recovery.

How can women whose lives have been most adversely impacted by the penal system, transform themselves and be transformed through a politics of prison abolition?

In 1999, with her own recovery underway, Susan went on to found “A New Way of Life,” a group of transition homes for women coming home from prison in the Watts District of Los Angeles. Susan’s life reveals how an abolitionist perspective works to transform the lives of women impacted by the prison system. In our view, abolition is not only a political ideal, but also a practice that creates new kinds of communities. This article elaborates how prison abolition works to transform and heal lives. We focus on the transformation of Susan Burton and the Leadership, Ed-

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ucation, Action and Dialogue (LEAD) Project—a political education program that fosters critical analysis of the prison industrial complex. The LEAD Project grew out of a collaboration of “A New Way of Life” and the Los Angeles chapter of “Critical Resistance” an abolitionist organization that Susan began working with in 2003.

FROM CAPTIVE TO FIGHTER: ONE WOMAN'S STORY

It was soon after Susan became sober and began to work in her community to aid elderly African Americans who were suffering from health problems that she learned about the growing numbers of incarcerated women and how they too faced the daunting systemic conditions that she herself had confronted. She decided to do something about it. In 1999, Susan was able to obtain a home in Watts that she opened to women coming home from prison and women on probation and parole. This was the beginning of what would become “A New Way of Life,” a group of non-profit sober living and transition homes.

On any given day in Los Angeles County, there are 3,000 women on parole. About half of them have the disease of drug addiction and live in South Central Los Angeles. Close to 70% will go back to prison, either convicted of a new crime or failing to meet the conditions of parole within a year of their release. Often unable or unwilling to attain assistance from agencies perceived as insensitive and judgmental and which have highly structured programs that restrict individual choice, the women struggle to stay out of prison, to find legal income, and to remain sober in isolation.

In contrast, Susan's homes offer a clean, safe, supportive environment for women coming home from jail or prison. One resident describes the environment at A New Way of Life (NWOL):

She [Susan] helped me get a job, and now I have a steady job ... She made me feel welcome, I can't explain it, she just taught me so much and made me feel comfortable; it's really hard for me to open up to people, but she really made me feel like she cared about me and wanted me to get clean, instead of just trying to make money off of me.

While supporting women struggle to put their lives back together, Susan repeatedly witnessed them losing their children to the foster care system because they couldn't meet the state's requirements for reunification. Susan experienced their pain and her loss over again:

It was devastating to watch women lose their children when they were doing everything they possibly could ... But to see that happen and understand what it felt like to lose a child, I felt it over and over again, and that was enough to give me the fire, the determination, the commitment to address it and it was against all odds ... I was so angry at the system that I was going to walk through hell and high water in order to make a difference.

Susan has been able to work out of the pain, anger and grief to create a remarkable home for women to be reunited with their children after suffering from the multifaceted disruption and break-up of the family imposed through the prison and police system. In addition to providing the necessities of housing, food, clothing, transportation and health care, A New Way of Life (NWOL) began programs to help women access case management services, job training, skill-building, and community advocacy opportunities. Alongside the development of A New Way of Life (NWOL), Susan became increasingly involved in working toward systemic changes to address the injustices she was witnessing on a daily basis, and soon became a leading advocate in California for the rights of former prisoners.

In 2003, Susan participated in the Critical Resistance South conference in New Orleans, Louisiana. Her encounter with Critical Resistance would prove to be a pivotal experience. Founded in 1998, Critical Resistance (CR) is a member-led organization that seeks to abolish the prison industrial complex (PIC)—in other words, to end the use of prisons and policing as ineffective and dehumanizing responses to social and economic problems. Through grassroots campaigns and projects, CR works to challenge the notion that caging and controlling people makes us safer, and to build a national movement)—guided by those most impacted by the system—to promote and realize genuine forms of safety and security.

Recalling when she first met CR members, and came to understand their abolitionist stance she says,

I didn't have a concept as wonderful as that ... I had never heard anyone challenge prisons in the way that CR challenges the existence of prisons period. To understand and to know that a prison is not a solution, what a prison does to people is torture—this should be prohibited. It should not be able to function ... And then to begin to imagine a world without prisons ... there's so many other ways to treat people.

Susan readily states that when she first got involved in community activism she did not have a complete analysis of the interconnections between the prison industrial complex and the other systemic forms of oppression. Her exposure

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to CR's analysis of the prison industrial complex, and her own development of an abolitionist perspective set the stage for the formation of the LEAD Project.

THE VISION AND PRACTICE OF LEAD

In 2004, Susan met Critical Resistance (CR) organizer Melissa Burch through mutual anti-PIC activism in Los Angeles. As they began to share their political visions, Melissa conceived of the idea to start a political education program at a New Way of Life. Susan wholeheartedly collaborated. Melissa along with a few other CR members began to design workshops to critically analyze the PIC with A New Way of Life residents.

The women who live at A New Way of Life (NWOL) and participate in the LEAD Project have all had personal experiences with the effects of the criminal justice system on their lives and on the lives of their loved ones. Most of the women at NWOL are low-income African-American women, a population increasingly affected by the PIC. Although the number of imprisoned men is much higher, African American women represent the fastest growing population of prisoners in the US today. Over the past 18 years, we have witnessed an astounding 800% increase in rates of imprisonment for women of color. Driven largely by the so-called "war on drugs," the majority of these women remain behind bars on small-scale drug charges, the result of a system less interested in treating addiction than in punishing those who do not have the social, economic, and political clout to keep themselves out of prison. Through educating about the history and politics of the prison industrial complex, LEAD exposes how the system operates—not to prosecute all forms of "crime"—but to target and entrap only certain groups of people. One woman tells her story:

I was at the can place, at the recycling, and this girl was going to do the recycling for me, because I couldn't go in, because me and the recycling lady didn't get along, so she took the cans and bottles in there for me, she took my cans and bottles in there, she came outside and gave me 2 dollars and 5 cents. A police car drives by and sees her handing me the money, they made a U-turn and came back, and then a bunch more police cars came and jacked me up, and said I have 'possession of sales'. I couldn't argue the case because they said they seen her hand me the money. It was 2 dollars and 5cents for my cans and bottles. I'm right in front of the can place! The people at the can place even tried to tell them [that I was recycling cans], but they [the police] said, "No, she was buying dope!" So I went to jail with 2 dollars and 5 cents on my books for possession of sales.

Through bi-weekly participatory workshops, the LEAD project creates a space in which women who have recently been released from prison can temporarily step outside conventional recovery programs' emphasis on the personal and look critically at the larger social and political systems that perpetuate the prison industrial complex. Drawing on the women's own experiences with the system, the LEAD Project further exposes how the penal system works to label certain groups of people as "convicts" or "felons," a status that simultaneously impacts one's sense of self-worth and cuts off a person's opportunities to lead a healthy economically self-sustaining life.

The LEAD project works toward a women-of-color centered critique of the prison industrial complex, emphasizing how it is an extension of the interlocking racist, heterosexist, and classist forms of systemic oppression. The workshops offer a critique of various interconnected aspects of the prison industrial complex (PIC), such as the "war on drugs" and the arbitrary construction of "crime." In each workshop, LEAD organizers facilitate a number of activities that include role-playing, films, guided discussion, small group work, guest speakers, journal writing and life history exercises, to help participants make the connections between the PIC and the systemic conditions of their own imprisonment, probation/parole status. Other projects of LEAD that foster political education and leadership development include the maintenance of a political education media library and a grassroots organizing internship focusing on collective engagement in community actions.

In this way, LEAD offers an organic extension of Susan's own experience and politicization, as well as an extension of CR's abolitionist vision in practice. By emphasizing learning about, envisioning and practicing alternative forms of justice and safety, LEAD instantiates abolition in the present by resisting a narrow reliance on the state that dictates punitive forms of justice. Instead, LEAD seeks to implement restorative forms of community-based justice and rehabilitation. By collectively imagining what changes would be necessary to create truly safe and secure communities, the LEAD project offers a vision of justice that is based on the well-being of entire communities.

HEALING, TRANSFORMATION, AND ABOLITION

It takes quite a bit of energy and belief in yourself and willingness to open your mind to make that transition from *captive to someone who is going to fight* ... It takes a bit of commitment and force within yourself to come out and do that, after living in that place of less than, and not-good-enough.

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As exemplified in Susan's story, a new understanding of the system is integral to the process of reevaluating the conditions of one's incarceration and vital to the process of healing and the determination to fight an oppressive system. The LEAD project offers women this space to critically dialogue about their experiences. Many of the women at A New Way of Life (NWOL) describe the particularities of a criminal justice system that serves to help keep them in an incarceration cycle. Instead of offering treatment, the system penalizes these women who lack the resources to escape such entrapment; says one woman, "Don't just drag 25 people where the only crime they had was getting high, and then you give them 4 years in prison, and then you release them out into society with nothing ... you're just making it a revolving door. You let them out with nothing." Susan emphasizes that healing from the denigration, abuse and dehumanization enacted from the system requires new forms of knowledge and the *time and space* for each person to recover. The LEAD project plays a key role in pushing the women through the very difficult, but essential transition that shifts the blame from "it's me" to "it's the system." It is this understanding that Susan believes is necessary to move oneself away from the self-destructive tendencies that lead to addictions and "self-abuse". This opportunity and ability to reevaluate oneself from this political perspective can be key to rebuilding self-worth, and the successful transition to leading a healthy life.

One woman explains the role of a NWOL and her education through participating in the LEAD workshops as key to her empowerment and transition to healthier living: "I didn't realize things like CR [Critical Resistance] actually existed. I didn't know that there were people out there trying to stop it or reform it ... people who have never been incarcerated, never been in trouble, and they're out there fighting against something that's wrong. So CR, all of that showed me something different, that I do have a say and that my voice can make a difference in a lot of things."

BUILDING A MOVEMENT

For Susan, and for many women at A New Way of Life (NWOL), a new understanding of the system has been integral to the process of reevaluating the conditions of their own incarceration and vital to the process of healing. Over the course of seven years, since its opening, Susan's program has touched the lives of over 250 women. Through their experience at a NWOL and the political education provided by the LEAD Project, many women have not only begun to feel more empowered to stand up and fight but are now also able to view the problems of the PIC and envision alternatives. One resident says: "I think that the way that it is right now ... just needs to be completely abolished. I am not saying that we do not need some kind of

system in place but the one that we have we do not need.” Another resident speaks to her vision of safe communities:

They should build more of these [NWOL] than prisons. Because when I got here it was like a new world to me. I was glad and ... It wasn't like being locked in; there were restrictions, but still, I wasn't locked in. I could go outside and smoke a cigarette. I could do this, I could do that. I was gonna go back to school. She [Susan] showed me a school, got me an ID and Social Security card, things I didn't have she showed me how to get them. It was like starting all over again in a new world. If they had more places like A New Way of Life, they would have better communities, I believe.

Many of the women at a NWOL have even taken the political education one step further, and like Susan, are transforming themselves into leaders in the movement against the PIC. Several are active in the local chapter of “All of us or None,” a former prisoner led initiative to end discrimination against former prisoners in jobs, education, and access to services. Some have become involved in efforts to stop prison expansion in California, while others have become active in different arenas of the struggle for social justice. While it takes time, even years, for a person to heal and recover, Susan's life story attests to how a successful transition from the denigrating effects of prison-life back to leading a healthy life often requires a form of self-reevaluation that is at once political, emotional and spiritual. A politics of abolition can be practiced as part of this process of personal healing. Susan and many of the other women at a NWOL have come to embody this vision of healing and transformation that offers a radically new perspective on themselves, their place in the world, and the possibility of a future without prisons.

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