Our History
25 Years of Freedom Work

**Susan Burton**
Ms. Burton is born to Flora Burnell Hughes and Herman Burton in Aliso Village, a housing project in East Los Angeles.

**Childhood**
Ms. Burton loved school and placed top in her class spelling bee contest. Throughout her childhood, Ms. Burton was assaulted by those she trusted.

**Incarceration**
Ms. Burton is sent to Juvenile Hall at the age of 13. The judge grants probation. She is assaulted and gives birth to her daughter at the age of 14.

1998

**A New Way of Life**
Ms. Burton obtains gainful employment and dreams of bringing reentry services to her community of South Los Angeles. With the help of her nephew Lamont, Ms. Burton purchases her first home and establishes A New Way of Life Reentry Project (ANWOL).

**Help**
Ms. Burton learns that the criminal justice complex is a tale of two systems: second chances for those who are wealthy and white; mass incarceration and collateral consequences for everyone else. With the help of her brother Melvin, Ms. Burton is able to access recovery services through the Santa Monica-based Claire Foundation.

**Criminal (In)Justice**
Ms. Burton is enmeshed in the criminal (in) justice system for the next two decades. Everytime hope appears, tragedy strikes. She receives no support, and is continually reincarcerated.
Ms. Burton realizes that the forces working against her are those that laid the foundations of our nation: capitalism, racism, sexism, and more. She co-founds All of Us or None, a grassroots civil rights organization.

Ms. Burton looks to train the current and next generation of abolitionists. She establishes Women Organizing for Justice & Opportunity Leadership Lab—a six-month leadership program for formerly incarcerated women.

Ms. Burton seeks to combat the collateral consequences of mass incarceration. She establishes ANWOL’s Reentry Legal Clinic with the support of UCLA School of Law’s Critical Race Studies program.

Ms. Burton publishes Becoming Ms. Burton. This powerful memoir is widely praised and wins an NAACP Image Award. The book is distributed in prisons across the United States to inspire incarcerated women.

Ms. Burton establishes the annual Justice on Trial Film Festival after speaking with Civil Rights Activist Michelle Alexander about the need to spotlight works exposing the injustices and exploring possible solutions to mass incarceration.

Ms. Burton is recognized as a Top 10 CNN Hero. This award brings increased national and international visibility to ANWOL.

Ms. Burton establishes the Sisterhood Alliance for Freedom & Equality (SAFE) Housing Network after visiting 64 prisons and jails in 26 states and three countries. The SAFE Housing Network provides rigorous training and supports justice-impacted members in their replication of ANWOL’s successful reentry philosophy and model.

Ms. Burton passes the torch to co-directors Pamela Marshall and Michael Towler in 2021. As of 2023, ANWOL has provided housing to over 1,600 women and children, reunited over 400 parents with their children, provided pro bono legal services to over 4,000 individuals, and provided leadership training to over 200 women. Tens of thousands more have been empowered through our advocacy efforts.
Dear Friends of A New Way of Life,

In 1998, Ms. Susan Burton established A New Way of Life Reentry Project with the dream of bringing compassionate reentry support to her community of South Los Angeles. She purchased a single three-bedroom, two-bath bungalow in Watts, and slept in the dining room so that her guests could sleep in the rooms. The house was full of life; ten formerly incarcerated women living together, caring for one another. Twenty-five years and 1,600 women later, we stand in awe of the movement that Ms. Burton built.

A New Way of Life is a movement. What began as a single house quickly grew to include advocacy work, pro bono legal services, leadership training, workforce development and education, cross-institutional collaboration, and more. Today, in addition to the more than 1,600 women and their children who have found safety and support in our 12 safe homes, more than 4,000 individuals have found post-conviction relief through our reentry legal clinic, more than 200 women have been provided leadership training through our Women Organizing for Justice and Opportunity (WOJO) Leadership Lab, and more than 30 organizations across four countries are members of our Sisterhood Alliance for Freedom & Equality (SAFE) Housing Network.

As we celebrate our successes, we must also remember the sacrifices, losses, and work that remains to be done. A New Way of Life did not begin overnight. It may have started with a dream, but it was built with the blood, sweat, and tears of Ms. Burton and hundreds of dedicated individuals. This issue is a celebration of that work and our history and features 12 interviews with key figures in the history of our organization.

Best wishes,

Pamela Marshall & Michael Towler (Co-Directors)
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June 2023
RM: Can you tell us what it was like in 1998 when you first established A New Way of Life? What was it like going to the Greyhound Station and telling the women, “I have a space for you.”

SB: It was actually a really exciting time for me because, finally, I found so much purpose and responsibility in my life. Prior to me starting A New Way of Life, my life felt full of pain, confusion, and disappointment. So when I started A New Way of Life, it felt like I had broke through to a place that really resonated in my soul and in my spirit.

RM: How did the women respond when you reached out to them?

SB: Some women were eager and happy to have a place; and some women, it seemed like it felt strange, and they were leery of the opportunity. I do understand that, sometimes, some things are too good to be true, and you are leery of it. It didn’t take long before the house was filled of people, filled with hope, and filled with determination.

RM: At what point in the history of A New Way of Life did you first realize the gravity of what you were doing? A sense that this was bigger than what you had imagined. That you were paving the way for a national movement? That what you were doing was groundbreaking?

SB: After about five years of establishing the organization, I began to understand the magnitude and the possibilities of what I was doing. I began to understand the forces that were against me, and those were the forces that had laid the foundation of our nation: capitalism, racism, classism, all these things that had poor people oppressed and vulnerable, and, for us, sent us to prison.

RM: Was there something specifically during those five years that helped you to see that?

SB: There was something specifically. People like Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Melissa Burch began to do classes at A New Way of Life. I remember an exercise we did with Critical Resistance. Ruthie Wilson Gilmore and Melissa Burch—who worked at A New Way of Life—were a part of Critical Resistance. We did an exercise with them where we built the type of city that we would love to be a part of, and it was much different from what we had: we had libraries, we had parks, we had health centers, and wellness centers, and good housing, and we had no police—we had conflict resolution, and good schools for our children. It began to open my eyes that, you know, this is what happened in other places that were wealthy, but it wasn’t what happened in our community. And even my time that I spent in Santa Monica in the recovery center (in 1997) showed me a much different world that we could live in.

RM: Reflecting on A New Way of Life’s 25 years, what stands out to you as important moments in the history of our organization? What are some milestones you are particularly proud of?

SB: In my book, I talk about the Broke Leg House. That was a really important milestone, because now we could actually help women to be housed with their children. Even though that Broke Leg House came out of an accident, where I literally broke my leg, it was like the history of my life of making lemonade out of lemons: thinking about what could happen for everybody, not just me.

RM: Are there any other moments that stand out?
SB: There are lots of moments. When I became a CNN Hero, it was shocking and surprising but such a great opportunity to give international visibility to the work that was being done, because up until that point people, the greater society really did not appreciate the effort that was being made. CNN put a shine and spotlight to this work. I was actually quite shocked when CNN elevated me to one of the top ten heroes, because of the stigma during that time of incarceration.

Another time that was just huge for me was when I read Michelle Alexander’s book, *The New Jim Crow*, and it just put together all the pieces that led to mass incarceration, and how it had been designed through law and policies, and then put into practices. When I read her book, it gave me the opening to even forgive myself at a deeper level for what had taken shape in my life. I realized that what had happened was not my fault. I was trapped into the activities and decisions that I had made.

RM: I would love to hear more about the SAFE (Sisterhood Alliance for Freedom & Equality) Housing Network. Since its establishment in 2018, it has now grown to 31 members across four countries. What has it been like developing this network? What has it been like working with this international community dedicated to offering reentry services to formerly incarcerated people?

SB: The SAFE Housing Network began as a result of my national tour for my book, *Becoming Ms. Burton*. I visited prisons and saw so many women just like me, trapped in a system that did not allow for them to leave prison and remake their lives and change their trajectory and possibilities for their lives. They had nowhere to go except the same communities and neighborhoods that put them to prison. I visited and spoke with so many women who, if they just got a little support, could help them to change and become messengers of hope and faith in their respective communities.

So the SAFE Housing network has been this powerful movement to heal mass incarceration in our nation. By providing housing, leadership development, and support for women coming home, we can build women who have leadership qualities and abilities and who can become leaders of their community.

RM: Is there anything else you would like to say about the SAFE Housing Network?

SB: Yes. I’ve had the opportunity through the SAFE Housing network to watch the leadership of women just grow. It is so beautiful, but it is hard and difficult work for them, but it is work that needs to be done. States put their resources in prisons and law enforcement, instead of into safety. The SAFE Housing Network is a mechanism that brings safety and healing to communities. We need to rethink as a nation how we are spending our dollars, how we can spend our dollars more effectively, and how we can build a different approach to community safety.

RM: In 2020, you named Michael Towler and Pamela Marshall as your successors. What is it about them that stands out to you? What it is that led you to name them as people who would carry on your legacy?

SB: As the founder of an organization that I have led for the last 25 years, it is so important that I think about how the organization goes beyond Susan Burton. The
work is super important. Michael and Pamela have been with me, and they have been an integral part of the growth. We could not have grown without them, without the effort they have put in for the last ten years. The level of integrity that they have led with, that they demonstrate, and that they have displayed over the last ten years is impeccable. Their intellect is spot on. They are smart. They are principled. They have the skillset. They understand the population. They understand the model. We have a model that is a best practice for formerly incarcerated and incarcerated people. It just seemed natural that we would find someone who has a proven track record to lead the organization to the next phase of its development. It was also important to me that the organization continued to be led by Black people.

**RM:** What do you hope for the future of A New Way of Life?

**SB:** For the future of A New Way of Life, I hope that it continues to grow and change the perspective of people: that we look towards rehabilitation and support, and that we are a model for that. That people, especially government, respects our approach to reentry.

I want to also say, regarding my hope for the future, is that one thing that I’m most proud of with the work that we’ve done, I’m really proud of the folks, like you, Robert, that have come on board. The team that has been put together at A New Way of Life is just outstanding, and I’m so moved by them and their commitment to the work. That is one of the most inspiring parts of what I see as a legacy: the people that are on board doing the work, from communications to legal to housing to workforce development and advocacy. We have such a strong, dedicated team of folks.

**RM:** I think we all feel the same. I often tell people that I feel like I am working alongside a Civil Rights hero, up there with all the greats. I’ve learned so much from working with you, and I believe the people here care a lot about the work we are doing.

**For my final question: what can people do to support you, A New Way of Life, and your vision?**

**SB:** People can support us through dollars. They can support us by donating housing. By volunteering. The women at our homes always need resources: electronics, computers, so many different types of things. If people could make a monthly commitment to A New Way of Life, even if it’s $25 that we could rely on to continue to do our work, that would be so helpful.
KY: What was it like when you first joined the organization?

MT: When I first came to A New Way of Life, in 2010, we were on 108th Street in Watts, in an old metal building. There were only 4 or 5 people on payroll, and I shared an office with Susan. Susan had just been named a CNN Hero—and I was able to attend the awards ceremony. The next year, Claire Gardener joined in Development, and we all shared the same office. It took a year or two before the impact of that CNN award began to be felt.

In the summer, it would get really hot and we had no air conditioning. In the winter, it was really cold and if we turned on multiple heaters, it would blow out the electricity and we had to go to the breaker box. Our financial resources were slim, at best. Susan would at times go for weeks or longer without pay herself so that the other staff members would get paid.

It was an exciting time. Susan and Dorsey Nunn had just started the Ban the Box movement. They coined the name. Not too long after, Compton banned the box. Then, President Obama mentioned banning the box. That really made our eyes open, knowing the reach of our work.

I love the work that we do, and the lives that we touch. I remember someone once telling me I was built for this. Moving from the Midwest to Los Angeles during the Watts Uprising of 1965, living through the crack epidemic, working my way up in finance at small and large organizations, then having to pivot to the nonprofit arena after the market crash, I was built for this.

KY: From your perspective, how has ANWOL grown or changed since then?

MT: It has grown tremendously. We have departments now whereas when I first started, the employees who were most skilled in a particular area did as much as they could, and we outsourced the rest (funds permitting). We made it happen! Now, we have a larger workforce with formalized departments. We would help our residents find work informally, but we’re formalized now, with a Workforce Development and Education department. We’ve grown from 4 employees 25 years ago to more than 50 employees now.

KY: Looking back at your time with ANWOL, what is something you are particularly proud of?

MT: I’m proud of the position that we hold in the community and how people look at us now. I’m also proud of how people look at reentry, because, when I started in 2010, nobody cared about reentry. Reentry was not popular. Now, everyone wants to do it and people realize how fundamentally wrong they were treating people when people were released. You imprison them because of minor things like drug charges and due to the racial disparities in sentencing, people of color end up doing more time than others. Unfortunately, that felony rides with you forever. I’m proud of how we had a hand in changing that scene.

KY: You became the co-director in 2018. What would you want people to know about your vision for the future of A New Way of Life?

MT: I want people to know that my vision is to uphold the original vision that Susan had in mind. She envisions having a centralized campus located in South LA that would give the community greater access to our services and create more synergy throughout our departments. I think we’re going to have a campus in the next two to three years. We’ve always taken on work based on the needs of our clientele so that is what we’ll continue to do.
RM: Let’s start with how you came to be involved with A New Way of Life and what it was like when you first joined the organization.

PM: I joined A New Way of Life on January 11, 2011. I had been working in retail for nearly ten years when I was let go. I had just turned the corner with housing insecurity—having lived on the couches of family and friends for the prior two years—and had been living in an apartment with my one year old daughter when I learned that I was losing my job. I applied for Transitional Subsidized Employment services and was sent to meet with Susan. She hired me on the spot, and I started working immediately as a housing monitor.

My employment was only temporary, unfortunately, as A New Way of Life did not have the resources to make my position permanent. So I had to look for another job after six months. As I was about to enter the Marina Del Rey—West Los Angeles Worksource Center, Susan called and said she found the funding to offer me a permanent position as an Administrative Assistant.

When I first joined the organization, we were a small group: two attorneys (Josh and CT), our reentry legal clinic coordinator (Charsleen), a social worker (Evelyn), a community organizer (Fanya), a couple of interns, Michael, Claire, myself, and Susan.

Over the next years, I’ve wore many hats within the organization, providing administrative support, technical and more. As A New Way of Life gained more visibility and funding, I began to work as Susan’s executive assistant, and then took on the position of the Family Reunification Housing Pilot Program case manager. I continued to support the organization’s growth, next as an administrative manager, and then a co-director, alongside Michael Towler in October 2020.

RM: From your perspective, how has ANWOL grown or changed since then?

PM: A New Way of Life has grown tremendously over the years. Our team has tripled. The model is being replicated across the world through the SAFE (Sisterhood Alliance for Freedom & Equality) Housing Network. However, through the growth and recognition our core mission and vision has remained the same. We are still as passionate today as we were when I joined ANWOL over ten years ago.

In fact, many of the services we provide today are outgrowths and formalizations of what we were doing since ANWOL was established. Susan would connect the women to job opportunities, help women get their babies back and take women to the board of supervisors meeting to speak on different issues.

Over the last 25 years, we have been able to formalize and support these efforts through the build out of dedicated departments. We now have a dedicated team of social workers, case managers, and lawyers solely assigned to offering family reunification services. We likewise have an employment case manager, coordinator, and director dedicated exclusively to workforce development and education.

The increase in funding and visibility we have experienced over this past decade has allowed for us to expand our services and reach while remaining true to our core values.

RM: Looking back on your time with A New Way of Life, what is something that you are particularly proud of?

PM: I am incredibly proud of the entire team as a whole. What we have been able to accomplish together: from the second chances we have provided through our housing services, the families we have helped reunite...
through our family reunification services, to the
records we have expunged through our legal clinics,
and the changes we have been able to create.

Our family reunification housing pilot program, for
instance removed barriers for formerly incarcerated
loved ones to reunite with their family members living
in section 8 rent subsidy programs in the City of Los
Angeles housing authorities. This happened through
the advocacy of Susan and partners in the movement
standing up at the All of Us or None Peace & Justice
Summit and raising this issue and concern around
housing.

I am truly grateful for A New Way of Life, Susan, and the
amazing people I get to work with. I came to ANWOL
through the California Welfare to Work Transitional
Subsidized Employment Program. ANWOL provided
me with an opportunity to make a difference and do
something greater for not only myself and family but to
also make a difference in the lives of other. To give an
opportunity to others, especially other Black women
who are often times overlooked and under valued is
rewarding and I feel honored to be a part of something
so amazing.

RM: You became the co-director in 2020. What
would you want people to know about your vision
for the future of A New Way of Life?

My vision for the future of ANWOL is to continue
the legacy of Ms. Susan Burton. The foundation, infrastructure, and
the sisterhood that Susan has created is an effective
solution to ending the mass incarceration of women
and girls. I want to build upon her work and continue
to create a safe place for women to return home to with
dignity and respect and hope for a better future at the
safe homes of A New Way of Life and the safe homes
of the Sisterhood Alliance for Freedom & Equality
Housing Network partners around the world.
Pamela Marshall and Michael Towler at ANWOL’s 2022 Gala.
By Robert Mejia

RM: Can you tell us how you were first introduced to Susan and A New Way of Life?

WDH: I was on the board of directors of an organization called Emerge. At that time, one of my co-board members said, I think you would be great for the board. I had not heard about A New Way of Life until then, and she introduced to me it. I did my research and absolutely fell in love with everything about the organization. It resonated with my interests in women, particularly women of color. That’s how I got involved, back in 2014; I joined as a board member immediately.

RM: What was that period like then?

WDH: I would have described us as a small grassroots organization that had tremendous influence. We had been involved in the Proposition 47 ballot measure. Our other arms, such as All of Us or None, were starting to flex their power. We were small but powerful. We didn’t have even a million dollars in the bank. It was a lot of work by the board members and our very small staff.

RM: From your perspective, how has ANWOL grown or changed since 2014?

WDH: At that time, I don't think we owned any homes; we rented but did not own any houses. The staff was tiny but dedicated. The board was small but very involved. This was all during that time that the debate to eliminate county contracts began. Susan was unhappy with the way they wanted to treat us as an extension of the prison system. It was a scary but exciting time, as we were also trying to buy our first home. But I agreed that the costs of those contracts were too high: they can’t pull our ladies out, they can't flip our beds looking for drugs, that just can't happen.

RM: Looking back at your time with A New Way of Life, what are some things you are proud of?

WDH: Since that time, it has been an extraordinary ride. A few things happened along the way. There was the canceling of the county contracts. There was the publishing of Susan's book. There was a merger with Long Beach’s Harbor House. All of these occurred around the same time, from 2016 to 2018, and we sort of catapulted to a different space.

It was exciting to watch. The growth of the organization. The dynamism of the organization. The dynamism of Susan and the folks she was leaning on for support. I am in awe of Susan and proud of that team effort. The staff work, the boardwork, everyone really pitching in to grow the organization and to keep it stable while it was growing at an exponential rate.

As I already mentioned, when I started with the organization, we had less than $1m in the bank and were contemplating how we could purchase a home that was $200 or 300k. Since that time, we purchased several homes. We have a ton more money in the bank. We have sponsors and angels, and folks who understand the mission.

The two things that I think that are most extraordinary, beyond our self-sufficiency, which is critical, are the SAFE Housing Network and our family reunification project. These both are incredibly important, because the work that we do is about women and also about families and communities. It starts with women but it blossoms out in all those areas.

I am proud of the board’s commitment. I am proud of our services and the stability we have provided through this extraordinary period.

RM: Is there anything else you would like for us to know about the work the board is doing?

WDH: I am proud of the board’s commitment. I am proud of our services and the stability we have provided through this extraordinary period—our growth has just been phenomenal these past nine years.
MG: Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and how you were first introduced to A New Way of Life?

JSG: I’m a retired educator with 40 years of experience from elementary through university—as a teacher, as a college instructor, and as a coordinator of programming at local schools. When I retired from the teaching profession that I loved so much, I wanted to discover something that would rekindle my passion for contributing to a meaningful cause.

It so happened that at the time I belonged to a local women’s association focusing on community issues. At one of the meetings, we had a speaker who gave a presentation on her life and her dedication to the organization that she founded. I was so impressed by this presentation. When it was over, and as she was exiting, I followed her to the door. I mentioned how intrigued I was by the information she shared, and my interest in supporting her organization. She welcomed my comments, and gave me her card. That woman was Susan Burton, and of course, the organization was A New Way of Life. I subsequently was asked if I would serve on the Board. I was absolutely honored, and eagerly accepted.

I served on the Board for 10 amazing years in which I witnessed a lot of growth and change. I observed how this organization helps women who experience the trauma of incarceration, and reunites them with their children. While on the Board, my colleagues and I worked diligently toward the success of A New Way of Life. Though I am no longer on the Board of Directors, I continue to support A New Way of Life in whatever way I can. I believe in the organization and its work.

MG: Thank you so much for sharing that. What was the period like when you were on the Board?

JSG: Working with Susan, experiencing her energy and her dedication, was in itself inspiring and empowering for me. I observed the importance of the specific facets of support and services provided to our residents. A New Way of Life is uniquely designed to encourage hope and renewal. The successes were, and continue to be, astonishing. There was also a great deal of expansion during this period: the number of residences and women served increased, policies involving criminal justice were implemented, and the organization itself expanded.

MG: It’s wild to think how much the organization has grown. Thank you. Your answer actually leads us to my next question. From your perspective, how has A New Way of Life grown or changed since that earlier period?

JSG: In 2009, when I joined the Board, there were eight Board members. Today, that number has grown significantly, it has doubled.

Also, at that time, there were two houses on the same block in South Central Los Angeles. There may have been 10 women residing in the houses. Today, there are 12 houses spread throughout Southern California. Over the years, A New Way of Life has successfully impacted the lives of hundreds of women.

There are currently two administrative locations: one in South Central and one in Montebello, which has a very spacious campus, providing housing and ample office space for the expanding organization. In the beginning, there was one small office that housed up to seven people. Thinking back on that office makes me also think about their dedication to A New Way of Life, though the space was very limited and cramped.

The organization has also expanded through its SAFE Housing Network, which has replicated A New Way of Life’s program, in eighteen states and four countries.
Judith Sydner-Gordon and ANWOL Board Member Nancy Moreno at ANWOL's 2022 Gala.
Who would have thought, in 2009, that the organization would have experienced such expansion? It’s been an amazing two decades of growth and making a difference in the lives of the women we serve. From the humble beginnings that was the start of Susan’s vision, it has become a multimillion dollar organization.

MG: Definitely. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

JSG: Yes. I want to emphasize the breadth of A New Way of Life’s impact, which has been incredible and far reaching, from local to state, to national and international horizons. Its impact on policy, its impact on lives, and its impact on the way people think about mass incarceration and giving second chances.

MG: Absolutely. Looking back at your time with A New Way of Life, what are some of the organization’s accomplishments that you’re particularly proud of?

JSG: To be honest with you, I am proud of each of the things that I have mentioned in our interview. I have been extremely honored to witness the growth of this organization and its work surrounding the issues of women and mass incarceration. I am proud of every accomplishment that has been made over the last 25 years.

My experience with A New Way of Life has been somewhat life-changing for me, as well. I have learned so much, and have seen what hope, opportunity, support, and caring can do when the trauma of incarceration is addressed and a second chance is given to anyone who wants to emerge as a renewed person with a renewed light, with pride, and confidence, as they return to their communities and society. It is awe inspiring, and for me, it has been an amazing journey.

Now, as a member of the recently created Advisory Board, I look forward to continuing to support this amazing organization as it continues to move forward.

MG: Thank you so much. That’s incredible.
Dorsey Nunn
Co-Founder, All of Us or None
2003
By Robert Mejia

RM: Can you tell us how you were first introduced to Susan and A New Way of Life?

DN: I met Susan by way of Frankie Treo. He had brought me over to A New Way of Life to meet Susan. At the time, she had one house and she was picking people up at the Greyhound Station. I knew by the way she was operating that we were more similar than dissimilar. She was impressive from the moment that I met her.

RM: What did you know about Susan and ANWOL at the time?

DN: That was my first encounter. As we started to work together around the question of All of Us or None, it strengthened our relationship.

RM: I understand that All of Us or None and FICPFM were co-founded by you, Susan, and other formerly incarcerated activists. Can you tell us about the founding of these two organizations and what led to their development? How was it working with Susan to co-found these two social justice movements?

DN: All of Us or None, when we founded it, what we were doing was demanding the right to speak in our own voice. I wrote the initial paperwork for AOUON, and it was called Save Ourselves. I shopped that paper around to formerly incarcerated people nationally. People starting putting in different things, so it didn’t take me long to realize that whatever I wrote was only part of what actually existed. When we held the first meeting at the hills of Oakland at the Center for Third World Organizing, it was intentionally a meeting of mainly people in the state of California. However, even though it was mainly for people in California, there were a couple of people who crept in from out of state. I guess they seen that we were on a trail that was long overdue. I can remember us meeting in the room and knowing that we were going to have to record our own history—and by the way, you should see the video of that first meeting, Enough is Enough. We felt that we needed to be conscious of being responsible to each other and to be responsible in reporting out to other people.

That first meeting, it was remarkable, had people from various ages, different parts of California, so what made people see it as successful was the fact that people sat in a room and were willing to participate. It was a good meeting.

The other thing that I can remember is that we had leftover funds because we had funds from the Center for Third World Organizing. We took the excess funds and split it between the people who didn’t have work and we paid for child support for people who had children who were attending the meeting, and gave money to help people who had to travel. We thought this was important to us, breaking bread with each other. There was blowback because once we started giving away resources people assumed that we had a whole bunch of resources. They believed that we had an unbelievable amount of money from Open Society, which we hadn’t gotten a dime from at that point.

So, when we came down to Los Angeles, it started to fracture. I think that it was the character of loyalty and Susan that kept us together. So she is not only a cofounder, she was a critical and pivotal member of the whole. What we tell people going into AOUON, because we see ourselves as perpetually growing, anybody who joins AOUON is a cofounder. But Susan, she was what held us together in Southern California. She was ultimately...
the go-to-person in Los Angeles. I can remember going to Peace & Justice Summits in California. I can remember meeting Maxine Waters, Karen Bass; I can remember all those people because Susan orchestrated it. So when it came to Los Angeles, when it came to Ban the Box, for example, I learned that you all have a different political base.

RM: I believe you are also cofounders of FICPFM. What was that conversation and experience like?

DN: Some things arise out of conflict. When we went out to New York, because we knew we had a potent idea with Ban the Box, we pulled up to a community that had other formerly incarcerated people as organizers. They could have had their own apparatus that they had developed. So, we couldn’t just say drop whatever you’re doing and become a part of All of Us or None. So ultimately, we got into a conflict with an organization in New York, what stood out in my mind and probably in Susan’s mind, we needed something that could actually organize organizations as opposed to individuals. And that’s what FICPFM is about. Even in that mix, there were all of these warnings, some AOUON members were saying what you are doing trying to build another national apparatus when we are already out here doing all of this national organizing; it was because not everyone was going to join All of Us or None—not when they had their own individual organizations.

So, that’s what it in part became. It immediately gave us a greater bandwidth in terms of geography. Suddenly, we had members that were attached to us in terms of organizing strategies in the South and the East. We could have been more westernly centered. At the point that we were developing FICPFM, AOUON was more regional, western organized. With FICPFM, we became national in the real sense. We are, of course, now, national with AOUON also, but the distinction is that one effort is to organize organizations and the other is to organize individual members or chapters is totally different.

RM: My next question is looking back on your first conversation with Ms. Burton to the present, what would you say about her life and legacy?

DN: I can remember when she was standing at that 3-4 bedroom house in Los Angeles. At that time I had already been a California Wellness Fellow and I had the ability to nominate other people for the award. I could remember telling Susan, because I had already gone through the process, “that as soon as people start to feel relaxed they may take more advantage of their situation and not want to hear you as clearly as they were listening to you when they had greater need.” I was telling her this, as I was going to nominate her and I had a good feeling that she was going to win—but I couldn’t tell her. I gave every hint possible, but she wasn’t picking up none of it. I believe that $50K was her first money.

Susan started off purchasing property. She thought she wanted to control the whole apparatus. For years and years later, I was still leasing and renting property to do Legal Services for Prisoners with Children and AOUON. It was only six years or seven years ago that I bought our first piece of property as LSPC.

What stands out as a guide pole is probably Susan and Kim Carter—who is somebody that Susan trained in part. After we worked on Ban the Box, and we had some degree of success, when we went to purchase the building, something Kim mentioned—and I trusted Kim because she was being mentored by Susan—if you controlled the whole board you don’t have to worry about the box. You can choose to have one, not have one, you can choose the people who are going to sign contracts with you, you can take their box off or force them to take the box off. So if you ever come up here and see the Freedom Movement Center, the first thing I did was hire a formerly incarcerated contractor. But the initial idea about me owning came from Susan.
In terms of her legacy, the countless people that Susan has touched. I have walked into rooms where Susan’s reputation proceeded her. Some of the things that I do, I do because Susan has done them first. I’m just now putting out my first book. Susan has had her book out for six years, and I get to take advantage of all her good stuff and all her mistakes too. Her legacy includes both being a teacher and student. I think that she will share that in such a way that other people will recognize that those roles are interchangeable.

RM: Is there anything else you would like to add for our readers to know?

DN: We didn’t have much. We didn’t have many resources between us. I thought this woman was so incredibly important to the movement. When you see someone as your equal, you treat them like their your equal. Being that I see her that way, it was easier to run down trails that she had gotten to first.

The other thing that I know is that she is honest enough to tell you the truth whether you like it or not. And not everyone is capable of doing that. From the very beginning, I can sense that that’s who she was. She will tell you difficult to hear truths. You may not understand at the time but if you give it enough time, it will sink in. Part of her legacy is telling people difficult truths.

I also learned about what it means to be a leader. I came into this movement as a newly recovering addict; but I didn’t have to worry about that with her. Being around her, she provided a safe venue for me to do organizing. And not just me but my administrative director, Hamdiyah operates a SAFE house in Arizona, so I can see that she is still sharing what she knows with other people.

I just got the Irvine Leadership Award. Susan must have won that 10 years earlier. I can remember asking Susan, “why do you keep winning these individual awards when we are building a movement, shouldn’t you be winning recognition for the whole movement?” What she told me, which is something that I hadn’t thought about, was seizing the communications apparatus of major foundations.
By Mario Garcia

MG: Can you tell us a bit about yourself and how you first got introduced to A New Way of Life (ANWOL)?

SS: My name is Saúl Sarabia, my pronouns are he/him/his, and I had the privilege of meeting Susan Burton when I was a staff member at a nonprofit in South Los Angeles called the Community Coalition for Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment. My job was to support organizing campaigns for people on welfare and social service providers.

In March 1999, we were working to overturn a ban on people with drug-related felonies accessing food stamps or cash welfare payments. We were also helping South LA providers keep clients who were being kicked out of domestic violence, drug treatment, or educational programs due to welfare reform. In 2000, Susan joined a study group with other providers to identify gaps in the safety net in South LA. They identified the lack of services for grandparents raising children whose parents were incarcerated and the lack of support for people coming home from prison. We began working together to get people, like the women in her homes, involved in community organizing and public policy making to address these gaps.

MG: It’s cool hearing more about these beginnings from your perspective, as there’s a bit about this in Ms. Burton’s book.

SS: Yes! Chapter 21 of her book describes her role in the “Family Care, not Foster Care” campaign and details how she learned to organize and the power of collective action.

MG: Awesome. What was that period like when you first got introduced to ANWOL?

SS: Susan was in the process of acquiring her 501(c)(3). There was one cook feeding the women and Susan didn’t have an office. She was sleeping in a day bed in the same room that had a fax machine and phone. The women contributed what they could to cover the costs of living together. Some contributed their welfare payments, others their social security payments, and a few gave a part of their wages if they were lucky enough to get hired despite discrimination based on conviction histories. Not having nonprofit status made it hard to get grants, but also was a core element to the success. People felt like they were invited to a home—not a program—and that they were responsible for its success.

Susan welcomed the opportunity to get involved in organizing and policy advocacy work. She embodied how to come together, not just as providers, but also with the residents as equal human beings. Women from ANWOL were brought to our meetings after their first five or six months in the home. They were taught about the structural conditions that led to their situations and how to organize to change the laws and policies that create those conditions.

Susan organically developed this notion that reclaiming your civic voice and exercising it is a part of your healing and rehabilitation. The women saw her emerging from a civic death: the laws took away your rights such as the right to vote or to be on a jury, killing you as a civic actor. To resurrect yourself from that by becoming a forceful voice for yourself, for the residents at ANWOL, and the people that are still locked up—they could see the impact of that.

MG: From your perspective, how has the organization changed since that time period?

SS: Susan has become a founder and leader of entire sectors that did not exist! In 1991, there was not yet a field of “reentry services,” or a “Formerly Incarcerated, Convicted People and Families Movement,” which she helped to co-found. As organizers, we work to
create mechanisms for an oppressed group to find its voice, collectivize its power, and to build with other movements. To link the discrimination that they’re facing with the discrimination that, for example, undocumented people, queer people, and other stigmatized groups are facing and build movements together.

There’s no question that Susan Burton is a social movement leader now—and not just a leader of formerly incarcerated people, but against injustice everywhere and for social transformation. The legacy that has been built over the last 25 years is her ability to multiply herself by training others to heal, serve others, and work together against injustice. For example, ANWOL’s WOJO (Women Organizing for Justice and Opportunity) Leadership Lab, leading the LA and LBC chapters of All of Us or None, and the other ladders that she puts in front of women to find their voice and join social movements is central to what she does, as is feeding, housing, and clothing women.

MG: What makes ANWOL and Susan so special is that focus on people’s dignity like you were saying. Looking back at your time with ANWOL, what is something that you’re particularly proud of that the organization has accomplished?

SS: I’m going to focus on the establishment of the reentry legal clinic. When I left Community Coalition, I went back to UCLA’s Law School to run the Critical Race Studies (CRS) program and to connect students to organizations that were doing movement work. I wanted them to learn how to apply critical race theory in a community-based context and to navigate how the law is both a tool for maintaining the status quo and reproducing racial oppression, as well as a tool to challenge injustice and inspire people to transform society.

ANWOL and CRS got a grant for law students to support the Ban the Box campaign to remove questions about conviction histories from job applications. Through that campaign, the UCLA students became immersed in the racism embedded in these laws. In the second year of that grant, we piloted the clinic and it now has become the largest expungement clinic in LA County. The students stayed involved as alumni and built out the reentry legal clinic to represent people whose expungements were denied by the courts, establishing an entire legal department at ANWOL. Hundreds others were transformed by volunteering and being exposed to the injustices facing people with convictions and the power of legal services and organizing.

The organization now works with legislators to change laws, including those that make it easy for the county to remove children from homes. This evolution from the “Family Care, not Foster Care” campaign to defining a legal and social change agenda, is emblematic of what community organizing and leadership development are, and why we work to apply critical race theory with community members on the issues that directly impact them.

MG: Is there anything else that you would like to add for our readers to know?

SS: I feel privileged to be a part of the organization’s growth. Here you have an organization that shows that if you just accompany people to demystify law, structures, and policy making processes, they can go further than just being helped. The leadership development role that this organization has played for women who have been incarcerated, for Black and Brown residents of South LA, and others who face stigmas, is an incredible contribution to the landscape of social justice movement-building.
Saúl Sarabia moderating ANWOL’s 2020 Peace & Justice Summit on Family Reunification.
MG: Can you tell us a bit about yourself and how you were first introduced to A New Way of Life?

JK: Currently, I take on cases that I think will change the landscape around the access and use of criminal history information—cases that few attorneys will take on either because they are obscure areas of the law or because there’s not a lot of money in it. Root and Rebound is my current employer, and this is what I have been doing since I left ANWOL in 2021.

Back during my last year at UCLA School of Law (2006–07), I was looking for a summer internship. I went to the then Critical Race Studies Program Director, Saúl Sarabia, and asked him if he knew any places I could go for a summer internship. He recommended a few, and the way that he described ANWOL resonated with me so I decided to intern there.

MG: Thank you! What was that period like when you were first getting involved with ANWOL?

JK: There were four people, including Susan Burton, who worked on the admin side. That was it.

Susan and her team were in the middle of working on what we now know as Ban the Box, or the Fair Chance Act in Los Angeles City and County. Under that theory of the law, use of criminal history information—given the racial disparities in the criminal justice system and the institution records that follow—any employment use of criminal history information would necessarily have a racial impact. Without a legitimate business necessity for using criminal history information, it would be a violation of Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

Around 2007, we were trying to figure out whether this was a viable theory or not. The clinic was initially thought of as a way to identify people with potential claims under this new theory of Title VII for us to screen and send to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission where they could further build a case around them.

The whole movement looked like, from my perspective, that garage office. It was a small group of people who were living in the reality of the drug-impacted folks trying to do something. They were proposing an incredibly unlikely law to pass. A bunch of crazy people doing what they thought was right in a tough situation.

But that’s also something that’s missing today in the work that I do. When we, for example, had our first statewide get together of all the reentry advocates in California, all of us comfortably fit in a small room at East Bay Community Law Center. There was a direct immediate sense of community there. It’s more professional today.

MG: That goes a bit into our next question actually. How has ANWOL grown since that period? Is there anything that you would like to add regarding these changes?

JK: ANWOL was the loudest voice because it was the only voice, especially in Southern California. Of course, there were other agencies doing some reentry work. But in terms of doing impact litigation and policy work and trying to change the landscape, ANWOL was for a long time the only one when it was not popular. So, there was a tremendous amount of responsibility and influence that ANWOL would wield.

But partly because of ANWOL’s success, we had more and more partner organizations joining. For example, Californians for Safety and Justice really created a huge ripple when they joined as a combination of three
major funders. As more and more organizations joined this political and legal work, I think ANWOL has maintained a leadership position in setting the tone and direction of where this movement should go. But of course with more and more people in the movement, ANWOL becomes just another voice.

One thing that you can notice in the past three or four years is the dramatic turn that ANWOL has taken in terms of impact litigation. ANWOL is focused on family law, custody issues, and family rights. It’s a tremendous privilege for the movement to have an organization like ANWOL. Now a lot of people are joining on this issue. So, I think that’s a role that ANWOL has played well: defining priorities and overlooked issues in the movement to bring attention to.

MG: Looking back at your time with ANWOL, what is something that you’re particularly proud of that the organization has accomplished?

JK: One unique contribution that ANWOL has been able to make was linking the direct lived experiences of members of the community to landscape changes. Back in 2007, Ban the Box is what the community wanted. We had a lot of people coming into our clinics, telling us that they needed this job, and that they couldn’t get it. Same thing with family rights and custody rights. That’s what we’re hearing from women and their children living in ANWOL’s houses. From the very beginning, the clinic kept our ears to the ground and that’s what ANWOL is particularly good at: listening to the community members and representing their voices in larger society.

MG: Is there anything else that you would like to add about your experiences with ANWOL that you would like our readers to know?

JK: I worked with ANWOL for over a decade. I am grateful because I was exposed to such a wide variety of issues around criminal records and given such autonomy to explore different ways of addressing these sorts of problems. For example, there’s this seven-year rule in the books that prevents background check companies from reporting convictions. But they’re still doing it every day. ANWOL was okay with me doing these crazy litigations to make background check companies stop. The well-followed rule in the industry is no more reporting expunged records. Then we had other successes.

There were failures, obviously. It’s only by being crazy enough to try what you think is impossible that I think you really learn. I would not be the litigator that I am today without ANWOL. Once these cases are shown to be workable, other people start joining. That’s how we invite partnerships and change in the landscape. That’s how things get better for our clients. I am grateful for the incredible, unreasonable, irrational, and almost crazy level of trust that I was given.

I would not be the litigator that I am today without ANWOL.
Joshua Kim at ANWOL's Reentry Legal Clinic in 2009.
Anuja Mendiratta
Philanthropic Advisor
2006
BY ROBERT MEJIA

RM: Can you tell us about yourself and how you were first introduced to A New Way of Life?

AM: It’s an honor to talk with you about A New Way of Life! My name is Anuja Mendiratta. Through my consulting practice, I am blessed to work on a range of critical justice issues, from racial and social justice to environmental, criminal, and gender justice.

I first met Susan in 2006 through my work with the Race, Gender and Human Rights (RGHR) Fund, and was immediately blown away by her clarity, her powerful vision, her big heart, and the incredible work of A New Way of Life. Even then, she was leading the way for systemic transformation and to bring dignity to and secure basic rights for system-impacted people living under unjust, oppressive conditions.

RGHR was founded in 2002 by a group of progressive donors, who came back from the UN Conference on Racism in South Africa with a commitment to collectively fund at the intersections of race, gender, and human rights within the domestic context. After a scan of key issues, the group quickly came to focus on criminal justice, mass incarceration, the policing and criminalization of Black, Brown and Indigenous folks, and the impact that the criminal legal system has on women and girls and families.

RGHR works to promote racial and gender justice by challenging the criminal legal system and mass incarceration in California. We focus on the system’s impact on women and girls (inclusive of cisgender, transgender and gender non-conforming individuals), prioritize the leadership of formerly incarcerated women, and invest in building the justice movement and advancing systemic change.

RM: From my understanding, that would make you and your organization one of the earliest supporters of ANWOL. The support you and your organization offered must have been critical at that time.

AM: Yes, I believe RGHR was one of ANWOL’s early funders, which we are very proud of. We have been partnering with and making grants to ANWOL for the past 20 years annually since 2003. In recent years, RGHR has been happy to provide general operating support, multi-year grants to our longstanding partners, like ANWOL, without requiring proposals or reporting.

It has been wonderful to see ANWOL grow its capacity and impact over the years. Susan is such an incredible leader not only for LA and California but nationally and increasingly even internationally! She has been a profound teacher and guide for us in shaping the RGHR Fund’s work as a justice funder. We have been fortunate to deeply learn from Susan and your staff in various contexts, including with the women in ANWOL’s reentry houses, and visiting the LA County women’s jail and the state women’s prisons to sit in a circle with incarcerated women. These experiences expanded our thinking and our understanding, and ultimately our practice as funders. Along with the many amazing advocates, I credit Susan, in particular, for her early pivotal influence on RGHR’s work.

RM: Long-term, consistent support is so important—especially when an organization is just starting out. I know your support continues to be important to what we do.

AM: Yes, I believe RGHR was one of ANWOL’s early funders, which we are very proud of. We have been partnering with and making grants to ANWOL for the past 20 years annually since 2003. In recent years, RGHR has been happy to provide general operating support, multi-year grants to our longstanding partners, like ANWOL, without requiring proposals or reporting.

I first met Susan in 2006... and was immediately blown away by her clarity, her powerful vision, her big heart, and the incredible work of A New Way of Life. She has been a profound teacher and guide for us in shaping the RGHR Fund’s work as a justice funder.
AM: We are humbled and grateful to have played a role in ANWOL’s early days! RGHR continues to prioritize support for emerging groups, many led by formerly incarcerated women, working with impacted communities to advance justice in underfunded regions in our state—just like ANWOL, some 20 years ago, working in South Central!

RGHR is a small fund, and our grants generally range from $10,000 to $30,000 per year. Although we make smaller grants, we are steady with our support for our incredible field partners and generally provide longer term, sustainable funding. We have supported many of our partners, like ANWOL, every year consistently for the past 10–15–20–plus years!

Our role is also to lift up and connect our grant partners with other funders and donors and needed resources to advance their work. Towards that aim, we have helped organize many funder briefings and opportunities for folks in philanthropy to learn directly from the field. ANWOL has been part of much of that work over the years.

RM: That is so critical. Knowing that you have supported us for nearly two decades, what was this early period like from your perspective?

AM: With much respect for ANWOL’s direct services, transitional housing, family reunification work with women coming out of the system, as a small funder prioritizing system change, RGHR was unable to support that work directly. So, it was really amazing to see that, Susan and ANWOL were also offering political education, leadership development, organizing and skills training to formerly incarcerated women living in your houses. RGHR was proud to support what is now known as the Women Organizing for Justice and Opportunity (WOJO) Leadership Lab. That organizing element is so phenomenal, because ANWOL is saying: not only are we going to provide you—formerly incarcerated women—with your direct needs coming out of prison, support you with family reunification and to get your children back, job training, skills building, safe housing and all you need to reintegrate into society, succeed, and thrive, but we are also going to engage you in leadership development and political education and support you to be part of social justice movements to organize for your rights and to create transformation in the world.

At the time, very few direct service organizations, which focused on basic needs, also bridged to organizing and systems change work. So, it was really extraordinary that ANWOL went beyond that and we were really blown away. Even back then, ANWOL advanced a vision that was so much bolder and more expansive around the change we need to see in the world, and not just focused on band-aids and fixing things in the moment. That is what got us—and that is what RGHR was inspired by and excited to support.

RM: How has ANWOL changed over the years?

AM: The depth of ANWOL’s work has really grown and deepened over the years. Going from the original concept of providing safe, clean housing for women coming out of prison to a more comprehensive framework tackling systemic issues and creating a more just world. ANWOL is now known for its advocacy efforts and for being a leader in challenging systemic oppression and for advancing the
dignity and rights of formerly incarcerated people in California and nationally.

The changing hearts and minds work of Testif-I—which I love—and the Justice on Trial Film Festival are ways of reaching people through media, cultural production, and storytelling, are really significant and important as part of the range of ANWOL's work.

There has been a layering and deepening of this work, which is incredibly important—using storytelling as a way to reach broader audiences—both through Testif-i and JOTFF—along with having lawyers on staff, the legal expungement clinics, the policy work, and more. It has just been really great to watch all these elements come together in one organization.

RM: My next question builds on the answer you just gave here: as an early supporter, what is something that you are particularly proud that ANWOL has accomplished?

AM: Many organizations might have stopped at the direct services, but ANWOL went way, way beyond that in its approach and focus. We are proud to have played a role in supporting the work. There really is a sense of let’s not only support people to succeed in their lives, but let’s engage them to tap their lived experience to seek transformation. This is happening in multiple ways, from supporting the women in the houses directly to the WOJO program, but also through All of Us or None organizing, FICPFM work, and more. Underpinning it all is the vision to profoundly transform systems that are creating the harm. That has been amazing to watch, and really a model for other organizations and movements.

RM: Is there anything else you would like to add for our readers to know?

AM: It is wonderful that Susan, as ANWOL’s founder, has passed the torch to new leadership in the organization. This has enabled both ANWOL to continue doing its good work and for Susan, as the incredible leader she is, to do other important things in the world: her work on the SAFE Housing Network, her work in Africa. It has been amazing to see her go in these important new directions.

Understanding that one organization cannot do it all—and an ecosystem of collaboration is needed to create change, Susan and ANWOL have mentored other formerly incarcerated women leaders and helped incubate new organizations. That has been so important. RGHR has funded a number of groups based on Susan’s guidance.

There really is a sense of let’s not only support people to succeed in their lives, but let’s engage them to tap their lived experience to seek transformation.

The RGHR team is a learning community committed to seeking ways to make positive change. ANWOL and Susan Burton, Claire, and your entire team have been significant teachers for us along the way. Many people have learned from and been inspired by Susan, and certainly we have. ANWOL has taught us about the issues, the transformation needed, the broader vision for justice, and humanity—and has shown us the way. It’s been great to see ANWOL grow and make impact. RGHR is humbled and honored to be part of that.
Ingrid Archie
Women Organizing for Justice & Opportunity (WOJO)
2007
KY: Can you tell us a little about yourself and how you were first introduced to A New Way of Life?

IA: I was first introduced to A New Way of Life in 2007 or 2008. I went into a program that introduced me to A New Way of Life. I went to prison again in 2014 and once I was released I went back to A New Way of Life.

KY: What was it like when you first joined the organization?

IA: My first experience was different because I have never lived with strangers, but I was able to get my first apartment and I was involved with advocacy. I went into it a second time with an optimistic mindset and I knew it would be different.

KY: I understand that you were heavily involved with Women Organizing for Justice and Opportunity (WOJO) Leadership Lab, what led you to join WOJO?

IA: I joined in 2007 and went to a mansion for the first time. We learned about media and the different ways that media shapes the world. We learned this in two days. When I came back in 2015, WOJO was more advanced and it was all things leadership. You were able to understand what kind of leader you are.

I had my own struggles with the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), but Susan taught me how to advocate for myself and she decided that she wanted to make a shift within WOJO and become more laser-focused with children and the welfare system. We all came together and tailored the content to focus more on the DCFS system and how it affects women and children. Fortunately, I was able to get all of my kids under the same roof, but I didn't want to stop there, I wanted to help other people get their kids back.

KY: You are now the TimeDone Organizing Director for the Alliance for Safety and Justice. How did your time with ANWOL help with obtaining this position?

IA: I transitioned out because I wanted to focus on nationwide organizing, but without A New Way of Life, I wouldn’t be where I am now. I credit A New Way of Life for my leadership and advocacy work. This organization helped me discover my potential.

KY: Looking back on your time with A New Way of Life, what is something you’re particularly proud of?

IA: I am proud of being able to be a part of WOJO going national. I am also proud of my participation in the work around the child welfare system because A New Way of Life wasn’t focused on that in particular. Being able to see that flourish has been amazing. I am also proud of the civic engagement efforts I made and I am proud of all of the staff members because it takes a special person to work in this organization. I am proud of the organization and how it offers so much more than reentry services. Being able to work under Susan and learn all the what not’s and how to’s is something to be proud of because it taught me how to be a woman and a leader. Proud is an understatement.
Angela Burrell
Former Resident / Current SAFE Housing Network Member
2011
TJ: Can you tell us a little about yourself and how you were first introduced to A New Way of Life?

AB: I was in prison. I was a call girl and I got arrested. Because I had been incarcerated previously, when the cops arrested me they wrote that I was not under the influence of drugs so that I couldn’t get into any rehab programs. I had a four-year sentence. I was writing to halfway houses and nobody would accept me. They would ask me what my crime was and they would tell me I wasn’t eligible for their programs.

One day I was in prison and one of my roommates asked if she could watch my television. She began to watch “Secret Millionaire,” and there was A New Way of Life! It sounded like a nice place, so I hustled and got the address. I wrote ANWOL and they accepted me. I couldn’t believe it! I was so excited. It was a life changing thing.

I had made up my mind after being incarcerated this last time, I didn’t want to live my life like that anymore. I needed to change and I needed a place to go that would give me a chance. I was anxious. When you are in a situation like this, and you know that you are not going to be able to get a job, you begin looking at all of the things that you can’t do. Because that’s just the way it is. You don’t know where you are going to live. So, receiving that letter back from ANWOL that they had accepted me was step one. I was excited about that.

I still have that letter from the day I got out of prison. I rode the bus from Chowchilla all the way down to the Los Angeles bus station. When I got off the bus, all I had was a paper bag in my hand. I think they gave us $200. Part of it was for the bus, so I got some change. I went to the payphone to call Susan Burton and she answered the phone. When she answered the phone, I said, “I wrote your program and you said I could come when I got out of prison.” She was like, “Yes, yes. Where are you?” I told her I was at the bus station, and she said, “Don’t move, don’t leave.” Then, she came and picked me up. Oh my God you have no idea. When she picked me up, she took me back to the home. When I walked in, you could feel the peace of the house.

After I got there, Evelyn Ayala did the intake. She was so soft spoken and so easy to talk to. Oh my God! I felt like I had a friend. I felt like I could tell her anything. Do you understand what I am saying? I hadn’t had that feeling for so long. I felt like I could be honest with her about anything. My fears and the things that I wanted to do. She was so understanding.

Later, after being there for a while, I realized that Ms. Burton didn’t normally answer the phone and that the office was actually closed the day I had called. Ms. Burton just happened to be in the office that day, and she just happened to have a bed for me that day. Can you believe that? You can’t tell me that was a coincidence. That was nobody but God making a way for me with ANWOL.

TJ: What was it like being a resident?

AB: At ANWOL I had a bed, I had pajamas. I had a chance to heal after incarceration. That’s really hard to do when you’ve been used to sleeping with one eye open. You’ve been in a place where there’s always tension, fighting, and turmoil. Then, to come into a place where I had a pillow, a bed, and pajamas! It was clean and nice. I had hope and they helped me.

I never had a problem. There was a list of chores. The women that were around me, we all wanted our lives to be different. When you’re in a place and everybody has their own goals, we held each other accountable. You know what I mean? You know you’re grown. We
weren’t policed or anything like that. It was a place to
heal and share our thoughts and do what we needed to
do. It was like a home setting. It wasn’t like being in an
institution.

Even though there were always more than two women
in the house, there wasn’t any fighting or turmoil. We
just did what we were supposed to do: get up, take a
shower, get yourself together. I went in the kitchen and
made breakfast for myself and I washed the dishes. You
didn’t have to tell me to wash the dishes. I took bubble
baths. I cleaned up. You did
what you would do when you
were at your home. That’s what
it felt like: like being at home.
It was good. It was good for
me. At home, that’s the truth.

TJ: What did you do after
leaving the program?

AB: I travelled back here to
Amarillo, Texas. As a matter of fact, I didn’t know I
could get a job as a caregiver. I was a nurse years ago,
but I lost my license when I went to prison. I came back
here, got a job, and worked for a while. I would go to
Los Angeles periodically. I would go see Ms. Burton
and go back to ANWOL. Just to check them out and
tell them just how much I appreciated them.

In 2018, I published a short autobiography: “My Story:
The Best is Yet to Come.”

TJ: I understand you are one of our newest SAFE
Housing Network Members, what led you to start
your reentry program?

AB: Well I’m here in Amarillo, Texas. It’s a small town.
I have to tell you: it’s a small town, predominately
Republican. They have some places for formerly
incarcerated people, some halfway houses, but they
don’t have any SAFE Houses here. There are a lot of
women who come home from prison and don’t have
any place to go.

I was in Los Angeles, talking to Ms. Burton about
this, and she suggested—can you believe that—she
suggested, I start one in Amarillo. At first I was thinking,
there is no way in the world I could do that! But, then,
when I started to look around, you have no idea. It’s so
heartbreaking to see women and you know they want a
chance. If they don’t get a chance, they will go back to
where they were before.

I could see the need, so I asked Ms. Burton and she
helped. Can you believe it? I have a SAFE home right
now and there are three women and
three children in it. They are doing
well in a nice neighborhood. We have
resources for them. Counseling for
them. It’s awesome.

To me, I look at it like, I get to help
somebody else because Ms. Burton
helped me. So it’s kind of like pay it
forward. So, I tell them every single
day. They have it in them to become
leaders. And hopefully at least one of them will do the
same thing when they leave the home.

TJ: Is there anything you would like to add?

AB: I just want to let you know what Susan has allowed
me to do. She saved my life. If Susan had not allowed
me to come, I didn't have any other place to go. No
place else. Do you understand? But back to the life
that I was in. If I had not had that opportunity to go to
ANWOL, I probably would be dead now or sitting on
a street corner somewhere. She gave me my life back.
Look I have clothes on, jewelry and I am blessed!

The other thing is that the SAFE Housing Network is
a great support system. When a question or something
comes up, I am able to call someone and get answers. I
love the support. We need each other, and I am learning.
It’s a whole lot of work, but that’s okay. It’s rewarding
work. That’s what I like. The support system. I love it!
RM: Can you tell us how you were first introduced to A New Way of Life?

MA: When I was doing research and writing *The New Jim Crow*, I came across an article that featured an interview with Susan Burton about her work creating safe homes for formerly incarcerated women who were struggling to navigate the myriad, discriminatory barriers faced by people released from prison.

I don’t recall exactly what Susan said in that interview, but I remember thinking that she was brilliant and courageous. She spoke honestly from her heart, but she was also deeply insightful about the nature, design, and impact of the system. I was impressed by her determination to help build a movement that would end the discrimination facing people with criminal convictions and dismantle the system as a whole.

I knew immediately that I wanted to meet Susan one day, and I got that chance after my book was published. After a mutual friend introduced us via email, Susan offered to host a book event for me and invited me to visit A New Way of Life.

RM: What did you know about the organization at the time?

MA: When I first visited ANWOL, I knew quite a bit about its work and mission, but I was still blown away when Susan gave me a tour of the homes and I met some of the women who lived there.

As I noted in my foreword to Susan’s book, the homes were unlike any halfway houses or facilities for formerly incarcerated people that I’d ever seen. They were homes—loving homes—not merely housing. Susan took me from home to home and showed me where the women slept and worked. The residents and staff greeted Susan with formality, saying “Good afternoon, Ms. Burton!” or “Good to see you, Ms. Burton!”—but there was nothing formal about the interactions at all. There was love, care and warmth between them and amongst all the women and the staff.

In some of the bedrooms, paint was peeling off the walls, and mattresses for children were on the floor along with a few scattered stuffed animals. The accommodations were sparse, to say the least. It was obvious that every penny raised was immediately invested in providing more beds, homes, and services. But they were also immaculate, and every woman I met expressed enormous gratitude for Susan and the lifeline she provided.

The homes offered an inspiring model of what it can look like to welcome people back to communities with genuine love, care, and concern, rather than with callous indifference or downright hostility—which is what so many people returning home from prison must face. I was struck by the sisterhood that was created in these homes, and the sensitivity Susan and staff showed the women who lived there.

RM: I understand that ANWOL’s Justice On Trial Film Festival was established as an outgrowth of a conversation between you and Ms. Burton. Can you tell us about that conversation and how it contributed to the establishment of the Film Festival?

MA: I think you need to ask Susan about that conversation because her memory is likely better than mine about that! I do remember that when she shared the idea, I told her that I was definitely on board and was eager to support in any way I could. Truthfully, I’d be eager to support just about anything Susan wants to do, no questions asked—since I believe in her and her vision that much—but I thought the idea of a film festival was especially exciting because it allows the stories and
experiences of people impacted by the system to be seen and heard broadly, reaching people who might never read a non-fiction book about mass incarceration or even a memoir about women’s experiences after being released from prison. Stories are far more impactful than data, and images are often more powerful than words. The film festival is an example of how art and activism can come together to challenge and to inspire in important ways.

RM: Looking back on your first conversation with Ms. Burton to the present, what would you say about her life and legacy and the work being done by ANWOL?

MA: Susan has impacted countless lives and made invaluable contributions to our movements for justice. As I’ve said many times, I see Susan as a modern-day Harriet Tubman. Like Harriet, who famously helped to build the Underground Railroad, Susan has committed her life to helping those held captive today make a genuine break for freedom and rebuild their lives and families. It’s thrilling to see the network of safe homes that Susan launched in Los Angeles begin to spread nationwide, inspiring communities around the country to reimagine how we might respond to those who’ve been branded criminals, and how we might best support women returning home to their communities and families. Susan has planted beautiful seeds of societal change and personal transformation that future generations will be harvesting for many, many years to come.

RM: Is there anything else you would like to add for our readers to know?

MA: Well, I suppose the only thing that I’d add is that it’s an absolute honor and joy to know Susan. There are many activists and leaders who are doing valuable work in the world today, but relatively few of them do it with as much integrity, courage, creativity, and compassion as Susan. I feel lucky to know her and to claim her as my friend.

There are many activists and leaders who are doing valuable work in the world today, but relatively few of them do it with as much integrity, courage, creativity, and compassion as Susan.

For many years, she’s been passionately devoted to building movements that seek to end the oppressive systems that seek to control, exploit, and oppress the most vulnerable, and she’s been fiercely committed to ensuring that formerly incarcerated women don’t merely overcome barriers and survive, but find a way to thrive and to organize to help others get free.
Michelle Alexander and Susan Burton at the 2012 California Faith in Action convening.