* *4 May 2017 The New York Times by NICHOLAS KRISTOF*

From Prisoner To Modern-Day Harriet Tubman

**From**She was 4 years old when her aunt’s boyfriend began to abuse her sexually. Then at 14, she had a baby girl, the result of a gang rape.

Soon she fell under the control of a violent pimp and began cycling through jails, prisons, addiction and crime for more than 20 years.

Yet today, Susan Burton is a national treasure. She leads a nonprofit helping people escape poverty and start over after prison, she’s a powerful advocate for providing drug treatment and ending mass incarceration — and her life story is testimony to the human capacity for resilience and recovery.



**Susan Burton**

America’s greatest failure in the 21st century may be that far too many children grow up in a twilight zone of poverty, chaos, violence, drugs and failing schools. We can’t afford to help them, we say, and then we spend billions of dollars building prisons to house them.

Burton, now 65, has co-written a stunning memoir that will be published next week, detailing how after overcoming narcotics she eventually founded a nonprofit, called A New Way of Life Re-entry Project, to help women leaving prison. In a preface of the book, Michelle Alexander, a civil rights advocate, describes Burton as a 21st-century Harriet Tubman, and there’s something to that.

The memoir is called “Becoming Ms. Burton,” and that’s the journey it describes. As a black girl growing up in a dysfunctional family in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles, Burton was repeatedly raped, and then her child was run over and killed by a policeman. She self-medicated with alcohol, cocaine and crack.



“After six prison commitments, at the end of those, I was more broken than when I went into the system,” she told me. “Each time I was released, I would say I’m going to get it together, but each time it was more daunting.”

Her cycles in prison ended only after she chanced into a drug treatment program in Santa Monica that mostly served a more affluent clientele. A 100day stint there helped her turn her life around — a reminder that America would be far better off if we treated addiction as less a criminal justice issue than a public health crisis. That’s particularly true now that some 52,000 Americans die annually from drug overdoses, more than 10 times the number who died in the entire Iraq war.

Starting in 1998, Burton began to help other women leaving prison, providing them with shelter and coaching them on staying sober and finding jobs. The effort was an immediate success, and philanthropists took note.

When Theodore Forstmann asked her to make a list of what she needed, Burton initially wrote down “toilet paper.” A friend explained that Forstmann was a billionaire, and Burton upped the ante to request a van, and Forstmann came through.

Burton now has 28 staff members, including six lawyers. She runs five homes for 32 women who have left prison, and has been recognized as a CNN Hero — and she burns with a passion to help other women find an exit ramp as well.

“We keep a woman in prison for decade after decade at a cost of $60,000 a year, and then give them $200 when they hit the gates for release,” she said, shaking her head. “And, adios. People have to get their IDs, Social Security cards. They have to get clothing, housing, apply for benefits and services, and it’s impossible to do with 200 bucks.”

The upshot, she said, is that people reoffend — and then get locked up once more, at a huge expense.

Burton showed me the homes she has set up, and the women in them are a reminder of how difficult it can be to start over after years in prison. One woman, Unique, confided that she hears voices in her head shouting at her, and Burton asked her why she didn’t keep a doctor’s appointment. “I’m afraid to go out,” Unique explained, so Burton worked out an escort so that Unique could see the doctor and get her medicines.

“If we don’t help her with those voices, she’ll be right back in prison,” Burton said when we were outside. Another former prisoner proudly gave her full name: Mary Mitchell. Now 53, she had been behind bars for her entire adult life and has never had an official ID card. With Burton’s help she is getting one and looking for a job. But Mitchell has forgotten how to walk in a city.

“I was so scared,” she said. “I didn’t know how to cross a crosswalk.”

Burton told me that a trigger in her own downward spiral was the gang rape that resulted in her pregnancy; if she had received counseling, she thinks, she might have avoided unraveling.

Too often, we miss these chances to help wounded young people, and we invest only in jailing them.

So I’m celebrating Burton’s new book and amazing second career — but with a bittersweet feeling that there are so many other Susan Burtons out there who never get the help or drug treatment they need, and are still incarcerated in ways that diminish them and all of America.