

# Let's Talk About It!

## A Community Book Discussion on “Becoming Ms. Burton”

When? 6 – 8 pm, Monday June 18

Where? Cascade Park Community Library, 600 NE 136<sup>th</sup> Avenue

Books are available at Cascade Park Community Library. If you don't have a chance to read the entire book, just review the notes below and join the conversation!

## Notes from “Becoming Ms. Burton”

“What if the general public understood that prison was a tool of social control, and that locking up more people did little to enhance public safety? What if we could have a system that wasn't about chaining people and throwing them in cages? What if our country could adopt a holistic approach that helped both the individual and the community? What if the massive amounts of money spent on prison were put toward education, so that our country was no longer a leader in the prison business, but in the long-term venture of providing urban schoolchildren with more opportunities than just drugs or crime?”

### **In the United States:**

- At least 95% of state prisoners will be released back to their communities at some point.
- In the US, up to 100 million people have a criminal record – that's one in three Americans.

### **ACEs, toxic stress and historical trauma -**

- Being abused or neglected as a child increases the likelihood of arrest as a juvenile by nearly 60% and the likelihood of adult violent crime by approximately 30%.
- More than 60% of incarcerated women report having been sexually assaulted before the age of 18. Ninety-four percent were victims of physical or sexual abuse.
- More than 75% of incarcerated women had at least one child as a teenager.
- The majority of incarcerated women are the mothers of underage children. Over 40 percent of these mothers report that, upon incarceration, they were the only parent in the household.
- More than 42% of African American children under the age of six lives in poverty.

- Most women are behind bars for social or victimless crimes – while the real victims, which the flawed system perpetuates, are the children. The number of children under age eighteen with a mother in prison has more than doubled since 1991. Approximately 10 million American children have or have had a parent in prison.
- More than 70% of people in prison cannot read above a fourth grade level. When inmates are provided literacy help, the rate of recidivism drops to a 16 percent chance of returning to prison – as opposed to a 70% chance for those who receive no help.
- Just three percent of federal spending goes toward nutrition programs. The average Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefit per person is about \$29.25 per week.

“Dad would punish my brothers by ordering them to strip and endure a switch or razor strap. They were whipped until they fell to their knees, or until my father tired. Didn’t matter if skin would break, if blood would come. This was how my parents had been disciplined. This was how their forefathers had had their souls beat out of them... We kids were the collateral damage of my parents’ histories, of the worst and weakest parts of themselves, and of the plain fact that neither was around during the day and we were left to raise ourselves.” – page 16

“The ceiling [of Susan’s childhood home] was crumbling and rats scurried along the floor and in and out of holes chewed between the kitchen cabinets. One night a rat crawled into my bed... it was as big as my foot. For three years, we lived in that hovel – which would be torn down the minute we moved out. For those years, I lived in a constant state of fear. I was scared of my brothers and scared of my mother and scared of that house. ... School was my safe place.” – page 23, 24

“I was trained not to talk back, though this was about more than respecting your elders. This went back to an archetypal core: you didn’t speak up to the master, no matter what, no matter if the master was right or wrong or crazy as a loon, you didn’t say a damn thing. That’s how it was for my ancestors, and that’s how they taught their children, and that’s how my parents taught me.” – page 27

“...my mother was a single woman raising six kids on a cleaning woman’s wages, or that we lived in a house that should have been condemned, the government routinely visiting us in search of evidence of my father, all the while turning a blind eye on the empty refrigerator, the collapsing, ceiling, the scratching of rats in the walls.” – page 36

“I abided by the unwritten code of silence; a silence that spit out the cherries but left the stones piling up inside me. My mother’s shame was pervasive. But her shame had not been the opposite of pride; her shame had been the barrier to any means of rising above, to any method of healing and learning and vowing never to make the same mistakes again. Now, her shame had become mine. It would be another three decades before I’d finally confront my mother, and even after all that time it took vast courage to speak honestly to her.” – page 41

At the age of 14, when Susan took a secretarial course and said she had a baby, the teacher said “Then why are you here?”

“There was sniggering, and I could feel eyes burning into me. This class was supposed to teach me a way out, a way up. Instead, I felt ousted from the class and from hope. Looking back, I see how this teacher’s words, flippant and sexist, should have rolled off me... instead his words pummeled me, and I crumbled. I’d been equipped with so little. I possessed no resources and no reserves. This felt like yet another betrayal, another failure, the only door I could see for miles slammed in my face. If only I had someone to turn to, someone to tell me “What happened to you was not your fault.” But there was no one. My family – generation upon generation- had lived their lives helplessly swept along. We were victims of the limitations society hoisted on us, which we then internalized as our own. We had no safety net, no system of support, no community or services to turn to and say, dignity intact: ‘I need some help.’” – page 45

“I didn’t think of myself as a battered woman. Getting roughed up was a part of the world I came from. I had heard my parents argue and saw the aftermath of busted lips and bruised eyes. Same with other families I knew; same with friends; same with the rooming house, the thin walls keeping all of us up on everyone’s business. Why would you think anything was so wrong, when all around you, this is how it was? With no other examples, it was easy to believe this was normal.” – page 51

“I focused on my children and parenting the best I could. I desperately wanted to learn how to be a good mother, and I didn’t want to default to the way I’d been raised simply because that was what I knew. I didn’t want my children to fear me, didn’t want to be a mother who barked orders, or walked around with an extension cord dangling her power. I also didn’t want secrets filling the house, suffocating us as silently as carbon monoxide.” – page 60

“I had lived with great sadness and disappointment over what I’d thought was my own inability to pull myself up for all those years. Only now did I see all the ways these barriers had affected me, pushing me back into the prison system. I’d been considered a throwaway. And this oppression had caused me to become depressed and aggressive, ruthlessly seeking what I thought I needed. The more my understanding of these social and political structures deepened, the more I was able to release myself.” –page 162

“The truth was, your decisions hardly mattered if none of your options were any good to begin with... be involved in the drug economy or starve to death? Like the women I knew: stay with an abusive spouse who at least provided for the family, or take your children onto the street? What kinds of decisions were these?” – page 164

“Parents who had served their time, but still lost their children even when their parenting had never been in question... Low-income families are often forced to choose between going broke or losing children. Children’s group homes and private foster agencies receive thousands more dollars in monthly funds per child than does a relative who steps up to care for a child. Group homes received the most, several thousand

dollars a month per child, though the group home system was riddled with documented cases of severe neglect and abuse. And, once children turned eighteen, they were automatically booted from a group home and expected to somehow possess the know-how and resources to create a productive life on their own.” – page 165 – 167

“I noticed similar dynamics in the lives of most women at A New Way of Life. Like me, they’d been conditioned to have low or no expectations of themselves or others. Also, like me, they’d turned to using. When all around you life was hard and unfair, when you were filled with rage and you didn’t know where to put it, why wouldn’t you seek a way to numb yourself? But what started as an attempt to find some relief went on to become an illness. Because it’s what they saw, the next generation followed your lead, and then the next. And now, generations in, it had become just the way things are, a treacherous form of normal.” – page 173

“The country was now full of agencies built on the back of the prison-industrial complex and operating under the auspices of Child Protective Services. It cost up to \$60,000 to incarcerate a woman for one year – but, after her release, zero was invested in reuniting her with her children and providing support for the family.” – page 189

“When police handcuffed a resident at A New Life: “When we see cops, we don’t see protection served. We see trauma, we see harassment. When these women are automatically seen as guilty and treated like criminals in their home, I am violating my promise to keep this house safe.” – page 229

“We don’t come into the world lying and cheating and stealing. No child says she wants to grow up to be an addict. So what happened? When did you learn destructive methods of escape? What happened to shape you, to compel you to make the decisions you did, to make you feel powerless, to make you feel desperate, to make you feel hopeless? There is a difference between who you are and the environment you were in.” – page 246

“In a juvenile detention center, I spoke with a thirteen-year-old boy.

‘Why are you here?’ I asked.

‘Because I had bad attendance at school,’ he replied.

‘Why weren’t you going to school?’

‘I couldn’t go by myself because of the gangs.’

Here was a kid being punished because his neighborhood was too dangerous for him to walk to school.” – page 256

## **Gender**

- The majority of offenses committed by women are non-violent drug and property crimes, motivated by poverty and addiction.
- Most female offenders are under thirty years old, and are disproportionately low-income, black, and didn’t complete high school.

- Women commit far fewer murders than men, but receive far longer sentences. A woman who kills a male partner receives, on average, a fifteen-year sentence, while a man who kills his female partner typically receives two to six years.
- Women give significantly more to charity than their male peers – around twice as much – even though women generally earn eighty cents for every dollar men earn.
- Approximately 90% of women imprisoned for killing someone close to them had been abused by that person.
- When unemployment rates rise, so does crime and violence.

## **Race**

- The average time served by African Americans for nonviolent drug offenses is virtually the same as the time whites serve for violent offenses.
- One in every 125 white children has a parent behind bars – for African Americans, the rate is one in nine.
- In the United States, one in three adults has a criminal record – though black men are six times more likely than white men to be incarcerated.
- The lifetime likelihood of imprisonment for white women is 1 in 118; for black women it is 1 in 19. Black women represent 30% of all incarcerated women in the US, although they represent less than 7 percent of the country's population.

“One of the men shared that he was here because he'd been driving drunk and hit a police car. In my neighborhood, that'd be called attempted murder, but this man, white, living in Santa Monica, was sentenced to community service, which entailed painting a jail. I thought of my brother who had been sentenced to eight years in prison for falling asleep at the wheel – with no alcohol or drug involvement – and he still had to serve the full sentence even after being diagnosed with narcolepsy.” – page 117

“When Dorsey reunited with the kids from his neighborhood he'd played Little League with, and they soon realized their whole team was there in prison – except for the one white kid.” – page 179

“Unarmed blacks are killed by the police at five times the rate of unarmed whites. At least one in three blacks killed by police were identified as unarmed. In 2015, police killed at least 102 unarmed black people, nearly two each week. Of these cases, only 10 resulted in police being charged, and only two cases saw conviction of the officers involved. One officer received a four-year prison sentence. The other officer was sentenced to jail for one year, though he was allowed to serve his time exclusively on weekends.”

## **Prison system**

“Our cost per woman at A New Way of Life is \$16,000 compared to the annual cost of up to \$60,000 per year to incarcerate a woman. We assist women in completing their education and finding jobs; we help women regain custody of their children; we provide twelve-step programs, counseling, and peer support groups.” – Prologue

“We are willing to spend countless dollars putting people who need help into cages, and then when they get out, we say you can’t have a job, and you can’t have housing, and because you don’t have either, we’re going to take your kids, too.” – Introduction

1970s consequences of prison reform that made sentences equivalent for same crimes, meant crowding:

- “Classrooms and gymnasiums had been turned into barracks,
- Vocational training and college courses discontinued,
- Drug rehab programs vanishes,
- Unable to choose or refuse a doctor,
- Denied painkillers – even post-surgery,
- Billed for all medical services
- At any given time it was speculated that busloads of prisoners were living on the road in what amounted to mobile prisons, waiting for word that someone had been released or died and a bed had opened up.” – Page 95

“Hurt people hurt people, and that’s the spiral in which I was trapped. Inevitably, I landed right back in prison, taxpayer dollars paying for me to sit there all day long doing nothing.” – page 97

“Despite patients’ rights policies that were supposed to prevent forcible medicating of inmates, not taking your meds could trigger a 115 write-up, denying you privileges, like shopping at the canteen. Collect enough 115s and you’d be thrown in the SHU or have more time tacked on to your sentence. On the flip side, I watched other prisoners being denied medication.” –page 103

“Discharge without any preparation was like... walking into the rain determined that this time I wasn’t going to get wet. But I still had no umbrella, so how the hell was this time going to be different than the last time it rained?” –page 88

“Over 90% of criminal cases close in a plea deal. The dirty little secret was that if fewer than 30 percent of people charged with a crime exercised their constitutional right to a trial, the justice system would crash. There simply wouldn’t be enough lawyers or judges or time. The right to a fair and speedy trial merely sounded good on paper.” – page 92

“The game had been rigged, and I’d been caught up in it for all these years. From the moment I entered the system, I was flagged for the criminal side, while my white Bunkie was flagged for the civil side, even though our crimes were the same. The fact was, we both needed treatment and help. The first obvious thing I noticed (in the Civil Addict program) was that my fellow prisoners were predominantly white. Most hailed from suburban California and most were represented by private attorneys, not public defenders.” – page 101

“Two/Three strikes laws... automatically doubled the sentence on a second offense, regardless of the crime. While curbing repeat offenders had been the goal, the result

was that prisons were filled with people serving inordinate sentences for low-level offences. Mary was doing 20 years to life for petty theft.” – page 147

“Some women tried to get Social Security. These (ex-convicts) were people with abilities. To have them strung along on a meager payout (was basically relegating them to a life of poverty and uselessness. If you got locked up, you got locked out. It didn’t matter that you’d paid your debt to society. Nor did it matter how hard you were trying to get your life back together. A criminal history was like a credit card with interest – so what if you paid off the balance, the interest still kept accruing. And accruing and accruing.” – page 154

“The prison wardens... were caught in a system and culture. Their culture was power. They bought into the idea that punishment was always the answer and was always deserved, that getting tough would solve everything. Most of the country had bought into this, too. After all it was the rhetoric being spewed from the White House and amplified by the media with slogans, crime initiatives, and praise for officials who were the toughest on crime. Along with this came the demonization of urban communities and the painting of black people as criminals.” – page 123

“Saul Sarabia discussed the barriers and lack of services for people coming home from prison. But he added that the barriers were by design. He explained how those in charge had made a conscious decision to treat addiction and mental illness not as the public health problems that they were, but as criminal justice problems. – page 160

“I was one of two formerly incarcerated women on the (Gender Responsive Strategies) commission. We were tasked with addressing the unique issues of female prisoners in an environment designed, structured, and programmed for men.” – page 173

“Part of Clinton’s flawed Welfare Reform Act was a seemingly random stipulation that anyone convicted of a drug felony was banned for life from receiving food stamps. Not only did this continue to punish those who’d served their time, but it let their children go hungry. Also, it arbitrarily singled out drug offenders while still permitting food stamp benefits for those with any other conviction, such as armed robbery, rape or murder.” – page 182

“Jail had done nothing to stop my addiction. Education, hard work, dedication, a support system, and knowing there were opportunities for me and that my life had value: these were what made all the difference...Turning pain into power, turning despair into hope. One thing I learned without a doubt: a system doesn’t work just because it’s there.” – page 277

### **Re-entry**

- In large urban areas such as Los Angeles and San Francisco, up to half of those on parole are homeless.

- More than 60 percent of the formerly incarcerated will still be unemployed a year after release. Those who do find employment are typically in low-level jobs, earning 40 percent less pay than adults with no criminal background.
- Only around 15 percent of those serving time for a drug-related offense are given access to a drug treatment program with a trained professional.
- Nearly 80% of formerly incarcerated women are unable to afford housing after release. Most public housing authorities automatically deny eligibility to anyone with a criminal record. No other country deprives people of the right to housing because of their criminal histories.
- Sixty-five million Americans with a criminal record face a total of 45,000 collateral consequences that restrict everything from employment, professional licensing, child custody rights, housing, student aid, voting, and even the ability to visit an incarcerated loved one. Many of these are permanent... The result is a life sentence harsher than whatever sentence a court actually imposed upon conviction – American Bar Association president William Hubbard – page 153

“Three days is the average time for someone to relapse [into drugs] after getting out of prison. “All I wanted was to ease the fear, ease the self-loathing, ease the hopelessness. It seemed the only thing in the world I was certain of was how to escape by taking drugs, by self-medicating... in a drug high, I could escape into silence.” - page 5

“It was the first time in my life I’d deliberately set a goal. I felt a sense of accomplishment. Incrementally, my confidence began to build. No matter how far down the scale we have gone, we will see how our experience can benefit others That feeling of uselessness and self-pity will disappear.” – page 118

“I practice the Jewish teaching of *Tikkum Olam*, that one person can change the world through acts of loving kindness.”

“It is not just a lack of abuse that makes someone kind.”

“I wasn’t used to asking for help, but I discovered that when you are trying to do something good, people want to help.” – page 139

“Formerly incarcerated people should be viewed as a populations with something to offer, whose collective voice deserved to be cultivated, valued, heard. But it is a stigmatized issue and most in the political arena wouldn’t give the time of day to a group with no political power. Especially because this is also a group with restricted voting rights.” – page 162

“If you fail to plan; you plan to fail. Have discipline and focus with your finances. Planning for the future, setting a goal, seeing it through – these are important benchmarks for successful re-entry and a successful life... Watching someone acclimate to life on the outside after four decades behind bars was an extreme detox.” – page 190

“I am not my past. My past does not define me.” – page 225

“Recognize that whatever happened in your life, that was your experience, but it is not who you are. You can separate from that experience and understand your importance and what you have to give to the world. Hey, we are stronger and better because of our problems.” – page 249

“Many of our women had post-incarceration syndrome. I’d experienced it, where I had been so conditioned to feel shame and to believe I was a bad person who didn’t deserve a better life. For a long, long time, I believed I was insignificant. Now, I march around the houses telling the women, over and over, *your life matters*. Without exposure to things, how as someone supposed to realize her talents, strengths, and what was possible to achieve? These should not be activities reserved for people of privilege, schools should provide these too. Schools tend to operate from a place of punishment – just like the criminal justice system.” – page 246

“We believe that the people most directly affected by a problem will have the best solutions, because they live it.” – page 251

“The closest to the problem are the closest to the solution – but furthest from resources and power.” –page 262

## Becoming Ms. Burton

### Questions for individual thought or group discussion

- Why were you drawn to read the book and come to this discussion opportunity? What do you hope to leave with?
- What surprised you in the book, and why?
- What caused you the most concern and distress? Why?
- What gave you some hope? Why?
- What did you see that the author and others specifically did that seemed to promote positive change?
- What actions could we as individuals take in our personal and professional lives to help create positive change here in Clark County?
- What are some specific systemic and policy changes you'd like to see? How can you help promote them?
- What would you most like your friends, family, and general public to know from the book?
- What would you most like your government representatives to know from the book?
- What ways might work for you to help educate others?