

“Champion of Change” Sue Kastensen is on a mission to help offenders succeed after release

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LtD: Sue, first thank-you for taking the time to speak to us at the *Living the Dream Prison Blog* and thank-you for *Fair Shake*. I want to start by asking you to explain your personal journey and what you learned from it?

At 57, my personal journey is long, and I am mid-stream in my learning! A few characteristics stand out, however, and also a few events:

- I never stopped asking why...or why not
- I have never allowed myself to be limited by what someone else said.
- Thanks to Billie Jean King, I knew I could be whatever I wanted to be.

A few major events:

* I was kicked out of my parent's home at age 12. For the next 5 years I was deemed an 'uncontrollable child' and sent to group homes, foster homes, jails, and a reform school 200 miles from home. Ran away a lot. On Christmas eve, 1979 (age 16), I hitchhiked to a hospital in GA, bent over in pain, to get appendix removed.

* In my small WI town of 2000, I built a popular, national hemp-based personal care company in 1993. In 1999, an employee asked if I'd hire her friend who was coming back from prison soon. I did...and the seed was planted for Fair Shake.

* In 2005, I sold that business, received my bachelor's degree (age 42) in 2007, and started Fair Shake in 2009. In 2016, I was recognized by the Obama White House as a Champion of Change and in 2019 I received a Master's in Education. Next, I plan to add a Free School to Fair Shake.

LtD: Where did the idea for Fair Shake come from and what were

your first steps to creating Fair Shake?

I decided on that name because I kept hearing that all people wanted was a fair shake. As a kid who had spent several formative years 'in the system', I knew what that meant and how that felt. That was all I wanted, too.

I also knew that to get a fair shake people would need a way to differentiate themselves from the media portrayal of a person who has committed a crime. The only way to do that is to demonstrate volition, skills, intention, commitment and one's unique characteristics. But first, people had to find the things they need to exist! So, first I created a huge national [Resource Directory](#), next I built the stakeholder pages, and the last, but not least-important, came the page that holds the [Choose Your Perspective](#) documents.

LtD: What are the features of the Fair Shake website and software? How does each help the Returning Citizen?

Fair Shake is like a huge reentry Do-It-Yourself building center. I've pulled together resources, information, tutorials and lots of links to offer to people to use in the way that makes sense to them. Everyone's successful reentry project is different, so – like a hardware store – there is a lot of diverse information!

The website and software are identical, except – of course – that the software is offline, meaning it functions without the internet. There are several benefits to using the software prior to release:

* The individual can learn to find things in the website. Fair Shake is huge! They can explore the 'website' on their own time and in their own way. Then,

when the person gains access to the internet, they will know where to go to click on links to the resources and information that is most relevant to them.

* Some people have never used a computer or the internet, or maybe they have just been away from them for a long time. Learning how to navigate the website through our simulation will be beneficial to navigating all websites...without pop-ups, advertisements or other 'shiny' distractions. Also, we created a tutorial for learners to gain computer and internet knowledge regardless of their previous experience; one which does not require them to start at the beginning unless they want to. We offer email tutorials, as well.

* Progressive institutions can send people home with their digital property! Documents, spreadsheets and images can be uploaded into a personal account which can then be accessed online after release. Resume's, reflections and other writings can then be accessed from any computer!

LtD: Fair Shake must be a ton of work. How do you keep it going, and more importantly, how do you fund it?

It is a ton of work. I don't understand why large organizations with many staff members don't accomplish more, when I am doing all this by myself. But then again, I don't waste time at the water cooler, or arguing with people about the best way to do things...

Fair Shake is 100% community supported, funded only by donors who believe that what I've pulled together, to freely share, has value. Most of Fair

Shake's donors are incarcerated, where they earn around 13 cents per hour. Since the donations have yet to start really rolling in, Fair Shake's HQ is in my home.

LtD: Lets discuss re-entry more broadly. You've called mass incarceration a "Wicked Problem", a term coined by Horst Rittel. First, tell our readers what a "Wicked Problem" is and then please explain why re-entry is a wicked problem.

The way I used the term, it means that a problem has many dimensions, it is complex to solve, it contains many moving parts, and relies on a large number of stakeholders who do not work in concert.

A proper response to this question would require a book-length examination, but I will offer a few examples of the dimensions of the problem:

Television pretends to inform us but it mostly just numbs us, conditions us, and leaves us feeling overwhelmed and unable to think deeply about crime, justice, or the power and responsibility of citizens in a democracy.

Schools crush our full humanity (which includes others; not just ourselves). It conditions us to only care about ourselves and our individual goals; it also embeds the idea that we must see others as competitors for jobs, and that jobs provide the key to a life worth living. I believe this is at the root of our crisis of care today.

The 'justice system' is focused on 'othering' people based on the idea that the incarcerated possess "criminogenic needs", which are different from the deep human needs we all share. They 'manage' people through behaviorism instead of personal development. By failing to offer people resources and personal development information before release (job training is grossly insufficient for human development), they guarantee that many people will come back. We can see ample evidence for their "evidence-based" approach in the 83% recidivism rate*.

We've been lulled into thinking that government grants and philanthropy

have 'got this' so we don't need to think or take action. But we've been hearing that same story for so very many years...

This is just the tip of what I see of the "wicked problem" iceberg. There are many more dimensions to explore.

LtD: In your experience, what is the biggest hurdle men and women face as they leave prison? Are their unique challenges for each gender? How does Fair Shake help?

The biggest problem that I see is that prisons do not offer the incarcerated the skills that we all need to face the world each day: confidence about the gifts that we have to offer to our communities and to employers, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, the ability to use a computer efficiently and wisely to find information without getting pulled into the vortex of distraction, and a deep understanding of our needs - and the way we satisfy them - to foster both autonomy and interdependence.

Limiting stories create a huge hurdle. We know that stories can bolster us and help us feel confident, but they can also be used to justify fear, self-doubt and inaction. For example, even though I constantly share stories about employment opportunities all around the country, and employers who are looking toward prisons to find their future employees, I must constantly address the old claims that employers won't hire people who have been released from prison.

I believe there are far fewer employers in that category today. Employers want references, however, so a person may have to work in a setting that is not their ideal position until they can demonstrate that they are tenacious, convivial, caring and dependable. People can move to a more desirable position once they have a reference for 6 – 12 months of work.

Since I'm a kid from the system, and a female and a mother, I can see that women have an extra-tough hurdle to surmount to fully engage their powerful self-determination. I'm shocked and saddened that we have slid back from the liberation that was growing from the 60's to the early 80's. Media in every form wants to convince us that

we must focus first on how attractive we are; and second, our duty to others (children, men, elders). Very rarely are we provided with images or support for being agents of our destiny and success. In prison, for instance, we are mainly offered employment training opportunities for the occupations that women have traditionally held for the past 100 years, rather than giving us the opportunity to earn much higher wages in occupations such as construction, welding, or coding.

LtD: Many of the resources provided by Fair Shake appear to address Re-entry as a process. For example, you recommend re-reading the Working Through Depression information a few weeks after release and the Educate Yourself! resources six-months later. Is re-entry a process? Does thinking of it this way help Returning Citizens succeed?

I've been fortunate to stay in touch with quite a few people after release. Most, if not all, have said that it was much different than they expected, and that they were over-confident (a bias that afflicts most of us!) about their ability to address gnawing issues. Even after a year or two of relative freedom, they were still learning about themselves and their true needs and goals.

This is true for all of us. When we move to a different state or city, we are often unable to anticipate the psychological and emotional challenges that will face as we settle in to the new environment. The challenges are exponentially exacerbated for the person coming from an environment of such complete deprivation to one with an overload of information, misinformation, fake information...and overwhelming possibility.

One of my new friends, who was released from prison just over 2 years ago, shared his "process" in the most recent edition of the Fair Shake [newsletter](#) (sent to 3500+ incarcerated subscribers each month). He felt it was important to reach back and remind the readers to take care of themselves, or they would be faced with challenges they have not prepared for.

LtD: The information you provide in the Fair Shake Reentry Packet is very comprehensive and extensive in many different categories - including tips on watching TV, for example! Why are these topics so important for Returning Citizens to understand?

Where can we learn to watch TV defensively? It has such a huge influence on society, yet we are most often passive recipients of its pervasive and controlling messaging. Anxiety and depression are increasing! We can refuse to see ourselves as inadequate. We can question the media with its constant promotion of drugs, fear mongering and consumerism.

Besides critically thinking about the impact television has on us, what school teaches about all of the other influences that have shaped us - and the status quo? Where do we turn to foster self-determination in ourselves and our youth? Why are we taught to turn to authority for answers, rather than how construct knowledge with others? Who helps us to bravely set boundaries, or consider the biases that play havoc with our thinking?

I feel it is my duty to not only offer physical resources but also emotional and psychological resources! We have a right to ask questions, to reflect, and to think for ourselves. These documents form the foundation of the Free School I'm building: a free and open study center where people can explore the education that we were denied in our formative years.

LtD: Proponents of the term "Prison Industrial Complex" see the system as one that intentionally sets Returning Citizens up to fail in order to maintain a revolving door of imprisonment. What is your opinion on this? Are felons set-up to fail? Why or why not?

We are all set up to fail each other, starting with public school. Since we are starved of the opportunity to learn about ourselves as persons in the world, we are stripped of fundamental inclinations toward care, creativity, cooperation and critical thinking. The result is that we fail to care about one another - which is against our nature.

Many of my other responses provide examples of how prisons fail to prepare people for release.

I want to remind readers here to keep their scope very wide: the prison industrial complex does not stand alone. It is as pernicious and pervasive - and deeply connected to - the medical industrial complex, the education industrial complex, the military industrial complex (Eisenhower coined this term in 1961) and even the charitable industrial complex, which has been created to give us the illusion that society's shortcomings are being tended to by caring souls; rather than "foundations" and grants that may be bent on making sure things stay the same.

These writings will help you see the controlling power behind philanthropic funding and government grants: [*The Revolution Will Not Be Funded*](#) written by INCITE!, [*Winners Take All*](#) by Anand Giridharadas, and Peter Buffet's article [*The Charitable Industrial Complex*](#). Philanthropists, and the science that supports their perspective, circumnavigate democracy, create a comforting illusion, and continue to generate "solutions" that perpetually fail to solve problems.

I don't want to disparage non-profits! Many, like Fair Shake, are committed to a mission to reduce suffering and improve lives.

The industrial complexes, however, are about control: control of the people, control of the economy, and control of the future.

LtD: What industries or companies seem more open or willing to hire felons in your observation?

I believe the field of employment is wide open. Many of the newsletter readers are interested in trucking, entrepreneurship and building maintenance. I learned that more than a few thought they would like to share their gifts in the non-profit sector. I think this is a great idea, so I added a non-profit employment search engine link to the Fair Shake [Find A Job](#) page.

One of the most interesting aspects of Fair Shake is that it can be responsive to the interests of those who are preparing for release and those who

have made the transition. Real-time data!

LtD: What should current prisoners do, right now, to prepare for release and success upon re-entry?

Learn to recognize the conditioning that we've all been subjected to throughout our lives and decide, with intention, which beliefs are still serving you, and which ones you can let go.

In addition to your regular studies and job training and preparation, consider perusing user-friendly books on functional philosophy, psychology, sociology, citizenship and physical and mental wellness.

If you are interested in higher education, start your studies now! You can test out of many courses for just \$90 by utilizing the [CLEP](#) test, and you will likely even qualify to get your [Freshman Year Free](#).

Finally, read while you can, because taking the time to read a book will become very difficult once you get busy ~

LtD: Do prisons provide appropriate rehabilitative programs and/or job skill training for inmates?

It is impossible to answer a question about "appropriate rehabilitative programs" with a yes or no response since we have nearly 2000 prisons in the US and they function like independent communities.

I believe all institutions offer some sort of job skill training that can be considered appropriate, but I would doubt they are universally adequate.

LtD: What could prisons do better? Or, put differently, how should prisons help prepare inmates for our current economy?

I hope you don't mind if I skip this question. I've written, and scratched and rewritten responses and I have so many problems with 'the current economy', which I believe is in the process of pivoting anyway, that I don't think I could provide a response that is anything but confusing. (side note: I was deeply involved in Fair Trade for a decade, so my view of 'the economy' includes high regard for the workers

and deep thinking about extraction and externalizing costs...including pollution, toxins, etc.)

LtD: Has COVID affected the employment opportunities for Returning Citizens over the last 14-months?

Yes. It has been more difficult to get documents, in-person training and hands-on support, but - from what I've heard - jobs have been relatively easy to obtain.

LtD: You believe in, and promote, the concept of Ubuntu. Please define that concept for us and explain how and why you've adopted it in your life.

Desmond Tutu sums it up so well when he says "the solitary individual is a contradiction in terms".

Ubuntu, roughly translated, means: I am who I am because of who we all are. We learned how to be a person through other persons, and the culture and the environment in which we have lived. We are interdependent, and authenticity is of paramount importance because, as Desmond Tutu also says "I need you to be all that you can be, so that I can be all that I can be."

One of our deep human needs is belonging. We have a powerful, innate desire to give to our community, and we have many gifts to give! But we are taught to focus on our needs, and to address our problems as individuals, rather than within a community.

I learned about Ubuntu because I was frustrated (and still am!) by how we are controlled by Microsoft, et al. My son told me to try the Ubuntu operating system (which I now use), but when I

searched the term, I found the philosophy instead. I felt like I struck gold! I realized it is how I see the world, and how Fair Shake was created and continues to develop.

LtD: What about Fair Shake makes you the most proud? What are you still working to improve? Most proud: (I live in the midwest; this is very difficult to say out loud)

That my efforts are recognized and valued by the stakeholder groups I have tried to reach out to. Below please find a powerful, unsolicited 'performance review'; one I take very seriously. I see the acknowledgement and accolade not only as a compliment, but also as a fortunate responsibility.

I received this unsolicited comment just last week: Please know how much I remain grateful for all that you do. Despite the recent cold blast, I am given tremendous warmth from the hope and passion you exhibit. During moments of adversity, I will reread your newsletters and your encouraging words.

Working to improve: I'm always working my listening skills, widening my scope, my metaphors, and my understanding. The website and software are constantly being improved upon, and I'm writing new personal development documents in the hopes to improve the new Reentry Ownership Manual, as well!

LtD: What is the best advice you can offer a soon-to-be-released person? Hold on to your values, and try to not worry too much about unsettled feelings; they will settle in time. Breathe. Take an inventory of your gifts, your skills, your unique qualities. Think of ways you will share them with

those around you. Feel your confidence, and try to remember that feeling when you need to tap into it. Believe in yourself. Remember that Fair Shake is here, and I am here. Feel free to reach out if and when you need support. Congratulate yourself for getting through what could be the most difficult time in your life!

LtD: If Fair Shake is not available in an inmate's specific prison, how can they bring the software or information into the prison?

They may find an interested person in education, reentry and even in the library. Case managers have brought Fair Shake in, too! Let them know I will be happy to send a copy of the Reentry Ownership Manual and a DVD. The best way to reach me is sue@fairshake.net.

Other options are in development, too. We're creating a 'secure' website, that acts like the software but is accessed through the chrome books now in circulation. We're also working with a tablet supplier. Fair Shake will remain free through all access points.

LtD: I always end these interviews by giving our guest an opportunity to address any area I may have missed or share information or ideas important to you. What would you like to leave our audience with today?

We've allowed our imaginations to be limited by external influences. We do not need models to build a powerful and satisfying future; we need gumption, determination and curiosity! We need to learn to listen, and we need to support one another. We must shatter the old models that no longer work. We have to make it up as we go; and to do this we will need to learn to trust ourselves and one another.

Rosie The Riveter said "We Can Do It!"

Candidate Barack Obama said "Yes We Can."

Sue Kastensen says "What Are We Waiting For? Let's Go!"

* Alper, M., Durose, M. R., & Markman, J. (2018, May 23). 2018 update on prisoner recidivism: A 9-Year follow-up period (2005–2014). Retrieved from <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/18upr9yfup0514.pdf>