

The Beauty of Giving

Meet **four powerhouses** devoted to helping their communities rise above.

Susan Burton A New Way of Life Reentry Project

IN 1998, SUSAN BURTON opened her home in Los Angeles' Watts neighborhood to ten women, nearly all of whom had recently been released from prison. The three-bedroom was a squeeze, but "not as tight as a cell," says Burton. It was the happiest she'd felt in the 15 years since her 5-year-old son was struck and killed in a crosswalk. After that crushing loss, Burton numbed her grief with alcohol and drugs. Without access to proper counseling, she entered a revolving door of incarceration. Says Burton, "When I left prison for the sixth time, I thought, *I don't have no tools. How am I going to make it?* And I didn't." When

she finally did find support, it was at a treatment center in whiter, wealthier Santa Monica. "People there weren't going to prison for the things people went for in South L.A.," says Burton, 69. "I got angry. I also felt like I could do something about it."

Leaving prison can be as scary as entering. "You're given a \$200 pay card, and you're supposed to make a start with that," Burton says. She knew her community needed a haven like the one that had rescued her. "I couldn't get back my years in prison, but I could help others not cycle in and out," she says. She saved up to buy the house in Watts and a Ford Escort, and began visiting a bus station near Skid Row, where just-freed passengers arrived every day. Burton approached them with an offer

she knew sounded suspicious: a sober and affordable place to stay. "People threw rocks at the house for the first few months," she says.

This summer Burton's nonprofit, A New Way of Life Reentry Project, opened its tenth house in L.A. More than 1,200 women have found refuge in these spaces, where they have access to therapy, 12-step meetings, and life-skills workshops. In 2019, its recidivism rate was 1 percent (California's statewide average has hovered around 50 percent for ten years), and graduates have become construction workers, nurses, hairstylists, and more. "People aren't throwing rocks anymore," says Burton, "but they do throw a couple of dollars here and there. Now they want to help." —LISA BUTTERWORTH



Above: One of the ten homes that Burton (right) runs to shelter and support formerly incarcerated women.



“When I left prison for the sixth time, I thought, How am I going to make it?”

—SUSAN BURTON



From left: Moonlynn Tsai assembling care packages; Tsai with her girlfriend and Heart of Dinner cofounder, Yin Chang.

Moonlynn Tsai and Yin Chang Heart of Dinner

AS NEW YORK CITY shuttered in March, Moonlynn Tsai and Yin Chang brainstormed how best to help their beloved Chinatown. At first, Tsai leaned into her background as a restaurateur and prepared free meals with Chang for anyone to grab. But after seeing videos of older Asian Americans being attacked and sprayed with hoses, the couple wanted to do more. "When the president calls Covid 'kung flu,' it gives people permission to target our community," says Chang. She asked social service agencies that support older Asian Americans if they needed help providing meals. The overwhelming response: yes.

What was originally a two-person operation, with Tsai and Chang using their own savings to prepare close to 300 meals per week, has since turned into Heart of Dinner, an initiative delivering comfort food to Asian Americans between ages 65 and 95. (In NYC, 24 percent of the demographic lives in poverty.) Tsai wants locals to eat dishes her

own grandparents ate—like cooked whitefish with bok choy—instead of the canned tuna and cheese that government agencies were handing out to those who couldn't or wouldn't shop. "One woman refused to ask her son to get groceries because she was afraid to put his life at risk," says Chang. "Pride is a crucial part of our culture."

Financial donations to Heart of Dinner allow Tsai to source and pay for Chinese-inspired meals from ten collaborating restaurants. Food distributors are also contributing (donations have included 15 boxes of tomatoes, \$3,500 worth of sea bass, and 16,000 containers of tea). Chang, meanwhile, coordinates Heart of Dinner's volunteers, who shuttle meals to more than 21,000 Asian American elders—and offer a little extra TLC in the process, in the form of personalized messages from supporters around the globe. The volunteers attach the notes to the delivery bags; the hope is that even after the congee and scallion buns are gone, souls will still be nourished. Learn how to mail your own love letter at heartofdinner.com.

—JENNIFER CHEN

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“We can do good with the damage that was done to us.”

—SAMANTHA GERSON

Samantha Gerson UnBroken

WHEN A 12-YEAR-OLD Samantha Gerson came out as bisexual, she faced pushback. "I started telling people, which my mom didn't want," she says. Within a year, she realized she was gay. "But even beyond my sexuality," says Gerson, now 27, "I never felt accepted in my home." Feeling trapped, Gerson ran away at 14, spending several months in a shelter in Los Angeles. She eventually moved in with a friend and went back to school—until Gerson's mom had her sent to a treatment facility a few states away. "I was put in an SUV and brought to LAX in handcuffs," Gerson says.

For the next nine months, she was subjected to restricted diets, forced exercise, physical restraints, and conversion therapy. "They made me believe I wanted to be straight," says Gerson, whose mother did not know her daughter would face abuse at the facility. (The program Gerson attended is part of what's called the troubled-teen industry, which is largely privately run and not subject to federal oversight.) "There was so much hatred and disgust engrained in me."

Thirteen years later, Gerson's pain persists. She can't stand to look at herself in the mirror, and eating and sleeping feel like chores. Yet she's one of the lucky ones. Today she is a clinical social worker studying for her doctorate and the founder of UnBroken, a nonprofit helping adults who have survived forms of institutionalization like conversion therapy, outlawed in only 20 states. "The ultimate goal is a full-blown federal ban," she says.

With UnBroken, Gerson, a 2019 L'Oréal Women of Worth honoree, provides or pairs survivors—some 700 from all 50 states so far—with therapeutic, legal, and vocational support. The first person her clients meet, Gerson offers a lifeline to those who've known similar trauma. "This is my passion," she says. "We can do good with the damage that was done to us." —ZOE DONALDSON



Samantha Gerson in 2019.