

Ana Sofia Harrison 00:04

All right, so, what was growing up in the Bronx like, to start off?

SWH 00:10

Oh, growing up in the Bronx was, for me, actually, oh, it was—it was wonderful from a child's perspective. We lived in kind of like the North end part of the Bronx. So it was residential. I grew up on a block called Bouck Avenue. And it was family oriented. Mostly everyone who lived on Bouck Avenue was a family with children, whether it was a two parent home, or even a single parent home, there were children. So, grew up with not only a lot of love, but I grew up with knowing what community really looked like, right?

SWH 01:02

I learned that from a very early age. And I also know how fortunate—I am blessed. I was and am, to have that part, because everybody doesn't have that I grew up with two parents, you know, in my household, and my father was a big educator. He was many things, but education was, like, really huge. In, in my family, in my household. So it was, you know, we didn't have TVs in every room until we grew up because it was, you know, always just family based and, and centered.

SWH 01:50

So it was like, during the week, you would study, you're going to read, your favorite pastime is going to be picking a book that you you want to read for leisure. But it was studying during the week and weekend, and we would come together, watch TV, watch wrestling, do those type of things, you know. And so I was, I would say I was semi-sheltered in a way, because I was always involved in something, whether it was some type of activities.

SWH 02:29

My father was also a pastor of his church. So, you know, every day of the week, it was something. Bible studies, you know, prayer meeting, something, choir rehearsal. So I was just always, you know, occupied and busy. And so, you know, didn't get to witness a lot of things, you know, but heard about them, you know, used to have conversations, because somebody else went through it. There was a hous—housing development, maybe about two, three blocks from us, you know, and that's where a lot of our friends were.

SWH 03:17

And, you know, a lot of things took place there, you know what I mean, and so, you know. My experience as a whole was really, it was actually more than wonderful. I think it was, it was, I learned what I think I needed to learn at that time. Especially, you know, I'm 55. So, we talking years, years ago, and things weren't—you know, we had the heroin epidemic in the 60s, where I was born [inaudible] the 60s, the 70s, you know, the 80s, 90s, you know, the crack era.

SWH 04:03

But there was still, just, there was a difference in that, than what I see now, you know. People still had respect, you know, even though people did things that people might have considered against the norm, you know, it just—it was a different feel, you know. And you didn't hear a lot of what is going on now,

community was harmed in a different kind of way, I think from then, than it is. So, definitely a different vibe growing up in the Bronx, you know,

Ava Sullivan-Thomas 04:49

Thanks for sharing that. So after your incarceration, how did you find your way to the Coalition for Women Prisoners?

SWH 04:58

Well, I think just to tie it in that I wound up in prison because a man attempted to rape me so that there's a, you know, a connection to how do you have this great, you know, kind of childhood and, you know, wind up, you know, post incarceration. And, and so I wind up in prison. Again, I was blessed not to get a lifetime in prison, you know, they gave me a nine to eighteen for manslaughter. Unfortunately, the person who attempted to rape me died by his own weapon. And so, I wound up there because when I came home, I was, I was very proactive, first off, in prison, right?

SWH 05:55

Because again, you know, as I said, about my childhood growing up, I went in, with a certain kind of foundation, you know, and so I wasn't—it was either I'm gonna do this time, because I have to, or I'm gonna let this time do me. And I did the time, right. And so I, you know, went to every workshop, got every certificate, did all that I can do. And I planned, right, what my next steps was post incarceration. 'This is what I need to do.'

SWH 06:34

And one of that is what I come to learn was, is, you know, networking, right? Connecting. Connecting is everything, because when you're locked up in this kind of set—kind of society outside of society, you know, your contacts, your engagement, all of that is limited. And so, you know, I tried to—I went to college, you know, connected with professors, just kind of really kept what was abreast of what was going on out there. And so, right before I got released, you know, they have you do this thing called pre-release. You learn kind of different organizations and stuff like that.

SWH 07:27

So I managed to get this book called Connections. And learn, you know, that their work wasn't a whole lot specifically for women and, you know, gender expansive folks. But I looked, I went wherever the men were, too, right? Because I'm trying to figure out what's going on. And when I came out, I went—I made the choice of going into a place called Providence House, which was a parole residence at the time. And hanging on one of the bulletin boards was a flyer for ReConnect.

SWH 08:14

And ReConnect was a part of that. And that's actually how I got there, right? I saw the flower—the flyer and I'm like, 'Oh, my God, there's leadership, this, that, and the third. Oh, absolutely.' And so, you know, when I went, I actually kind of, like, called and tried to connect, ask questions before the ReConnect program took place, and just, you know, got connected with everyone there.

Ava Sullivan-Thomas 08:48

Yeah, that's so interesting. My next question was actually: what was your experience within the ReConnect program? Could you talk a little bit about what you learned and did in that?

SWH 08:59

Absolutely. ReConnect, probably would be one of the best things I could have did for myself post-release. It just gave you that next level, that next set of skills, and learning, and being informed. It, you know, taught us about different types of advocacy—especially in the legislation, you know, legislative advocacy. And, you know, we had encounters with just being able to sit with people who were, you know, prosecutors that were, you know, lawyers and defense people who were pushing policy, City Council.

SWH 09:55

That was like my first real, um, kind of connection to something like that. Because prior to that, you know, honestly, who really cared? And I have to say that like, who really put credence or any kind of emphasis on City Council and the government? And I know I didn't, right? You know that things just function, you learn in school, you know, how a bill becomes law, all of these things.

SWH 10:33

But it wasn't no real interest for me, especially politics. But after being incarcerated. First off, that was—that changed my life in so many ways, right? Because I would have been—I could have been a doctor, lawyer, all of those things. Went to prison, they didn't even have social workers in prison. Had to change my course, became a social worker. I realized that a lot of people, folks, were in there innocently, right?

SWH 11:12

They were innocent. I don't care what the court said. If you hear and read their transcripts, all of that, it's like—it's an impossibility that they did this. How did they not see this? And not having the, the ability to advocate for yourself, because you have to be dependent on others to do that for you—your lawyer, whoever, you know, your voice is muted.

SWH 11:48

And so to come out and have a leadership kind of development program like ReConnect, it just, I just thought that that was like, the best thing next to cooked food, my God. Here we are, you know, and I'm able to learn this thing, because, you know, you come out thinking, 'Oh, you have a felony, oh you, you know, you have a history, you have a background. You're not—no one is going to accept you, no one's gonna hire you. No one's gonna care about you. You know, people are gonna look at you like you did the worst thing in the world, like you have leprosy or something, like nobody wants to be'—and that's kind of how it was, right? Nobody really cared about people in prison, and definitely them coming out.

SWH 12:47

Because there's these preconceived notions that you're, you know, all of these horrible things in life. So to have something that not only in—it poured into you, invested in you, in your development, but gave you knowledge and information and put you in the know, right? And it was not only informational, but educational. I was like, oh, I told everybody about this. You know, everybody that came home needed

to hear and it was for, for women for gender, you know, for gender expansive folks, for—that, you know.

SWH 13:34

And I just, you know, that was one of the best things that that could have ever kind of launched—kick off my post relief—release path, you know, was that. Because that—I was like, 'Oh my God, this is like going to college.' Opens the doors, opens your mind. And it's like, when you learn how things operate, then you come to understand how we—how we get caught up in the systems, you know. Not only, you know, being targeted, but we ourselves as, as a people on our accountability, how we get caught up. And so it was really dynamic, really dynamic.

Ana Sofia Harrison 14:41

Thank you for that. And, how did you find yourself as a leader in the Domestic Violence Justice Act campaign?

SWH 14:51

Through personal experience. Again, I go back to—growing up, you know, never had that, in my, in my family, never saw that. Never even saw, you know, my, my sister and I—it was three of us, my brother passed away—but my sister and I still talk about how we didn't see our parents argue. Like, if they did, they didn't do it in front of us, around us, we didn't hear it. So for me to personally experience being in a DV [domestic violence]—I can't even call that a relationship, but being in a domestic violence, you know, circumstance situation just really blew my mind.

SWH 15:45

And I was young, you know, I was young, I was traumatized. Because my, you know, the love of my life at that time, you know, got killed in a car accident before we were getting married, right? Three days and—you know, it—the trauma, right? The trauma of all of that just put me on a path. So I wound up with someone who actually was, you know, a homeboy, a friend. And, and come to find out that, you know, he was, he was violent, you know.

SWH 16:26

Not only just violent, but he had his own trauma, you know. When I look back, now that I'm a social worker, you know, the trauma he had with his mom beating on him, you know, with pipes and all kinds of stuff, I see. Right? Hurt people hurt people. And so in that, in that day and time, growing up, we didn't talk about it. I didn't, you know, because my parents—I tried to hide it as much as I could. Until one day, I couldn't, then my parents became aware, it became a problem. But they didn't, you know, there wasn't anything, no real resources no, you know, for, for us. And when I say 'us'—people of color, you know.

SWH 17:22

They had a movie out called The Burning Bed with Farrah Fawcett, you know, where she lit the bed on fire, killed the guy that was abusing her—her husband or whatever—but we couldn't get away with stuff like—you know what I mean? There wasn't anything. And of course, at that time, you don't realize how very active racism still was, and prejudices, and bias, you know, but it was. And there wasn't anything, so you kind of held on to it.

SWH 17:57

Didn't want my, my family to know, because, again, I didn't come from that kind of—that wasn't normal to me at all. Right? And so, going through prison—now, I did a lot of work on myself. I did a lot of reading, I did a lot of researching, I did a lot of studying. And, you know, one of my papers was actually based on women around the world, especially out in the Muslim community and culture.

SWH 18:32

In different countries, how they were treated, what they were going through, and I was able—you're able to name a thing a thing. And that thing is, oh, we weren't fighting, we weren't anything, that was abuse. You know, so coming home, you know, I think it was me stepping into my truth, right? That I'm a survivor of domestic violence. And that's, you know, how I—I went into that almost full force, because when you finally be able to speak your truth and put a name to a thing, it's hard to shut you up. You know?

Ana Sofia Harrison 19:23

And how did you feel after the act did pass?

SWH 19:30

I felt: well, finally, doggone it. Ten years is like, come on! You know, and while there's great, deep appreciation for this law to exist, it's like, what the heck took you so long to get there, right? We know that this is very much—and you know, not for nothing, it's not just women. Men, everyone, you know—domestic violence doesn't discriminate. It just doesn't. And so, you know, the, the push the constant, continuous meetings, almost the convincing on how important this was, right?

SWH 20:26

The opposition, all of the things—and all that kind of came up for me when Cuomo finally signed this in 2009, right? That, my God, even he got, you know, for harassment, all of these things, you know. And it's like, did it have to take this long? It shouldn't and it just really made it a—just pressed that button of reality to say 'we still got a way to go.' For us to even be respected, appreciated, acknowledged, you know what I mean? And for people to be held accountable. It's almost like that slavery thing. 'Oh, we don't want to talk about it. Oh, we don't want it in school. We don't—' But it happened!

SWH 21:24

And it happens. And the one thing about domestic violence is that it happens every day around the world, right? And, and more than we admit die—get killed—because of it. And it took you ten doggone years. And that's how I felt, you know. And I felt that—the heaviness—more than I felt the, the excitement of it, you know? And then, not for nothing, the first person that got to get released after this long battle was a man. Under the law.

SWH 22:14

That part. And while I'm glad that they are—well, they're underutilizing it, but I'm glad that people have have come out, are getting out. Like, we fought for this. I remember starting this and for the 10 years it was all but maybe three men that supported, that came out, that came to the rallies that—on a regular,

and that's because their wives were in prison. And the first person that got to feel the the impact of this law was a man. So, yeah.

Ava Sullivan-Thomas 23:11

Thank you for sharing the journey of that campaign with us. And then, switching gears a little bit to your later work, what drove you to create the Women's Community Justice Association?

SWH 23:24

So there is a few found—co-founders of WCJA [Women's Community Justice Association]. And it was—we created it, and it was founded because, again, with the Close Rikers, we actually had a campaign that existed before the organization called the Beyond Rosie's campaign. Which is about the only female-identified jail on Rikers Island. And we're saying—it's called the Rose M. Singer Center, and so it's dubbed Rosie's, and—we're saying there's life beyond. So that's how we came up with the campaign.

SWH 24:09

But all of that came about because, even through all of that, the men were highlighted. It was always the men highlighted, and then when we say 'Oh, get—well women, too. Women, you know, there might be more men in in prison, but women are the fastest growing population. They have a higher rate.' And, you know, not for nothing, that you find that most women are locked up or get locked up behind a man, for a man, because of a man, you know. And so, how do—how do they get excluded out of the conversation? And then when you bring up women or gender expense pe—oh yeah and them, and them, too, you know, like, as an afterthought.

SWH 25:05

And so, while we were doing this work, we had the campaign going out. We had WCJP [Women's Community Justice Project], which is now called SHERO, which is a consortium of, of gender-focused organizations for them that do housing as an alternative to detention. And WCJA actually was created to be that hood. But the city kept it as a pilot program for so long that WCJA just—it became an advocacy for justice, safety and healing. And so we are still the hood, we advocate for all of these things that are that are out there.

SWH 26:01

But really, it's about elevating, uplifting not only the issues, but the voices, right? We're in Rikers, just came from Rikers. Um, on what's today, Thur—on Tuesday, right, they had a community day. So we're in Rikers, because we can't say that we represent and uplift the voices, and the people, and the folks and we're not connected, you know? So we're in there. And so, WCJA is just that. It's based around women and gender expansive, gender nonconforming, non-binary folks, community.

SWH 26:50

We're about community all day long. If it wasn't for the community—we are the community, you know? And so most of my staff, half of my board, are formerly incarcerated. We're all directly impacted in some way or another. So we are the community. Justice—what does that look like? Doesn't look like

the norm, or what society deems justice is. Because I think, with them, it's really, you know, just them. And what we're saying—that it's, it's about all of us, right?

SWH 27:34

And so, we pump justice in a different kind of way. Justice really looks like reparation, for a justice look like healing in the community. Justice isn't about locking up people, and throwing away the key without understanding the trauma, and the backdrop, and the backstories, or the history of one's life, you know? And then, of course, we—as an association, we all come together as a collective. And that's why we're here, that's why it was created. And I have to say that WCJA is unique, very unique. We don't operate like the regular organizations, you know?

SWH 28:21

We practice self-care. I am the inaugural Executive Director, I started as a board member, co-founder. And I try to, I try to make sure—not that I try to make sure, that I do, right—not only weave in healing, and self-care, but also care for the community. And that's, you know, that's how we are. So we do things differently. They, you know, they don't work, you know, till they can't—till their heels are burnt off and on fire. They put in great work, but I also make sure that they take care of their family, that they, you know, take care of themselves, and that they take care of the community.

SWH 29:13

It's all, you know, it's, it's all in one, you know. And so, yeah, we—we definitely a unique type of organization and brand of people, right? Because we—we don't believe—it's, it's not about the work. It's about the people, people are always first, you know? People first, so. That's who we are.

Ava Sullivan-Thomas 29:42

I like that sentiment. So, in the Beyond Rosie's campaign, the decarcerate to under 100, how can that happen and like what vital steps must be taken to do so?

SWH 30:01

Absolutely. You know, I think just even startups—that we come to understand that, you know, there are people that are in jail that might need a higher level of care, right? We know that there are some people that have created and caused great harm to the community or someone in the community. What we're saying is a.) number one: there should be healing centers. There should be places where people get their trauma treated, that we address the underlying, and the overlying, and the baseline of what people are going through, right? And if we can do that, then we definitely will have less harm in the community, but there's no resources, right? It is proven statistically, logistically, logically, right, that alternatives do work, you know. Do everybody—you know, and I think this is a personal opinion of any individual, is whether they think that people should, or deserve to be locked up.

SWH 31:21

What I'm gonna say is, as a person that's been on both ends of the spectrum, you know, as a survivor, as a person who survived harm, as a person that had to protect themselves in self defense, and, you know, cause, you know, the life of someone that they—it doesn't take umpteen years for people to get, it doesn't take someone to sit on a landfilled island for four years, you know, people could be in the

community. And when I say 'in the community', there could be places that they could go for the ones who need higher level of care and give them that care, right? Doesn't necessarily mean they have to be ab—that they're able to just walk out and go to the nearest bodega.

SWH 32:21

But what it means is that they are in a place that is safe, that is healthy, and really cares about their well being. Give them the help that is needed, right? Help them to get better. It could be a clinical thing, right? Where they might need medication, but everybody don't. It's a matter of treating their trauma. So we're saying is, if people with mental health challenges—have mental health challenges, and this is a record, or this has been assessed, or evaluated, this has been diagnosed, then why aren't they in somewhere that can treat that? Someone has an addiction, why are they locked up like animals? Like, why not treat the addiction? Right?

SWH 33:19

And whatever the trauma is—so once you do that, and I mean, I've had conversations, you know, with the mayor, even the mayor agrees everybody don't belong there, right? Now, whatever his actions is after fact, I know for a fact he said everybody don't belong. Almost—there's 370 plus women and gender nonconforming folk, gender expansive folks at Rik—on, at Rosie's right now, the smallest population. And the majority of them have issues. All of them have trauma.

SWH 34:06

Absolutely, we can get them down to 100. We could get them down to nothing, right? If we had created and put people in their proper perspective, and allow them to get the help that is needed, rather than just putting them somewhere and saying, 'Oh, you com—you committed some type, or you allegedly committed this crime,' because they're detained, you know? And that's the problem right there. You know, especially when it comes to the women and gender expansive population.

SWH 34:48

Like, there's domestic violence. There's all of these other things that is weaved into this that isn't put into consideration because law and trauma never meets anywhere, at anytime, on anything, you know, not at all. So, you—they go by the law, rather than operating from this perspective of: Would they have done that if they weren't traumatized, if they weren't abused, if they weren't molested, or sodomized, or raped? Or some sexual assault, or violence?

SWH 35:32

Would they do that if they weren't tired of being mentally, emotionally, physically, spiritually, financially abused? Maybe not. So, absolutely, you know, we have a report. And that clearly kind of outlines what could be done, but the gist of it is, if you spend over \$550,000 per person, per year, that can change people's lives. If we put that to something more resourceful and more beneficial, right? And more healthier for the community. I think that's a no-brainer.

Ava Sullivan-Thomas 36:25

Yeah, definitely. And you just mentioned, and you also mentioned in your pre-interview, that most of the staff at the WCJA are formerly incarcerated—how does this like affect the work that the organization does, and also, like, the community within the organization?

SWH 36:41

I think that it has a great impact, right? I feel like, if you don't have these identifying factors, you know, I have, you know, I have a trans man, I have a male that is formerly incarcerated, I have women who was formerly incarcerated, I have people who are been in domestic violence situations, I have people that have did time in multiple states, you know, and—who can identify with this, right? People can—you can relate. So I feel like, not going to—we're not just, 'Oh, we think this is a great cause'. Like, we've been there. You know, I got staff that did over 23 years in prison.

SWH 37:38

Spent four years at the Rose M. Singer center, you know? It's—so she can talk about this, you know what I mean? My own personal experience, people can talk—and it's, it's not even just the the personal experience, but it's also understanding that this needs to be advocated for, and we care deeply about these issues, because we've experienced it, right? And we know that if we don't, then how many will? You know, how many? How many will? How many will stand up and say this thing is a thing? Or that, you know, people can say, 'Oh, Rikers Island is horrible. It's this, because I seen the pictures, because I was told.'

SWH 38:36

And we're saying: We lived it. We've been there. We know. Right? What that is, what that's like, what life is, how you can regain your your life, some semblance of it. How you can reinvent yourself, how you can reimagine what your life can be, even post-whatever it is that you go through. So, I think that we have a great impact. And I just need to be clear. I don't love what I do. This is traumatizing work, you know? And I spent over a decade of my life locked up because I defended myself, you know? My daughter grew up, basically, without me being present. You know, I had to parent from a distance.

SWH 39:37

So it's not that 'oh, we love this work'—we're passionate about the causes, that has us do this. You know, because if we don't, then, you know, how do we reach others and hopefully prevent them from getting caught up in the same thing? How do we help those coming out that didn't get to do pre-release, or whatever the case may be? And, and not even then, because you got people in pre-release that's been there 20, 25 years that don't even know what's happening in the, in the streets, in the world. Because they'd have been locked up for so long.

SWH 40:30

You know, I had somebody that did almost 30 years, and you telling me about my reentry? It's in I'm like, okay, you've been—the last time you've been in the street was in the 70s. Okay, I came home in 2004. Like, so it's, it's really connecting the dots for folks. Making it tangible, making it real. And really understanding that this is what investment look like. Us right here. Investing in ourselves, investing in each other, investing in community. And you, too, because we're—there's nothing special about us, right?

SWH 41:19

We're ordinary people doing extraordinary things, right? So you can, you can be on this side. They—we get paid well, make sure my staff is paid well, so they can have a livable wage. And these are people that come from the same place as you. So don't, don't fret, don't fear, know that it's doable. It is. It's doable. And I think that's kind of what we bring to the table is to show that nothing is obtainable. Nothing is impossible. Impossible, if it was broken down, really says 'I'm possible'. Right? And that is the gist of it, is that you're possible. To do all things.

Ava Sullivan-Thomas 42:15

That's beautiful. I never even thought of that. It literally is 'I'm possible'.

SWH 42:20

Right?

Ava Sullivan-Thomas 42:22

Um, one more question is that, like, how do you exper—how do you compare your experiences with the CWP versus, like, the WCJA?

SWH 42:30

To me, I'm not sure there's much of a comparison other than, back then, I think people had a different kind of drive. Now, it's really harder to get people—and this is outside of my staff, this is like community—getting people to really be committed. I think people, you know, love the idea of being a part of something and, you know, a belonging, the camaraderie, the siblinghood, all these things. And I think, you know, coming out, one thing people have to understand is that, for the formerly incarcerated community, especially the women, we have that.

SWH 42:35

We came out as community, you know. And when everyone, anyone come out, we there. We, like, fly in, like, 'Oh, what do you need?' Take them out, get them clothes, do all of those things. That's already built. And we nurture that. I think, now, with this type, it's—I think that people don't understand that the community already exists, you just got to nurture it. But they're still talking about, 'Oh, we need to build community, we need to build community,' and it's like, you're reinventing a wheel that already exists, you know. And I think that's kind of the difference the drivers—I think if people just—I remember me coming home. I mean, I was out morning, noon, and night, I was at every workshop, everything, I was everywhere.

SWH 44:28

And this is even before having a laptop, cell phone, all of that, you know. And I mean, you're paying as you call in all of that stuff there. And, you know, it was different. Because it was like, as long as I had a MetroCard, I was on my way, right? And I think now, people post-pandemic, you know, it's the comfortability of being at home, did this, did that, and so the drive is a little different. I think that the concept of commitment is different. But we're teaching it. WCJA's teaching it, you know. Like, this is—this is what it really means.

SWH 45:24

And then—and how do you hold yourself not only hold yourself accountable, but hold yourself in care as well, to where you're not just out here, you know, giving all your life, you know, your blood out your veins, but how do you operate? And do—you know, be committed, you know, do what it is that your heart desires, and yet still carve out a time to do the other things? You know, I think the difference is that we do get paid, you know.

SWH 46:02

Me and my staff, we get paid. And we made—I made, created, put a culture of WCJA that has all of that stuff built in. So I think for others who work in other places that still kind of want to do this work is kind of hard, because they're overworked and burnt out where they are. Whereas that's not the case for WCJA. You know, so also just kind of holding that—embracing space that people are tired.

Ava Sullivan-Thomas 46:42

Yeah, I think that's really important in advocacy work. You kind of forget that it can be a lot, sometimes. And I don't have any more questions. I don't know, if Ana-Sofia does, or if there's anything that you, SWH, would like to say. But if not, it was so lovely having you and hearing your experience with the CWP and the WCJA. And yeah, I'm just—I'm so happy that we were able to connect and have this call.

SWH 47:18

Me too.

Ava Sullivan-Thomas 47:20

All right. If that is it, then I think Adam is going to end the Zoom recording. And yeah, I hope you have a great weekend.