

Piper Burke

April 26th, 2022

Interview with an Activist

“Uncle Sam is the biggest pimp of all”

On April 1st I (Piper Burke) interviewed Bella Robinson. We spoke for about an hour and I learned about her life within her career as an activist. Robinson is an activist with Coyote RI, an organization self-described as, “a group of sex workers, former sex workers, trafficking victims and allies that are advocating for policies that promote the health and safety of people involved in the sex industry”. Robinson and I discussed a variety of topics and it was wonderful to hear about her experiences with activism as well as her career. I am a senior at Connecticut College studying philosophy and government. I only recently have studied about the field of sex work and transitional justice.

Robinson is part of the national council for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women. She participated in a seminar last year to fully immerse herself in the background of the council as well as to have a deeper understanding of its goals. One of her big questions during this time was “how do we hold people accountable without locking them up?”. This question is of course pivotal to ideas surrounding transitional justice. Keeping people out of the criminal justice system is also a pivotal point to the work she has done. She suggests starting to do this by a redistribution of funds that are currently being put towards the prison system.

Robinson greatly elaborated on her work with the sex worker rights movement. Although her main form of work is through sex work advocacy she emphasized the importance of understanding the interconnectedness of all the systems that uphold much of the injustice she seeks to undo. She expanded greatly on how homelessness, poverty, access to healthcare, racism, and much more all affect each other. This was a point that she emphasized several times and it made me consider how many of these institutions do affect each other in ways I had not realized before.

One of the things I asked Robinson was, “What do you think is something you think that the average person (someone who is not directly working in your field) could do to help support your cause of helping incarcerated women and girls?”. Her first response to this was the amazon wish list her organization provides with things that they can use to help those who need assistance. Ordering off of the wish list is sometimes even more helpful than donations because aid can be given more immediately. She also said of course volunteering is a good way to offer your time and availability. Also, as Robinson explained, oftentimes people are more willing to

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help buy a specific item over just donating money because it feels more personal. The other thing Robinson said is important when offering help is asking if you are wanted. She explains that this is an important step because sometimes your help might not be as helpful as you intended and it is important to know when your willingness to help might be misplaced.

Another question I asked Robinson was, “What do you find to be the most effective way to reach people and get your message across?”. She said that the decriminalization of sex work in any (or of course ultimately all states) would be an incredible way to get across the message she and Coyote RI are working towards. While changing the law is important, so is changing the social perception of sex work and sex workers. Often the dismissal of sex workers’ rights and safety are dismissed across the aisle. This is of course a big obstacle because it can be hard to find an ally in the political arena.

I asked Robinson about what a difficult aspect of her work was. She explained how it can be difficult to work with sex workers who are intentionally trying to keep their affiliation with the sex industry a secret. Sex workers who have not ‘outed’ themselves to their families or communities often will not reach out and then cannot receive any aid or help. Getting rid of the negative stigma around sex work would make it easier for individuals to reach out to organizations and to those in their communities.

The title of my reflection, “Uncle Sam is the biggest pimp of all” was a direct quote from Robinson that stood out to me from our interview. She was discussing the dichotomy and irony of how the United States (Uncle Sam) so vehemently opposes the sex work industry, in particular for its exploitative qualities, when the US exploits thousands of people in a variety of ways but specifically through the military.

Robison spoke of several long-term goals for her work and her activism. One is for girls and women to not be incarcerated. Reforming the political justice system is incredibly important to Robinson and her work. Also important to her work is the decriminalization of sex work along with the destigmatization. Both aspects are extremely important and they work hand in hand with each other.