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RSF photographer publishes first in a trilogy of books examining lives of women in jail, homeless and kids at risk

By Arthur Lightbourn

It may be something in the water but, for certain, author-photographer Susan Madden Lankford and billionaire Warren Buffett have something in common.



Susan Madden Lankford
Photo/Jon Clark

Both grew up in Omaha, Nebraska, in fact, within a block of each other. Both used their Midwestern good sense to invest profitably in the stock market. And both are demonstrating a profound social conscience. Buffett displayed his by donating the bulk of his considerable fortune toward helping the less fortunate throughout the world and Lankford turned from a lucrative career as a portrait photographer in Rancho Santa Fe to her self-financed exploration of the stark other-worlds of women in jail, the homeless and kids at risk.

“Taking pictures was the only way I knew how to shed light on these issues that are much bigger than me,”

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she said. "I felt the need to show the truth. My life and my photography were full of plastic portraiture, images of individuals wanting the 'right' image and not the one with real expression and life. I wanted to expose the truth, which can be ugly, real and harsh."

Her first book in a planned trilogy, *Maggots in My Sweet Potatoes: Women Doing Time*, is an impressive 284-page, 13" x 10" landscape-format book, complete with 326 black and white photographs, scheduled for release on Sept. 15 (Humane Exposures, LLC, San Diego).

Lankford spent more than two years and 80 visits to the Las Colinas Detention Center for women in Santee, photographing and doing tape-recorded interviews with inmates, guards, jail officials, attorneys, judges, rehabilitation counselors, medical professionals and psychiatrists to produce her ground-breaking work. Not one to do things by half measure, she formed her own publishing company, Humane Exposures Publishing, LLC, to create a public awareness "about the graphic needs and frail values of a society at risk [and]... a penetrating look at society's disenfranchised and castaways."

While many books have described in detail conditions in American prisons, few have been written about what goes on in the more than 3,000 jails in the U.S., run, in most states, by county and municipal governments. Jails typically incarcerate people sentenced to less than one year or are awaiting trial, often for petty theft, prostitution, drug possession, and occasionally, white collar crime.

One of the inmates she interviewed was a former Rancho Santa Fe resident, interior designer Shelby Roland, who was serving time for violating her probation after serving one year of a six-year grand theft sentence for running up \$48,000 in expenses on her partner's credit card.

Roland claimed she had been placed in Las Colinas for her own protection after she suffered "excessive punishment" by staff in the Vista jail.

We interviewed author/photographer Lankford in her rented 1,000 sq. ft. downtown San Diego studio on the 14th floor of an office high rise which was built by her husband of 38 years, developer Robert Lankford.

Dressed casually in jeans and with shoulder-length brown hair, Lankford bears a resemblance to actress Diane Keaton in her film role as "Annie Hall" (1977).

Lankford has an open, non-threatening demeanor that undoubtedly helped her talk her way into the overcrowded Las Colinas Detention Facility, one of seven jails operated by the county, incarcerating some 5,000 people. Las Colinas was built to house 450 women inmates. It currently

Quick Facts

Name: Susan Madden Lankford

Distinction: Author/photographer Susan Madden Lankford has just published the first in a trilogy of books examining the lives of women in jail, the homeless and kids at risk. Her first book, *Maggots in My Sweet Potatoes: Women Doing Time*, is scheduled for release Sept. 15.

Resident of: Rancho Santa Fe for 24? years

houses 600 on a typical day, Lankford said.

Journalists normally are not welcome in jails and prisons, and certainly not a recurring basis over a period of two years.

But Lankford managed to convince former Assistant Sheriff Ben McLaughlin, after viewing her photographs of the homeless in San Diego, many of whom he knew personally, that she would be a fair observer and not be easily manipulated.

McLaughlin had been a street cop and a captain at Las Colinas before he became assistant sheriff. Although he remained skeptical after 32 years in law enforcement, he told her, "If any good can come of this, go for it."

Despite McLaughlin's blessing, Lankford quickly discovered she was not a welcome visitor.

"The place is cold and dark," she wrote of her initial visit to Las Colinas. "And I feel as guilty as if I had committed a crime by the mere fact that I am inside. The staff treats me as if I am guilty of some crime. 'This doesn't happen,' the sergeant told me. 'We don't let cameras and tape recorders in here. You're invading a privacy.'"

Lankford is the first to admit that until 1990, she lived a life isolated from the grim realities facing so many Americans who get caught in a spiral that often leads to lives in jail, prison, or on the streets.

Born and raised in Omaha, Nebraska, Susan Madden was the youngest in a family of three children. Her dad was in the livestock commission business.

Initially, her interest was in science with the hope of becoming a physician.

She was a pre-med student at the University of Nebraska, but married in her senior year, and interrupted her university studies to help put her husband through his last year of electrical engineering. She later earned her B.S. degree.

She and her husband, Bob Lankford, had been going with each other since they were 15, she said.

"Then we went to Dallas and I finished up at Baylor Medical Center in medical technology and research... but we started moving from Dallas, to Des Moines, to Omaha, into Denver. That was the day and age when it wasn't common for a woman to take a man's position in medical school, so I acquiesced, and picked up a camera when we had our first child, Polly, to record "special moments" that her husband was missing because of his job-related travel.

Born: Omaha, Nebraska

Education: B.S. in medical technology and research from the University of Nebraska, 1970.

Family: Married 38 years to developer Robert Lankford. They have three grown daughters, Polly, a photographer and graphic designer; Stacey, an urban planner and designer; and Samantha, who is studying for her master's in social work at San Diego State University.

Interests: Animals, gardening, running, walking

Reading: Enjoys John Updike novels

Philosophy: "Be kind to yourself and others. Be alert, curious and increase awareness."

"I got myself a cheap little Minolta and I built a darkroom down in the basement and discovered that I was getting back into science because I was doing the darkroom work and mixing the chemicals and watching the images come up and it was terribly exciting."

She later purchased a used 500 C/M Hasselblad for \$500.

"And that was the beginning of a serious love affair with photography," she said.

She began studying photography seriously at the University of Colorado and at various workshops, including famed landscape photographer Ansel Adams' workshop in Yosemite.

She then launched a portraiture business that she continued when she and her family moved to Ranch Santa Fe in 1984.

"The nice thing about it was I could photograph individual children and families on my own property. I had a donkey and I'd move the donkey up the horse trails with all the equipment. One family I photographed had 25 family members. And I made darn good money.

"But I was noticing that there was a change taking place," she said. "People seemed to be getting more and more concerned about their looks and was their photo going to look like someone else's photo...People wanting the 'right' image and not the one with real expression and life."

Then, early one morning, a car, occupied by teens allegedly high on drugs and alcohol, crashed into a eucalyptus tree outside her house. Lankford and her husband heard someone calling out "Help, help, help my friends."

Paramedics took more than an hour to extricate the injured from the wreckage; one of the teens would later die in hospital. Lankford was shocked when she overheard a police officer remark at the crash scene that the teens got what they deserved.

Two weeks later the same paramedics arrived when her daughter was injured by a horse "and they didn't know which direction to go to get to children's hospital."

"These two accidents altered my life," she said. "I could no longer focus on individuals in a portrait stance. I had to find out as a woman, as a mother, I had to find out about society. I knew nothing about society."

She began photographing animals at risk, white pelicans struggling to survive on heavily trafficked highways, and abandoned dogs awaiting death sentences in animal shelters.

She sensed a hardening of life around her.

Intrigued by the idea of incarceration and confinement, she rented the old Seaport Village Jail and spent two months photographing the empty cellblocks, light streaming through the bars and the scratched-out graffiti.

"While photographing the inside of the barren jail," she revealed in her book, "... a homeless man came in. He said, 'What are you doing in an old, nasty place like this?....You wanna know about jail, come outside and let me tell you about it. I've been there.'

"He introduced me to the homeless street life....No longer could I photograph the places without the people

in them. I had to fill the image with society's reality and not my imagination."

She spent three years photographing the homeless.

In the process, she discovered that many of the homeless "were running around with 'beaucoup' warrants in their pockets and I didn't know anything about the court system."

She visited the courts and then branched out into various county-operated jails before zeroing in on Las Colinas Women's Detention Facility.

"To see so many women grappling behind cyclone fencing in a minimum security yard and trying to tell me about the maggots in their sweet potatoes the night before, and that they may have three, four, five or six children and are heroin addicts and may have been 10 or 15 times to jail."

"Parenting and education," she believes, "are the only solutions."

"I want my book to be a part of an awareness campaign," she said which she hopes to stoke with book tours and talks at universities, particularly to criminal justice students.

In her book, she quotes incarceration authority Maryam Razavu Newman, Ph.D., that none of these women inmates will become 'healthy' through punishment.

"For some of them it may be too late for rehabilitation...For others there is some hope, but it will involve long-term therapeutic involvement. Society cannot raise children. Parents raise children. Society can only be supportive of the parents...For damage control, we can assign a good caretaker (social worker) to every family that needs one. Very expensive, but less than the cost of juvenile halls, jails, prisons etc." Lankford's book is available (as of Sept. 15) at bookstores, amazon.com, etc. For more information, visit:

www.humaneexposures.com