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Drug Policy as Race Policy: Best Seller Galvanizes the Debate

By JENNIFER SCHUESSLER

Garry McCarthy, a 30-year veteran of law enforcement, did not expect to hear anything too startling when he appeared at a conference on drug policy organized last year by an African-American minister in Newark, where he was the police director.

But then a law professor named Michelle Alexander took the stage and delivered an impassioned speech attacking the war on drugs as a system of racial control comparable to slavery and Jim Crow — and received a two-minute standing ovation from the 500 people in the audience.

“These were not young people living in high-crime neighborhoods,” Mr. McCarthy, now police superintendent in Chicago, recalled in telephone interview. “This was the black middle class.”

“I don’t believe in the government conspiracy, but what you have to accept is that that narrative exists in the community and has to be addressed,” he said. “That was my real a-ha moment.”

Mr. McCarthy is not alone. During the past two years Professor Alexander has been provoking such moments across the country — and across the political spectrum — with her book, “The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness,” which has become a surprise best seller since its paperback version came out in January. Sales have totaled some 175,000 copies after an initial hardcover printing of a mere 3,000, according to the publisher, the New Press.

The book marshals pages of statistics and legal citations to argue that the get-tough approach to crime that began in the Nixon administration and intensified with Ronald Reagan’s declaration of the war on drugs has devastated black America. Today, Professor Alexander writes, nearly one-third of black men are likely to spend time in prison at some point, only to find themselves falling into permanent second-class citizenship after they get out. That is a familiar argument made by many critics of the criminal justice system, but