

Ear Hustle
Episode 102: What's Up, Michael Freeman?
March 20, 2024

Sam Lewis: This is Sam Lewis, Executive Director of ARC, the Anti-Recidivism Coalition. The following episode of Ear Hustle contains language and content that might not be suitable for all listeners. Discretion is advised.

[ambient sounds]

Nigel: I noticed this while we were talking to someone, and I tried not to get distracted by it. So, there's like a medical table, and then on the wall over the table are six dispensers with cereal in them. So, there's cornflakes, Rice Krispies, bran flakes, apple whirls, honey nuts, and fruit whirls. You work here, right?

Male Speaker: Yeah.

Female Speaker: Yeah.

Nigel: What's up with the cereal here?

Male Speaker: Well, we try to be a five-star area back here, not like the rest of the areas.

Nigel: Nice. It's also colorful.

Male Speaker: I fill it up every morning. I don't like it when it's not full. It just looks better when it's nice and full.

Nigel: Which one do you think is most popular.

Male Speaker: Actually, the Apple Jacks and the Cheerios. Honey nut Cheerios. It's sweet, but it's healthy. [laughs] So, you get a little bit of both worlds there. Yeah. These guys, they don't like what comes on their tray or certain things, they don't want it. I'm sure, like your kids, if you have children, I have children, That's one thing you could always get them to eat. And as we get older, we revert back to our childish state again.

[pensive music]

Nigel: This was really not an ordinary prison, Earlonne.

Earlonne: Honey Nut Cheerios. [Nigel laughs] I like Honey Nut Cheerios.

Nigel: Did you ever have those in prison?

Earlonne: No. [Nigel laughs]

Nigel: Yeah. So, we've been wanting to check out this place for a while. It's a prison hospice.

Earlonne: It took a lot of negotiation, but we finally made it in. So, that's where we're taking listeners today.

Nigel: I'm Nigel Poor.

Earlonne: I'm Earlonne Woods, and this is Ear Hustle from PRX's Radiotopia.

Nigel: So, the history of this prison hospice is pretty interesting. It was started back in the 80s at the beginning of the AIDS epidemic.

Earlonne: Back then, if you were incarcerated in California and became sick with AIDS, there was this one man's prison they sent you to. CMF, also known as the California Medical Facility near Sacramento.

Nigel: So, you can imagine back then, you have all these sick young men in one prison, often alone far from their families dying of this terrible disease that, at the time, really very few people understood. And the idea of the hospice was to bring some comfort and compassion and really a sense of dignity to their final days.

Earlonne: To get there, after you go through security, you got to walk down this long ass hallway.

[background chatter]

Nigel: The long ass hallway. I don't know if listeners remember. We've talked about long ass hallways before in prisons, and I've never seen one. So, I have to admit I was a little bit excited.

Earlonne: Was it long?

Nigel: It was truly a long ass hallway.

Earlonne: So, we had to stand there for a bit and just take in the scene.

[background chatter]

Nigel: This is just a long hallway that goes through the prison. And I don't know where people are coming and going to, but it's really busy and there's so many great sounds.

Michele DiTomas: *So, this is X corridor. It just happens to be X.*

Nigel: This is Dr. Michele DiTomas. She's the Medical Director for the hospital. And she led us down the long hallway to a door on the right.

Nigel: *We just walked into the hospice area. It smells very different than the rest of the prison. I can't quite- I'm trying to identify the smell in here.*

Earlonne: It looked like a regular hospital ward with the nurses stationed at the center of it. And then, you had these rooms all around for the patients. It was like a ring of rooms.

Nigel: Exactly.

Michele DiTomas: *It is a pleasant-- maybe it's the garden wafting out.*

Nigel: *Can we come in? Nigel. Nigel. Can we come in?*

Mario: *Nigel. My friend, Nigel. This is Mario.*

Nigel: *Hi, Mario.*

Nigel: So, we walked into one of the rooms. And we're introduced to a patient named Mario.

Nigel: *How are you?*

Alan: *They want to know how you like it here.*

Mario: *Excellent. I love it.*

Earlone: Mario was wearing this blue knit hat that was kind of-

Nigel: Almost bigger than his head.

Earlone: Yes.

Nigel: *Can I ask you about your hat?*

Mario: *Yeah.*

Nigel: *Where'd you get your hat? Did someone make that for you?*

Mario: *This morning.*

Male Speaker: *We have a group that crochets. And all the patients usually get one. They'll come and ask them what their favorite football team may be or their favorite color, and they crochet them up.*

Earlone: This is one of the incarcerated guys who work in the hospice.

Nigel: *So, they have like a knitting circle.*

Male Speaker: *Yes, they do.*

Male Speaker: *We have one of our workers here, Billy Ray, and he's bigger than me, big, muscular marine. And I always tell him, I tell him, "Sashay you pretty little ass on down there crochet class." And all the tough guys sit around in, they crochet hats for the patients. And it's just sweet as hell. So much, love into these hats and their patients love them.*

Nigel: *Okay.*

Earlone: *All right. Oh, he brought the boombox.*

A couple of rooms over, we met another patient. A guy named Mr. Roberts.

Nigel: Yeah. And he was also this tiny wisp of a man lying in the bed. You could barely register that there was a body there underneath all those sheets and blankets. But he was getting a visit from the music therapist.

Music Therapist: *We're going to sing it, right, because you love this song.*

[singing *Hey Good Looking*]

Nigel: This visit with Mr. Roberts made us rethink some of what we had hoped to do on this reporting trip.

Earlone: Yeah, I think we were hoping to really get to know people. And based on some of their conditions, that wasn't possible.

Nigel: I mean, a lot of these people we were meeting here were at this point where they were withdrawing. And I felt uncomfortable intruding during this really profound transition. I mean, Earlone, we were strangers to them.

Earlone: Right. I mean, I think this trip became less about one individual person and more about hospice itself, you know?

[singing]

Music Therapist: *All right, thank you. Have a good day.*

Earlone: But you know what? There were some surprises.

Nigel: *Hi, Alan. How long have you been here?*

Alan: *24 hours.*

Nigel: Alan looked like he was in his 60s, but it was a little hard to tell. He was in a wheelchair, really hunched over. He told us he had cancer and had chosen to spend his last month's here in the prison hospice.

Alan: *They say there's four stages to accepting a scenario like this, Dr. Elisabeth Kubler Ross. Yeah, so I'm going through all four of those stages.*

Nigel: And, E, you weren't in the room at this point. So, it was just me and our editor, Amy. And she was holding the microphone, and she had to really lean in close to Alan because his voice was so faint and there were these really long pauses. And I've got to tell you, I had a real moment there. I just felt uncomfortable and awkward. And it was like, what are we doing here? What are we trying to get from these people?

Earlone: So, Amy stepped up and took over while you got your shit together.

Nigel: Exactly.

Amy: *What stage are you at right now, do you think?*

Alan: *I guess I'm accepting it. I have had a pretty good life. I have a master's degree in psychology. And I survived Marine Corps bootcamp. So, I guess I'm ready to go.*

Amy: *How do you feel about that? Is that scary or not?*

Alan: No, not so much. Sorry, I can't think of anything.

Amy: Now, you look like you're thinking very hard. [laughs]

Alan: Just riding the wave.

Amy: Is there anything we should ask you or anything you'd like to say?

Alan: Gosh, I wish I had gone to the office more.

Earlone: That's a good one.

Nigel: I know. That cracked me up. And you know what I think, Earlone? That comment kind of helped me get back on track.

Earlone: All right. I mean, it's just another conversation about weird shit. We do it all the time.

Alan: I never met a drug I didn't like, although it's been 30 years I did any LSD.

Amy: What was your favorite drug?

Alan: God, so many. Methyl DMT. It's a short-acting psychedelic.

Amy: Can you describe what that feels like?

Alan: It's kind of like the visual perception of LSD, but it's all in about an hour.

Amy: Did your ego die?

Nigel: This is hard to hear, but what Amy just asked him was, did your ego die?

Alan: Not so much with DMT. Mushrooms and the LSD, you could say that.

Amy: LSD, what does that feel like?

Alan: It's ineffable. I think that's the word for it.

Amy: Do you think that death might feel anything like that?

Alan: I wouldn't think so. The light goes out. You're done with all the pain. Man, I had almost 10,000 songs on my iTunes. That's a bummer. I will not be able to hear those again. Oh, well. I guess I'm done.

[thumping music]

Amy: Thank you very much.

Alan: Thank you.

[ambient sounds]

Nigel: So, we just stepped out into a garden that's behind, I guess, the hospice unit looks like there's a fountain out here. There's little covered areas. It's very pleasant. There's a view of the hills in the background. There's lots of plants around here. It looks like you can stroll around.

Earlone: For the most part, the hospice looked like a pretty regular hospital.

Nigel: Yeah. Totally.

Earlone: But this garden they have is like one of those Zen-type meditation gardens.

Nigel: I'm getting very excited just thinking about it. I have never seen anything like it in a prison before. And I'm going to use two words to describe it that I never think about when I think of prison.

Earlone: What's that?

Nigel: It was delightful and exhilarating and also restful.

Earlone: That's three.

Nigel: Okay. Three words. And basically, it's the heart of the hospice program.

Incarcerated Worker: *So, starting up here, we have our citronella. And that is the plant there with the pinkish thing. They call that the mosquito plant. It repels the mosquitoes. They don't like this.*

Earlone: One of the incarcerated workers here gave us a tour of all the plants.

Incarcerated Worker: *And these are currants. And the currants, you could eat the berries. So, they usually come out a light, a medium, and a dark berry.*

Nigel: People warned us, if you talk to this guy, you are going to get a very extensive tour of this garden.

Incarcerated Worker: *Okay, now we have this, this is a desert willow. We'll go around, we'll see the butterfly plant right here. We have our lavender in here. And we have a lot of little lizards to fly around here. So, here's your elderberry. Now, that's the one that has medicinal.*

Earlone: *That's elderberry?*

Incarcerated Worker: Yes.

Earlone: Eventually, we extricated ourselves from this very thorough tour.

Nigel: Yes, we did.

Earlone: Because we'd heard there was someone else, we should be talking to.

Earlone: *He has a hoe with him.*

Nigel: Oh, he really does have a hole with him. He wasn't kidding. You tend the garden.

Joe Bick: Have we started recording?

Amy: Yes.

Nigel: Yes [laughs] Oh we never turned off the recorder.

Joe Bick: My name is Joe Bick, and I am a physician who's been working in the Department of Corrections for the last 30 years this month.

Earlone: This guy is the head honcho of health services for all California prisons. He's a real big wig. But on this day, he was just a regular gardener.

Nigel: One of the things I was thinking about standing out here is that I see something here that I haven't seen at any other prison in the United States, and that is areas of shade, quiet, and that there's a little bit of privacy that's created by the arbor here. And so, this actually oddly does not feel like being in prison. And when you look at it, you realize it's not that hard to create this, but it certainly isn't created in very many spaces.

Joe Bick: Thank you for that feedback. That's exactly what we're trying to capture. All of this was done in consultation with the people who were living and dying here and the people that worked here, asking them, "What is it that you want in this space?" People said, "I want to put my feet in the grass," and people will come out here and lay in that grass. "I want the movement of a swing. I want to see things moving." Like this tree, this chitalpa that was picked because it sways in the wind. It has beautiful flowers.

Nigel: Yeah. you feel like you can meander out here, which is not something you can really do inside of a prison.

Joe Bick: You can, and you can find your space. There are people that want a space with a lot of people who want to talk. There are other people, they're facing death. They want a space where they're more private, where they can be by themselves or maybe they and their family want someplace that's private.

Nigel: I'd want to lie down there so much.

Joe Bick: You can.

Nigel: Can I?

Joe Bick: You can.

Nigel: I'm going to lie down here. Sorry.

Joe Bick: Isn't it just like a nice place to sit down?

Nigel: Oh, just to lie down and look up.

Joe Bick: In this grass.

Nigel: Earlonne, I can barely express to you how astonishing it was to lie down in that grass. And you-

Earlonne: Yeah, yeah. I just couldn't do it.

Nigel: Why not? Why couldn't you join me down there?

Earlonne: Well, I mean, there's some things that you can do and there's some things that I can't do.

Nigel: What, you can't get prone.

Earlonne: No, I can, but I'm not there no more like that so.

Nigel: Huh.

Earlonne: Yeah. I know.

Nigel: I don't understand what that means.

Earlonne: I know. I can't do it. I'm not there no more like that. So, don't make sense to you, Nigel?

Nigel: No, I think I get what you're saying.

Earlonne: As a previous prisoner, there's some things that I probably won't do just on the strain of doing it.

Nigel: Okay, I get it. But, Earlonne, it was glorious.

Earlonne: You looked very peaceful.

Nigel: I was.

Nigel: *So, I've really been enjoying laying on that grass down there.*

Jeff Maria: *Oh, sure. I lay on it too.*

Nigel: *Are you joining me and we can talk?*

Jeff Maria: *Sure. Yeah.*

Nigel: So, I decided this was going to be a really great place to do an interview. And Earlonne you didn't mind holding the mic?

Earlonne: No, I had to stand there and do production work, Nyge.

Nigel: What a team.

Jeff Maria: *My name is Jeff Maria, and I'm sitting in the hospice garden.*

Nigel: *Are you really sitting?*

Jeff Maria: *Oh, I am laying down on a bed of grass. I'm looking up at the blue sky. Ah, smells good out here. Nice fresh air and got the sun on my face. Just laying on the grass like when I was a kid.*

Nigel: *Yeah. What do you think about when you're out here laying on the grass right now?*

Jeff Maria: *I'm living in the moment.*

Nigel: Earlonne, I was so struck by this experience that in prison, there was this real sense of ease and relaxation. And we're not just in prison, we're in a hospice where people are dying. And that there was this really connective, beautiful moment lying in that grass with him and talking. Actually, I'll never forget it.

Earlonne: I don't think he's going to forget that either.

Earlonne: *When was the last time you laid down with a woman and had a conversation?*

Jeff Maria: *In the grass forever, forever. I mean, I've been in prison myself 44 years now, ever since I was 17 years old.*

Earlonne: Jeff is what's called a PCS, or pastoral care service worker. He's an incarcerated guy here at the prison, and his job here is to care for the man who are dying. And when a person is really at the end of their life, like the doctors say they are 72 hours away from death, Jeff and the other incarcerated workers start a vigil.

Nigel: So, that means that at all times, a PCS worker is by their bedside so that no person has to die alone.

Nigel: *Do you think there's such thing as a good death?*

Jeff Maria: *Absolutely.*

Nigel: *What is it?*

Jeff Maria: *Well, I think the patient is comfortable. He doesn't have a lot of fear. Everybody can be anxious about the unknown, but if he's comfortable, he has people around him that he trusts so he doesn't feel vulnerable. We do what we can to bring the family into him, either on the video or in person. A lot of times, we'll roll their whole bed out here and then the family will be out here and they can stay out here and visit all day with them.*

Nigel: *Do you talk to them about their fears?*

Jeff Maria: *Sure. I'm there to hold their hand if that makes them feel better or just listen to them. Sometimes, they just like to tell stories about their life. Sometimes, they will talk to you about things that they're ashamed of or they feel bad, and they want to get it off their chest and let it go. It's not creepy or weird like you might think, or scary. At least for me, it's nothing like that.*

Nigel: *What is it?*

Jeff Maria: *I think it's sacred. I think it's a privilege, it's an honor that somebody that's in their most vulnerable state allows you to be in that space with them.*

Nigel: *Do you think it is the worst thing to die in prison?*

Jeff Maria: *[sighs] Well, it's relative, right? It depends on the person. We've had patients that have been in prison a long time that have nobody and nothing out there. And they're like, "I'm good here. I'm getting taken care of here. I'm comfortable and I'm okay."*

Alan Krenitsky: *I'm Alan Krenitsky. I'm a PCS worker here. This is my friend.*

Jerry Judson: *I'm Jerry Judson. I'm also a PCS worker here.*

Nigel: *We met Alan earlier when he was taking care of Mario.*

Earlone: *The guy with the knit cap.*

Nigel: *Right. And at this point, Alan was taking a break in the garden with his friend, Jerry.*

Jerry: *We're really lucky that we have the opportunity to do something like this. These chances just don't exist behind bars. It's a way for us to make amends for the wrongs that we've done in our lives. So, I'm very grateful.*

Alan: *There's sometimes when someone passes away, it's very traumatic. There's sometimes I'll tag out. We had the guy here had bone cancer. He was so young. He was too young. He was in his 20s and it breaks your freaking heart. That's several times a day, every day. He's a kid. And there was one point and they said he wanted me to go in and give him a back rub. Had to tag out with somebody else, and I can't do it right now. I need to go out and garden to cry. Dude's in his 20s, he is a kid, it's hard. But as much as I tell myself, like, "I can't do this anymore, this is hard. This is too hard," I tell myself that as I'm walking up the hallway to come to work.*

Nigel: *What is it about you as individuals that-- think about it, really think about it, and don't be modest, but why, like, why are you so compassionate? Why do you give so much care?*

Jerry: *I caused someone to die without a loved one sitting there and telling them, "Hey, it's going to be all right. It's going to be okay. We love you. We're here with you." So, what can I do now is to be there for those that don't have that.*

Alan: *The guilt is real.*

Michael Powell: *Oh, you hunted me down, huh?*

Nigel: *We hunted you down. Is that okay?*

Michael Powell: *That's all right. Yes, I'm okay with it.*

Nigel: *Can you introduce yourself?*

Michael Powell: *My name is Michael Powell. [sobs] Excuse me.*

Nigel: Yeah.

Michael Powell: And I'm being treated for brain cancer.

Nigel: So, Michael is this big, very pale guy. And, Earlonne, remember, he was wearing that cap on his head that looked like it had all kinds of electrodes coming out of it?

Earlonne: Like a [unintelligible 00:23:29] of quarters?

Nigel: Yeah, it looked like quarters on his head. I mean, it was clearly some treatment he was getting.

Earlonne: Right.

Nigel: Yeah.

Nigel: And you're out in the garden?

Michael Powell: Yes.

Nigel: And the nurses are going to walk you around?

Michael Powell: I walk by myself out here, but they check on me all the time.

Nigel: Yeah.

Michael Powell: Yeah.

Nigel: What do you think about this garden?

Michael Powell: Oh, it's beautiful. I came from a place that medical treatment for [crying] inmates is lacking. Sorry. It's hard.

Nigel: That's okay. It's hard.

Michael Powell: Well, they misdiagnosed me for two and a half years. That two and a half years is important.

Nigel: It is, yeah. What were your symptoms during that time?

Michael Powell: Severe headaches. They said I had sinus infections, so that's what they treated me for. And then, I saw a real doctor, and he said, "This ain't no sinus infection. You have a tumor." And within five days, they took it out.

Nigel: And how long ago was that?

Michael Powell: January 16th.

Nigel: January. So, that's about five months.

Michael Powell: Right.

Nigel: Five months ago.

Michael Powell: Right. So, the cancer that I have, they say 24 months after diagnosis.
[sobbing]

Nigel: That's a lot to take in for anybody.

Michael Powell: Yeah. After doing 20 years in prison, yeah.

Nigel: So.

Michael Powell: I apologize.

Nigel: Don't apologize. I wish I could hold your hand. I'm not allowed to, but I'm sorry that you've been feeling this way. Yeah.

[pensive music]

Earlonne: Michael was expecting to be released from prison in about five years, but the cancer diagnosis makes it unlikely he'll live that long.

Nigel: So, he's applying for what's called compassionate release. It's a California law that lets people apply to be released from prison if a doctor says they're at the very end of their life.

Michael Powell: The place they're trying to send me to is by my family. I look forward to just go out and have a hamburger.

Nigel: Yeah.

Michael Powell: Maybe some pizza.

Nigel: Yeah. Why do you want a hamburger?

Michael Powell: Oh, we very rarely get real meat around here, so. [laughs]

Nigel: True. Yeah. Yeah. If you could take a walk anywhere, where would you go?

Michael Powell: Beach.

Nigel: Yeah. Go to the beach. Yeah. I hope you get to do that.

Michael Powell: I will.

Nigel: What's the best part of the day for you?

Michael Powell: Writing letter, coming out here and hanging out.

Nigel: Yeah.

Michael Powell: Yeah.

Nigel: Yeah. And what are the most difficult times of the day?

Michael Powell: Getting up in the morning. [laughs]

Nigel: Really? Why?

Michael Powell: Just, I'm still here.

Nigel: So, isn't that a good feeling though, when you wake up in the morning and you're still here? I mean, that you're still alive.

Michael Powell: Yes. Well, the still alive part, yeah. But no one wants to die in custody. [crying] You just don't want to die in custody.

Nigel: Yeah. Yeah. Is it the pain that's more scary than the emotional part?

Michael Powell: I've been stabbed. I've been shot at more times than I know of, and so I've never been scared of that. But knowing it's coming, I think is. But you don't know when. I could get hit by a bus the day I get out. So, who knows? I just don't want to be miserable when I go, so. Excuse me.

Nigel: Mr. Powell, when we came out here, what were you about to do out here?

Michael Powell: Just walk.

Nigel: Just walk?

Michael Powell: Yeah, yeah.

Nigel: What part of the garden do you like to spend time in?

Michael Powell: Over there, there's hummingbirds down there by the swings. So, yeah.

[pensive music]

Nigel: Yeah. Do you hang out in that swing?

Michael Powell: Yeah, I sit over there. Usually on the sunny side though. Just get some sun.

Nigel: Yeah. Can we walk over there with you?

Michael Powell: Yeah.

Earlone: This is where the hummingbirds come?

Michael Powell: They come over here. They'll be by in a minute.

[pensive music]

Nigel: I remember we sat there for a while with him just quietly swinging on the bench in the gazebo. And I think the garden was doing what it was supposed to do. It was really peaceful.

Earlone: On that note, I think we should take a break.

Nigel: Let's do it.

Earlone: It's that time again.

Nigel: Time to make the donuts.

Earlone: What the hell?

Nigel: [laughs] You have to have grown up in the 80s to get that one.

Earlone: Now, it's time for another Catch a Kite episode.

Nigel: In case you're not familiar, Catch a Kite is a Q&A episode in which listeners ask questions about life in prison and get answers from incarcerated folks.

Earlone: This season, we'll be switching things up. Listeners might not know that people inside many US prisons can now hear Ear Hustle on prison tablets, kind of like a bulky iPad.

Nigel: Yeah, but a lot less fancy.

Earlone: So, here's how it's going to work. We're asking you, our listeners, to send us audio questions about life inside prison. We'll get those questions answered by incarcerated people around the country who listen to Ear Hustle on their tablets.

Nigel: You know, we've never taken listener questions to prisons outside California. So, this is a first for us.

Earlone: Indeed. To submit your question, leave us a voicemail at 510-906-1569 or send a voice memo to info@earhustlesq.com.

Nigel: Include your name and where you're calling from, and please keep your questions to under 30 seconds.

Earlone: Get your questions to us by March 27th.

Nigel: That number one more time is 510-906-1569, or send a voice memo to info@earhustlesq.com.

[titillating music]

Keith Knauf: *I am Chaplain Keith Knauf, I'm the Director of Pastoral Care in the Hospice here, and I've been here for 27 years.*

Nigel: All prisons have chaplains, but here at the hospice, it's a little different.

Earlonne: There's a part of Knauf's job that's like being a private eye, because a lot of these men haven't seen their families in decades, and sometimes they want to make contact again before they die.

Keith Knauf: *So, a lot of our patients, they come to us, and they haven't had contact with their families in 20-30 years. It's for a lot of different reasons. We have 30 plus institutions in the state of California, and they get lost in the shuffle. And so then, they just lose where the family member is. And sometimes, because of the crimes, they back away. And so, in our hospice though, we want to make sure that we locate families so that they can be notified and also to give them an opportunity for some restoration so that the patient can make amends with the families so there can be some reconciliation to take place, so the families can receive some closure, and so our patients can leave this world having closure for themselves as well.*

Earlonne: Knauf told us about this one guy who had lost touch with his family.

Nigel: The guy told Knauf that he had an aunt and uncle who had died and four cousins, but he had no idea where they were.

Earlonne: So, Knauf had to track them down.

Keith Knauf: *I prayed about it, and I thought about the fact that the aunt and uncle had a house, and that house probably was sold. And so, I knew where the address was. I called the various realtors in the area, and I found out who sold the house. I asked them if they could give me the name of the company, and they did. So, I called the title company, and I knew that there would be one of those daughters who would have had been the executrix of the estate. And the next thing I know, there's four cousins [laughs] wanting to see him. They didn't know he was in prison. And it was great. It was great fun. So, just bringing him together, so they had closure. They knew what happened to him and why he was here.*

In my 27 years, I've had maybe only two, maybe three of the family members who said, "I don't want anything to do with them." One even said that they considered the patient less than plant life. [laughs] "So, just let me know when they die." But all the other ones that we've located, they wanted to have some reconciliation, some closure.

Earlonne: Another part of Knauf's job is to help people decide what death they want to have.

Nigel: And as much as possible, I guess, help them face their end with some kind of acceptance and maybe even peace.

Nigel: *How do you comfort people in this moment where there's so much anxiety? I imagine for a lot of people, it's really an anxious time and a fearful time. So, how do you sit with them and touch them and talk to them?*

Keith Knauf: *Oh, with our patients?*

Nigel: *Yeah.*

Keith Knauf: *I usually talk to them about hope and what gives them hope. We'll talk about things of faith. We'll talk about their hope to reconcile with their family members, to make amends with those that they have injured.*

Nigel: Can you hold their hand or-

Keith Knauf: Oh, yeah.

Nigel: You can.

Keith Knauf: Yeah. I'll give them a hug. I'll hold their hand. Be there for them.

Nigel: Is that different than others?

Keith Knauf: I will read to them. We'll write to them. And then, our pastoral care inmate workers, they're the heroes. They're the ones that are there making sure that no one dies alone. Some of our Buddhists, there have been two that wanted to die alone. They wanted to be mindful of their last breath. They wanted to have their head propped up so they can project their essence into a higher plane and then be reincarnated on a higher level. They didn't want to have any distractions, and they didn't want a lot of pain meds. They wanted some to take the edge off, but they wanted to be alert, and they wanted to die with a clarity of knowing this life to the next.

Earlonne: Knauf told us about one patient in particular, a Buddhist man who was preparing to die in hospice.

Keith Knauf: We were in the wings just in case he wanted something, but he wanted definitely to be alone, to be mindful. We were not there right at the moment of his death because he wanted to be alert and he wanted to be alone. But we were hovering. So, we'd kind of walk by and look in, hover around and, "Do you need anything?" [laughs] without bothering him too much. And the nursing staff, of course, their job is to check on him, but he didn't want anything else. He didn't want somebody holding his hand. He just wanted to be left alone.

Nigel: If you're sitting with someone who's in the process of dying, in your opinion, what is the best thing? What advice would you give me to be present for somebody?

Keith Knauf: Don't talk so much. Listen more. Listen for their heartbeat. Have your breathing coincide with their breathing. Just tune into them and just listen. And then, if words come, let the words come. But mostly let them speak. Sometimes, they speak with their eyes. Sometimes, they're too weak to speak and they can blink. One blink for yes, two blinks for no, that kind of thing. Sometimes, they can squeeze a hand a little bit. You just let them know that you're there. For a lot of the guys, they know that God forgives them, but they have a hard time forgiving themselves when they think about what they've done.

Nigel: I want to be compassionate, and I understand that people can't live a life completely in shame. But there's sometimes where I feel like it's right. You shouldn't really struggle with what you did and how deeply you affected so many lives. So, how do we come to terms with that as a caring person whose heart is open to not wanting people to suffer?

Keith Knauf: I see my job as to help them open up to those things and to take ownership of those things, but they may not be ready for that. We had a patient back here who slaughtered his wife in front of five daughters. He had a real bad anger management issue and his own problems, and he just totally lost it one evening at the table, slaughtered his wife with a knife. His daughters saw this, and they were little.

Nigel: Even in this situation. Knauf felt like maybe there was some good that could happen here.

Earlone: So, he went in search of the daughters to ask if they wanted to see their dad again.

Keith Knauf: So, I was able to find those daughters through the Eastern Orthodox Church, and they wanted to come and visit, and they wanted to ask him questions. "Why did you do this, dad? What was this all about?"

Nigel: Who prepared those women for the experience of meeting him?

Keith Knauf: Well, we did. Yeah. I talked to them before they came in. I mentioned to them that they'll be remembering things from the vantage point of a little child. And I said now, he's just a sucked up old guy, [laughs] and he's weak physically, and he doesn't have power over them, but he wants to see them, too. And they saw that as a kindness. We prepared him for the meeting as well. In his culture, the husband, the father, is the one in charge. And I said, "You lost that when you killed your wife, especially in front of these daughters. And they're going to remember you as this monster. You don't have that control anymore. You don't have that authority. They're in control. They can walk out at any time. They're calling the shots."

So, we had the meeting, and he wanted to take control a couple of times and, ah, can't do that. They're in charge.

Nigel: Did you step in and say?

Keith Knauf: I stepped in. So, that made them feel empowered. They made it through really good. They showed him pictures of his grandchildren, and they showed pictures of their graduation from college, and he had missed all these things because of what he did. And he was able to express sorrow for his crime and what he did. But there was one time when one of them asked him, "Well, why did you do this?" And then, he started to complain about his wife, and then they shut him down. [laughs]

Nigel: Wow.

Keith Knauf: "You don't complain about mom." That still was in him. He couldn't reach that point of taking ownership over his own actions.

Nigel: So, when you told me that, my interior started to boil a little bit and get angry. What happened inside of you when you-

Keith Knauf: Oh, yeah, it boiled, yeah.

Nigel: Okay. All right. Who do you think that experience benefited the most?

Knauf: I think it benefited the daughters because they were able to confront him. They were able to see him. They had closure. They saw that he was no longer this monster, that he was a confused old man who hadn't really grown a whole lot from when he was their dad years and years ago.

Nigel: How did it end? Did they touch or exchange?

Knauf: Yeah, they shook hands. He wanted to hug them, but they weren't ready for that. So, they shook hands on the way out. Yeah. So, there was least some kind of touch.

Nigel: Any, like, I love you's or-

Knauf: No I love you's. But there was closure. They did say that they forgave him. Forgiveness isn't agreeing with the crime or the hurt. It's putting it away. If you look at the word in an old dictionary, you see, it's a collision of two English words, the fore and then evenness. And fore is what you hit the golf ball, you send it away. And the idea of evenness. So, fore-evenness, you send that infraction, you send that crime, you send that ouchiness of your heart away.

Nigel: I feel that we don't really understand what the word 'forgiveness' means, and it gets used way too lightly. And so, I really appreciate hearing how you talk about-

Knauf: That takes effort.

Nigel: Yeah.

Knauf: It's not just, "Oh, I forgive you."

Nigel: And it doesn't necessarily mean a happy ending either. It's not always about coming back together and hugging. It's about, as you said, like understanding something and moving on. But it's really complicated.

Knauf: Evenness.

Nigel: Evenness as that's not an easy thing.

Knauf: It wasn't for these five brave daughters. It wasn't an easy thing for them, but they wanted to do that. So, hospice is a place of healing.

Nigel: Yeah.

Knauf: Not just a place of dying.

Nigel: If I asked you what you did for a living and you couldn't say chaplain, what are three words you would use to describe what you do, what your job is?

Knauf: Spiritual midwife. Helping a person be birthed from this life to the next. Yeah. Spiritual birth.

Nigel: Nice. That's a pretty good ending. Thank you.

Nigel: Good to see you.

Michael Powell: Good to see you.

Nigel: Do you remember when we were trying to remember how long ago it was?

Michael Powell: About three and a half weeks.

Nigel: Okay.

Michael Powell: Four weeks. Yeah.

Earlone: A few weeks later, we went back to CMF's hospice for a second visit.

Nigel: We saw Michael Powell, the guy with the brain tumor who we had met in the garden.

Michael Powell: Good afternoon.

Nigel: Good afternoon.

Michael Powell: How you doing today?

Nigel: I'm good. Let's get the mic on you. [laughs]

Michael Powell: Uh-oh [laughs]. I didn't do it. It wasn't me.

Earlone: And, man, he seemed better.

Nigel: Amazing. He was hanging out with a service dog who was assigned to the hospice, a golden retriever named Angelica.

Michael Powell: She's my little buddy.

Nigel: Can you describe who Angelica-- Who is it?

Michael Powell: Angelica is a service dog that's been here a while, and she's a very loving dog that enjoys coming in here and hanging out with us.

Nigel: What does it mean when she licks you?

Michael Powell: That's just an emotional feeling, like she's trying to get to know somebody.

Nigel: Okay. So, it's a good sign.

Michael Powell: Yes.

Nigel: There were two things I wanted to ask you about last time when we met, you cried quite a bit.

Michael Powell: Yeah. You caught me in a bad day.

Nigel: We were strangers. I felt awkward. And it's so hard in prison because you can't comfort-- I mean, I'm not allowed to comfort anybody. I couldn't reach out, and I felt so terrible about it. But I didn't quite know why you were crying. I wasn't sure if it was emotional or physiological. So, I was glad we got to talk again.

Michael Powell: Well, I think emotionally I've changed a little bit. It was a large tumor. I have noticed that some of my thinking has changed a little bit. So, I imagine that had something to do with my emotional state at the time.

Nigel: *Were you irritated that these strangers were talking to you when you were crying?*

Michael Powell: *No, no, no. That's not my personality. It's just a weird situation. I'm a control person. I like being in control, and I'm not in control of anything right now.*

[trippy music]

Nigel: *I know it's only been three and a half weeks since we saw you, but you actually seem stronger than when we saw you.*

Michael Powell: *I walk every day. I go do squats. I walk. I hang out with her every day we walk.*

Nigel: *Your voice sounds stronger too.*

Michael Powell: *I feel good. Really. Other than not knowing about the tumor. The tumor can come back anytime, and I'm not going to know. I'm not going to know.*

Earlonne: Michael was still waiting to see whether his application for compassionate release had been granted.

Nigel: Again, that's the California law that lets some people get out of prison when a doctor says they're at the end.

Earlonne: And now that Michael was feeling better, you could sense this real urgency. Like, this was his window to live, reconnect with his family.

Nigel: And he didn't know how long that window would stay open.

Nigel: *So, if I asked you to look to like three months from now, where do you think you're going to be in three months?*

Michael Powell: *Hopefully in Crescent City. I'm hoping my health improves. Oh, my sister said she'll come spend the weekends with me.*

Nigel: *What do you imagine you would do together?*

Michael Powell: *Go shopping. I haven't been to a grocery store in 20 years. I haven't had a hamburger, a real hamburger, in 20 years.*

Nigel: *Yeah. Well, it's great to see you again. Honestly, you look so much better than you did three and a half weeks ago.*

Michael Powell: *Thank you for coming back.*

[ambient prison noises]

Nigel: Earlonne, the thing that I remember about leaving that day that was really striking was, the contrast between the quiet, sacred space of death and dying. That actually felt comforting in some ways. And then contrasting that with the loud, chaotic scene in that long ass hallway of the regular prison.

Male Speaker: Can I get your visitor pass too?

Nigel: [whispers] It's almost time for Diet Coke and lunchtime.

Earlone: You and your Diet Coke, Nyge.

Nigel: Earlone you know me well, and I know you wanted to get back to your phone.

Earlone: No. My sunflower seeds.

Nigel: Okay. Well, after spending a day in there, as beautiful as it was, it did actually feel good to get back to the routine of just regular life stuff.

Earlone: Indeed, it do.

***Alina:** Thank you for calling Crescent City Skilled Nursing. This is Alina. How may I help you?*

***Nigel:** We're hoping to reach Michael Powell.*

***Alina:** Yeah, give me a second. Hold on.*

***Nigel:** Thank you.*

***Michael Powell:** Hello?*

***Nigel:** Hello, Michael.*

***Michael Powell:** Yeah, this is Michael.*

***Earlone:** Is this Michael Freeman? [Nigel laughs]*

***Michael Powell:** No. Yes, it's Michael Freeman. Yes, it is.*

[laughter]

***Nigel:** Hi, Michael Freeman.*

Earlone: A few months later, we got on the phone with Michael Powell.

Nigel: The compassionate release came through. He'd been released from prison to go live in a nursing home up in Crescent City, right by the Oregon border.

Earlone: And that was this cool story he told us about when he was being transferred from prison to the nursing home in an ambulance.

Nigel: It turned out the ambulance drivers had also done time in prison. So, they were like, "Hey, let's show this guy some sights."

***Michael Powell:** We stopped somewhere, the world's biggest tree. And they let me out of the van to step out of the van, and that was my first step of freedom. Not handcuffed, not chains,*

not in orange. And that meant a lot. We were in the parking lot in the trees, just beautiful. It was fresh air, beautiful trees. Big old redwood trees.

Nigel: Yeah.

Michael Powell: *I don't know if it was the excitement of I'm free now. A cop drove by, I don't care. [laughs] I didn't do nothing. I don't know if it was the freedom or it was the air, the beauty of it. And then, we stopped and looked at the ocean.*

Nigel: *I'm so glad you saw that. I think that's a really special part of California. It feels like a place that's very alive.*

[pensive music]

Michael Powell: *It feels new. It feels like it's- You're right. It feels like it's new, like it's untouched. I don't want to say a virgin, but a virgin.*

Nigel: *But there's something like that.*

Michael Powell: *But I want to feel like it's not corrupted.*

Nigel: Yeah.

Michael Powell: *You know what I mean?*

Nigel: *Yeah. Absolutely.*

Michael Powell: *It was beautiful. We'll see what happens.*

[pensive music]

Nigel: A couple months after we spoke to him, and about a week before this episode came out, Michael Powell died in the nursing home where we last spoke to him.

Earlone: He died a free man.

Nigel: Yes, he did.

Earlone: Mario Reevis, the guy with the hat, and Mr. Roberts, who sang Hank Williams, also died at the CMF hospice.

Nigel: I'm glad we got to spend some time with them.

Earlone: Indeed.

[*Down the Hall* song plays]

Nigel: That's a bit of Bonnie Raitt song, *Down the Hall*.

Earlone: She wrote this song after reading about the hospice program at the California medical facility in the New York Times.

Nigel: That's pretty cool.

Earlonne: It is.

Michele DiTomas: Hey everyone, my name is Michele DiTomas. And right now, I'm having a little moment of gratitude that you all took the time to visit our hospice and share these important stories.

Ear Hustle is produced by Nigel Poor, Earlonne Woods, Amy Standen, Bruce Wallace, and Rahsaan "New York" Thomas. Shabnam Sigman is the managing producer. The producing team inside San Quentin includes Derrell Sadiq Davis, Tony de Trinidad, and Tam Nguyen. The inside managing producer is Tony Tafoya.

Thanks to acting Warden Cueva at the California medical facility for welcoming the Ear Hustle team and supporting the hospice mission to provide dignity at the end of life for our patients and their families. Thanks also to this amazing woman here.

Lieutenant Priscilla Gonzalez: My name is Lieutenant Priscilla Gonzalez. I'm the Administrative Assistant and Public Information Officer for the California Medical Facility and I approve this episode.

Michele DiTomas: Big thanks to Acting Warden Andes and Lt. Berry at San Quentin and Acting Warden Williams, Associate Warden Lewis and Lieutenant Newborg at the California Institution for Women for their ongoing support of the show.

This episode was made possible by the Just Trust, working to amplify the voices, vision, and power of communities that are transforming the justice system.

For more information about this episode, check out the show notes on Ear Hustle's website, earhustlesq.com. You can also find out more about the show on Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube @[earhustlesq](https://www.instagram.com/earhustlesq).

Nigel: Earlonne Woods sound designs and engineers the show with help from Fernando Arruda and Harry Culhane.

Earlonne: This episode features music from Rhashiyd Zinnamon, Fernando Arruda, Antwan Williams and me, Earlonne Woods.

Nigel: Want more Ear Hustle? Subscribe to Ear Hustle Plus.

Earlonne: We've got bonus episodes and live chats, so we get to chop it up with the listeners about the show.

Nigel: And, Earlonne, that is always a blast.

Earlonne: Always. Subscribe at earhustlesq.com/plus or in the Apple Podcast app.

Nigel: And don't forget to sign up for our newsletter, The Lowdown. In this issue, I'm going to be talking about a little photo project I'm doing on the side. There's actually a connection to this episode, but you're going to have to read it to find out.

Earlone: Nigel, you got a sidepiece?

Nigel: I'm stepping out on you, Earlone.

Earlone: Wee. Subscribe at earhustlesq.com/newsletter. And while you're at it, leave us a review on Apple Podcasts. That's a big help to the show and we appreciate you for it.

Nigel: Ear Hustle is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX, a network of independent, creator-owned, listener-supported podcasts.

Earlone: Discover audio with vision at Radiotopia.fm.

Nigel: I'm Nigel Poor.

Earlone: I'm Earlone Woods.

In Unison: Thanks for listening.

Male Speaker: Jasmine. Your jasmine right here. And that has a little smell too. This is your *Philadelphus lewisii* right here. And that has like a four-leaf clover when it does flower and flowered earlier, and it's white.

-End of Episode-

[Transcript provided by [SpeechDocs Podcast Transcription](#)]