



**Episode 48: Are You Listening?  
Air Date: October 21, 2020**

[theme song begins]

**Earlonne Woods:** Nyge, check it out.

**Nigel Poor:** What's up?

**Earlonne:** Look at what I got in the mail.

**Nigel:** Oh, very exciting, but please describe. [both laugh]

**Earlonne:** It's the official ballot General Election Alameda County on November 3<sup>rd</sup>.

**Nigel:** That is so exciting. And it is a big deal.

**Earlonne:** Hell yeah, it's a big deal. It's the first time I'm able to vote. I just got off parole.

**Nigel:** I love it. And obviously voting for president is a big-ticket item on the ballot, but what else are you excited about?

**Earlonne:** So, out in California, we have Prop 17, which— it restores the right to vote upon completion of a prison term. [Nigel affirms] Right now, people on parole can't vote.

**Nigel:** Yeah, that's right.

**Earlonne:** I'm definitely voting "yes" on Prop 17.

**Nigel:** So, soon you're going to fill out and cast your first proper election ballot. How does it feel?

**Earlonne:** It feels like I'm a citizen, Nyge. [Nigel affirms] I'm finally a citizen. No more taxation without representation. [laughs]

**Nigel:** So, everybody, if you haven't already, please get out there and vote.

**Earlonne:** Hell yeah. Get to voting. We need it. Today.

**Nigel:** Okay. Here's the show. [theme fades out]

**Laila:** My name is Laila. And I'm a junior counselor at Project Avary. The following episode of Ear Hustle contains language that may not be appropriate for all listeners. Discretion is advised. [transition]

[ambient sounds from an outdoor setting – fire crackling] [Ziri, reading]

**Ziri:** *Hey dad, how are you during this pandemic? Last time we spoke, schools had just closed. And I remember you telling me you weren't worried about the coronavirus and that it'd be gone in a couple months. Well, look at us now. I wish you could see how big Manny has gotten. The last time you saw him, he was eight and missing teeth. Now he's fourteen and 5' 10" – taller than all of us. I wish you could see me, how I've grown throughout the years. I know there's always pictures, but that's just not enough.* [music comes in]

[as narrator]

**Nigel:** Earlonne, we've talked about parenting on the show a bunch of times. And it's usually from the perspective of the men who are in prison and trying to figure out how to parent from inside.

**Earlonne:** Yeah. I mean, it's hard. [Nigel affirms] Because you only get a few minutes of phone time a week. [Nigel affirms] Your visits are a hella short. And a lot of the times, you got to take care of business, like family business, adult shit.

**Nigel:** Totally. [music fades out]

**Earlonne:** And one of the things that gets squeezed out is the time that you spend with your kids. [Nigel affirms] Just like being with them in the moment and watching them grow.

**Nigel:** Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. And we've heard parents talking about this. But what we've never heard is how the kids themselves feel.

**Earlonne:** Right.

**Nigel:** Like, what is it like for them? What do they wish was different? And what do they feel like they're missing out on? [theme music comes in] And that's exactly what we're going to talk about on this episode. I'm Nigel Poor.

**Earlonne:** And I'm Earlonne Woods. And this is Ear Hustle from PRX's Radiotopia.  
[music fades out]

**Nigel:** A couple months ago, we drove out to the beach to meet a bunch of kids who are part of this program called Project Avary. [sound of soft ocean waves in the background]

**Earlonne:** I remember hanging out with the little kids... [crosstalk] [children chattering in the background]

**Nigel:** [crosstalk] It was very sweet.

**Earlonne:** ... kicking back, enjoying the beach. They had their little sandcastle contest.

[ambient noise from sandcastle contest - someone shouts "Alright. And go! Twenty minutes!" in the background]

And we got to be the judges. [Nigel affirms] And how do you judge kids?

**Nigel:** I know. We need a big talk about that one. [Earlonne laughs]

[ambient noise from the beach during the sandcastle contest - someone shouts, "Everyone gather around! Alright. We need the judges."]

And we tried really hard to get out of picking a winner.

[in the field]

Right. So, I have to say that you guys are both winners in different way.

**Earlonne:** Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. But, so, we do have to award a winner here.  
[music comes in] And being that I'm a gentleman, I will allow ladies to go first. [all laugh]

[as narrator]

Most of these kids joined Avary when they were little, like eight or nine years old.

**Nigel:** There was this one kid, Rodney, and he asked me to watch those crabs he caught.

[in the field]

**Earlonne:** Chad the Crab. Rodney's new buddy... I think it's alive

[as narrator]

**Nigel:** And those crabs were definitely not moving, but we were trying so hard to keep his hopes up.

[in the field]

**Earlonne:** I see a leg moving. He's playin' dead. He's just playin' dead. [music fades out]

[as narrator]

About once a month, the kids from Avary go out on some kind of wilderness expedition: surfing, kayaking, whitewater rafting.

**Nigel:** They also take time to just sit down and talk. [music comes in] A few weeks after the beach trip, we met up with Project Avary on the coast up of north of San Francisco.

There were about ten kids sitting in a circle around a fire. For a lot of these kids, there's a real stigma around having incarcerated parents. It's something they don't necessarily feel comfortable talking about in school or with their friends.

**Earlonne:** But here in the woods, everyone understands what you're going through.

[in the field] [ambient sounds of bonfire crackling in the background]

**Project Avary Group Leader:** Let's start by going around, introducing yourself. And at that point, let's also do what we sometimes do. Where we bring in family members that have passed, family members that we that we hold in our hearts.

**Chris:** My name is Chris. And I'd like to bring my grandpa and my dad into the circle.

**Anthony:** My name is Anthony. I'd like to bring my older brother and both of my grandpas into the circle.

**Tweety:** My name is Tweety. And I'd like to bring my brother and sister into the circle.

**Nigel:** Okay. My name is Nigel and I'd like to bring our San Quentin colleagues into the circle who can't be here.

**Earlonne:** And my name is Earlonne and I'd like to bring my nephew, Tyler, who passed away while his parents were incarcerated into the circle.

**Project Avary Group Leader:** Please sing with me. [laughs] [plays acoustic guitar]

**Nigel:** [as narrator]

And you know what really struck me? [Earlonne affirms] Those kids were totally focused on one another. I mean, it was shocking. There were no cell phones and whenever somebody was speaking, they got everyone's full attention. And it wasn't just with their eyes; it was like they were being present with their whole being.

**Earlonne:** And then one by one, each kid tells their story.

**Nigel:** Like Ziri, who we heard at the top. She's nineteen, has long hair, and had this scrunchie around her wrist that she kept sort of twisting back and forth as she spoke.

**Earlonne:** When she was five years old, both her mom and her dad were arrested.

**Ziri:** When it happened, I was asleep. I woke up to my mom running around the room, crying and not knowing what to do. And I was like, "What's going on?" And I heard this banging on the door. It was the DA and FBI just showing up and raiding our house. They came into our bedroom, pointing guns at us. I was sleeping, not knowing what was going on. And my little brother was crying at the time. I was scared. I was crying. I didn't know what to do. And I just remember waiting for what felt like hours outside the house until finally the police officer was like, "Do you know what this is?" And my mom, she said, "No." And it was like, obviously they had found my dad's drugs. And he was a drug dealer at the time and they had found all of his stuff. And they arrested my mom and they put me and my brother behind in a cop car and took us to a clinic.

[as narrator]

**Nigel:** Ziri and her little brother Manny spent a few months in foster care. And then went to live with their aunt and uncle who basically raised them.

**Earlonne:** Her mom got out of prison seven years later when Ziri was twelve.

**Ziri:** When I first saw her and she knocked on our door and I opened, I was frozen. I couldn't talk. I just felt her go up to me and just hug me and suffocate me. And that's like, when I knew, like, *it's my mom*. That's when I hugged her and let the tears out.

[ambient sounds from bonfire – participants begin drumming in the circle]

**Nigel:** So, some of the kids at the fire circle had parents who had been released. Others, their parents were still in prison.

**Earlonne:** And many of them were really struggling with how to connect with their parent.

**Michelle:** So, something that's been bothering me is he hasn't called me for, like, more than five months I would say. And his prison is always locked down. And that's his excuse for everything. But I have realized that he has called my uncle and that's been bothering me a lot.

**Nigel:** This is Michelle. She's seventeen years old. She was wearing ripped jeans and she had this sweatshirt on that had some kind of like Bay Area pride.

**Earlonne:** It said "The Bay. We fresh."

**Nigel:** That's right.

**Earlonne:** Like Ziri and the other kids, Michelle had brought a letter that she had written to her dad.

[reading]

**Michelle:** *I don't really have much to say to you, but I do want to ask you something. I want to know why you call my uncle and not me? You don't know how upset it makes me. Why do I always cry over you? Do you ever cry over me or even about me? It doesn't seem like it anymore. Sorry.*

**Project Avary Group Leader:** It's okay. We're here.

**Michelle:** I just— I don't even really want to go off my letter. I just feel like now it's just I don't even talk to him, so I don't feel any way. I'm not even sad. I'm just angry. I have so much anger and frustration and just being confused. Why do I have to put so much more effort into even talking to him when he was the one that left *me*. I really don't feel like talking to him just because I feel like he doesn't really earn that. And when we do talk, it's the same thing, like, *what are you doing? How's this? How's your family*. He still treats me like a little kid, like, he still doesn't ask me about certain things I would like to be asked by other people. He doesn't. It just seems like he doesn't care.

**Nigel:** As soon as Michelle stopped talking this other young woman, Laila jumped right in there to hold up her friend.

**Earlonne:** She held that space with her.

[in the field, speaking to Michelle]

**Laila:** You just put it all out there. Like, I just support that. I fully support it. Like, you started reading the letter and you were like, *nevermind, let me just say how I feel*. And it looks like you're, like, not relieved, but it looks like you got lot off your chest. So...

**Nigel:** What's the...can I say something or is there...?

**Project Avary Group Leader:** Of course, of course.

**Nigel:** Michelle, you said something that was really— I had never thought about before. So, you really just taught me something. I always assumed when we talk to you all that we wanted to ask you what questions you want to ask your parents, but you said you actually want your dad to ask you questions. And that really struck me as such an important thing. But I just had never thought about— of course you'd want your parents to ask you questions, not just you ask them. So, thank you for kind of showing that to me. Appreciate it.

**Michelle:** You're welcome. [music comes in]

[as narrator]

**Nigel:** Earlonne, this was a real “aha” moment for me.

**Earlonne:** Absolutely. It was— it was very deep.

**Nigel:** So, we'd come with this whole list of questions that were basically about the parents. You know, like, what was your last memory of your parent? What does your parent smell like? Do you physically resemble them in any way?

**Earlonne:** But a lot of these kids, what they wanted was for their parents to be better at asking *them* questions, try to understand *them* a little better.

**Nigel:** And they had a lot of pain because their parents just didn't seem interested in doing that. [music fades out]

[in the field] [drumming comes in]

**Project Avary Group Leader:** [singing] *Put your feet down, with your feet on the ground. You can hear what is said if you listen. Put your feet down, put your feet on the ground. You can hear what you said if you listen...*

[as narrator]

**Nigel:** When Ziri's mom got out, they moved in together and started to rebuild the relationship. A few years later, her dad was released from prison as well.

**Earlonne:** But Ziri says her relationship with her dad never really recovered.

**Ziri:** [reading] *Up until you and mom were released, I loved receiving your letters and drawings. I still keep them in a box inside a storage closet. When you first got out of jail and were deported, I was around twelve and back then, I didn't really pay much attention to it and was fine with phone calls every week. But then you stopped calling and I had to be the one to make the calls and get your attention. Why should I have to*

*keep trying to talk to you when it doesn't seem like you're interested? I know I can't force a relationship, but it would be nice if you remembered you have kids, you know? Manny and I will always be waiting for you with open arms whenever you decide you want to be a part of our lives again.* [participants around the circle snap in support]

[as narrator] [music comes in]

**Nigel:** Basically, when you're inside, you get three ways to communicate with your family: letters, visits, phone calls.

**Earlonne:** And phone calls can be every day or sometime as little as once a month. And when you do get to make a call, it's just fifteen minutes before you get cut off.

**Nigel:** One of the Avary kids, Laila, her mom was incarcerated when she was three years old and she talked about what it was like to be a kid waiting for those calls. [music fades out]

[in the field, sharing with the Project Avary group around the fire]

**Laila:** Like, when she wouldn't call, when she said she could call, like just how much that impacted me. Or, like, say I was somewhere else or doing something and she would call, I would have full on mental breakdowns just because I knew that, with a parent being in prison, it's not like you can just call them back.

**Earlonne:** And sometime when she did hear from her mom, Laila found herself not really knowing how to respond.

**Laila:** The stacks and stacks of letters that she wrote me over the years, I recently found them. And I was reading through them and I was just like, it's crazy how she used to talk. Like, in every letter she would say, like, *please write me back...* How often did I write her? How often did I call her? Like, I feel like I didn't put enough effort in, on my part to communicate with her.

**Earlonne:** When Laila was twelve, her mom finally came home, and Laila and her brother had to make a really hard decision: did they want to keep living with their grandparents or go move in with their mom in another town?

**Nigel:** Laila didn't want to leave her school or her friends. So, she chose to stay with her grandparents. And that made her mom so angry that she stopped returning Laila's calls.

**Laila:** I had a set time, like, every Saturday I would call her. And I felt like it was more agonizing, just because I knew she saw me calling her phone and still chose not to answer rather than she couldn't answer because she was incarcerated. That's where it really messed me up.



**Nigel:** The way Laila described it, she and her mom had to find a new way of relating to each other, different than either of them had hoped for.

**Laila:** I don't want to say it was better when she was locked up, but just like, our bond now is more of like a friendship than it is like a mother and daughter relationship, which sometimes bothers me 'cause I'm like, *you're acting like me. You're acting like a child. Grow up!* So, it's like trying to figure out how to co-exist together when one person hasn't really matured. Especially when they go in young, in a way, I feel like my maturity has passed her maturity, even though we're very differing in age.

[drumming comes in]

**Earlonne:** At one point, one the Avary staff members asked the kids, "What advice would you give parents about how to talk to their kids?" And Tweety spoke up.

**Nigel:** She's like an older sister to a lot of these kids. She's in her twenties and her father, grandfather, brother, so many men in her family have been incarcerated.

[in the field, sharing with the Project Avary group around the fire]

**Tweety:** I would recommend to the parent who's incarcerated or was incarcerated to just be genuine. You know, if you care, make it very obvious that you care.

**Earlonne:** Tweety also has some insight into what those incarcerated parents were going through.

**Tweety:** *And*, them being institutionalized, then they've cut that emotional - from my personal experience - that emotional vulnerability out. Because, you can't be emotionally vulnerable in prison. You have to have that, you know, 'cause you're amongst other inmates or whatever it is, especially with men. I remember my brother used to pluck his eyelashes, not pluck them, but like, it looked like he was plucking them to avoid crying in the visiting room. [music comes in]

We have to be careful what we ask of these inmates because if they don't know how to be vulnerable, they don't know how to be a father, they don't know these things. It's like we're hurting ourselves... asking that expectation. And then obviously we're going to be disappointed 'cause we don't realize that they can't even achieve that expectation. I'm at a place now where I feel like, how can I expect something of my father that he wasn't taught?

[as narrator]

**Nigel:** Oof. This is a hard thing to accept, you know? I mean, I still find myself wanting answers to questions I know we'll never get answered. And here's this young woman

accepting that and understanding that sometimes for your own sanity, you shouldn't even ask the questions. [music fades out]

**Earlonne:** And I think that's kind of the point of those letters, Nyge.

**Nigel:** Yeah. So, we mentioned earlier, these kids write letters to their parents.

**Earlonne:** Those letters never get sent though.

**Nigel:** And this is really important. [music comes in] I think people hearing about Avary might assume the purpose of the group is to help these kids fix their relationship with their parents.

**Earlonne:** But, that's not really to goal here.

**Nigel:** Nope. The idea is to give kids space to just talk about the painful parts of those relationships. Not try to fix it, just see it for what it is.

**Earlonne:** Sometimes you just got to accept things and move on. [music fades out]

[in the field, sharing with the Project Avary group around the fire]

**Cesar:** Letter to my pops on what it means to be a man. That's a question that stick with me for my whole life.

**Earlonne:** Cesar is twenty. He reminded me of a cross between Snoop Dogg and one of the little cats on Backstreet Boys or N'sync.

**Nigel:** That's a perfect description of him. [Earlonne laughs] Cesar's parents were both gang members and in and out of prison when he was growing up.

**Cesar:** My mom was seventeen when she had me - doesn't know how to take care of herself and doesn't know how to take care of an infant. My life was crazy. I was raised around gang members. I was raised around a single mother that had nobody's support but me. I'd take care of my little sister, change her diaper, walk her to school, take myself to school, pick her up, drop her off, do my homework, or I help her make her some food. *Oh, where's your daddy at? Oh, my dad working. Or, he on a vacation. Or, he gonna pick me up later.* And whenever I did receive letters from my dad, it would be the same thing. Same thing: *Hey mijo, how are you doing? How's your mom? Are you staying out of trouble? You help your mom take care of your sisters? Are you doing good in school? Or, heard you got in a fight? Oh, this, that...* But it was never— we never got into deep conversations, like, what do I want to do when I'm older? Or, when you get out, what we gone do? [music comes in]

One day I got a call, my auntie, she like super serious. She like, *I need to talk to your mom*. I have a feeling in my gut. I feel that gut feeling like something happened. And then, I just see my mom's reaction go from happy, chillin' to straight on crying, dripping tears. She just says, um, "Your dad dead." Whatever hopes I did have of meeting him, they're all gone. I'm not saying I wanted that father and son relationship. But, you know, I wanted to at least have some relationship. Or be big bro and little bro, whatever you want to call it, you know? But, that night just everything was gone. Whatever hope I had was just *poof* out the window.

**Nigel:** When Cesar finished, there was just this chorus of kids snapping and nodding and encouragement. [snapping in the background].

**Project Avary Group Members:** [all speaking at once] I love you. I love you, Cesar.

**Earlone:** Yeah. And it seemed like that kind of energized him, you know?

**Cesar:** When I'm having a hard day, man, look in the mirror, ain't no daddy I see, I see me. I see the future. You feel me? I just want to say, I appreciate everybody for today. I love every one of y'all here. Nothing but love for all of y'all. And hope to hear from y'all too, you know? Yeah.

**Project Avary Group Members:** We love you. [Cesar affirms]

[music comes in] [as narrator]

**Earlone:** You know, Nyge, [Nigel affirms], these kids had so much insight that I never could have had at their age. [Nigel affirms] I mean, they're processing their emotions. I never would have been on that level. Like, just being able to identify what I'm going through and articulate it.

**Nigel:** I know. And it was really emotional to watch the process and learn from it.

**Earlone:** Real talk, real talk.

[in the field, sharing around the Project Avary bonfire]

**Anthony:** My name is Anthony. I've been in Project Avary for about six years now.

**Chris:** My name's Chris. I've been in Project Avary since I was ten, so, eight years.  
[music fades out]

**Earlone:** Anthony has a San Francisco Giants jacket that he always wears. He was a real ringleader at that a sandcastle contest.

**Nigel:** He was. He was great. And Chris has short curly hair. He's kind of serious and earnest, but sweet. His dad was locked up before he was born.

[in the field]

**Chris:** Anthony, if you could ask your dad one question and he gives you a hundred percent honesty with that one question, what would you ask him?

**Anthony:** Um, I'll probably ask, was it worth missing out all this time with your kids for this one thing you were trying to get when you committed your crime? I mean, I'm assuming what he would say; he'd probably say "No" because I doubt any parent would want to miss twelve, thirteen years of their children's lives for one thing. I would hope he would say, "No."

**Chris:** What do you think is a— what makes a good dad?

**Anthony:** To me? This is the definition that I want to try to fill when I become a father. I want to just be there to provide and support my kids and my significant other. I want to be able to be there for them and be there for their important events, like their first words, their first steps, their first graduation, their first sports game, their first dance recital, whatever. So, I feel like just being a good father is just being there for whoever needs you.

**Earlonne:** For both of them, there was this fear that even if they tried not to, they'd somehow end up like their fathers.

**Anthony:** And there'll be times when I'm talking with my mom and I'll do something and she'll say, "You look exactly like your dad when you did that." It's important to me to break that cycle. Like, if I have kids one day, I don't want to not be in their lives. I want to be in their lives a hundred percent. And I think I just try to avoid it and just try to think positively and try to get through this last bit of stretch before I go on to college. And then after that, I get a job and then have a family of my own. [group snapping in encouragement]

**Chris:** I can't get him out of my head, you know what I mean? Because there's things that my mom sees – er, she doesn't see him in me, but I think she does. 'Cause there's certain things that I do and she reacts and I can tell it like reminds her of the bad times and the— you know, it hurts a lot and uh... [sighs] I know I'm not my dad, but... [pauses and sighs] I mean, I'm not my dad. But I definitely do things just like him. And my mom says things like, "He'll shape up when he wants to." But, I mean, I know he's not going to.

[music comes in]

**Nigel:** Later on, we were talking to Chris and I asked him about this: which of his dad's behaviors he was trying to shake?

**Chris:** It's like sticking true to your word. Not Keeping empty promises.

[to Chris speaking quietly in the background]

**Nigel:** So, you're saying not give false promises?

**Chris:** Yeah. To my mom, it's like, *yeah, I'll help out around the house*. And then I'll just leave all my responsibilities and forget about them.

[as narrator]

**Nigel:** This part was really difficult. It was so hard to hear him say these things 'cause I just wanted to, I don't know, reach out and say to him: *there's so much about you that's wonderful*—

**Earlonne:** I know.

**Nigel:** — *And like, dig into that part*.

**Earlonne:** I know. And these kids, again, taking on heavy shit that they shouldn't have to take on.

**Nigel:** But then Anthony stepped in.

[speaking to Chris]

**Anthony:** I remember earlier when you were saying how you feel like you're underachieving. First of all, I think you're very— you're achieving a lot. I mean, you're in college right now. That's a lot more than other people can say they're doing. My advice to you: just don't be afraid to show little resemblance, like, 'cause if you totally just shut out all the parts of your dad that you know, you're going to lose the image of him and how he acts forever. Try to look for the good things your dad did - the good personality traits your dad did - rather than focus on the negative ones that you're seeing coming through to you.

[drumming comes in while group sings]

**Project Avary Group Members:** *Put your feet on the ground. You can hear what you said, if you listen to them.*

**Nigel:** For me, this entire day was a masterclass in listening. And this kind of listening means showing up fully for another person.

**Earlonne:** And maybe their parents couldn't do it for them, but they could do it for each other. [Nigel affirms]

**Project Avary Group Members:** ...'cause the sound of the river as it moves across the stone is the same sound as the blood in your body as it moves across your bones.

**Earlonne:** When we come back, a view from the other side of those letters.

**Nigel:** A parent talks about what it's like to try to stay connected with your kids when you're locked up.

**Project Avary Group Leader:** *Are you listening? Are you listening?* [voices chattering and laughter in the background]

**Earlonne:** Hey, Nyge. [Nigel affirms] I've been looking for something to read. Tell me you got something for me.

**Nigel:** Oh, partner, partner, partner. Of course, I've got something for you. It's short. It's sweet. It's interesting. It is our Ear Hustle newsletter.

**Earlonne:** Wait a minute. Wait, wait, wait. [Nigel laughs] You should know I read that before everybody see that, right? You should know that. [Nigel laughs]

**Nigel:** Yeah, I guess you're right. You're right. You're right. I will say it is great. And you're right, people should read that. So, I'm gonna take that to mean you're giving it a recommendation.

**Earlonne:** Of course, I'd recommend it to all our listeners.

**Nigel:** And you know what? My mom loves it. She always calls me to tell me when it arrived.

**Earlonne:** I know that's a good mother-daughter moment.

**Nigel:** Oh yeah. It makes me really happy.

**Earlonne:** This newsletter Nigel moms read is called "The Lowdown." And it comes out monthly.

**Nigel:** Yep, just once a month. So, it's really low commitment, but it's fun and it's informative.

**Earlonne:** And it got a gang of awesome stuff in. Letters from the Ear Hustle team, music recommendations from our sound designer, Antwan Williams, occasionally even top secret [Nigel says *shhhhh* in the background] information about upcoming Ear Hustle events.

**Nigel:** And don't forget the photographs. I love the photographs, especially the ones of our listeners. You know, our awesome Ear Hustle community.

**Earlonne:** Yeah. When they be sporting their Ear Hustle t-shirts... [crosstalk]

**Nigel:** [crosstalk] Oh, it's great.

**Earlonne:** ...at work, doing they thing.

**Nigel:** Yup. Just go to [earhustle.sq.com/newsletter](http://earhustle.sq.com/newsletter). Type your email address in the box and then click "sign up."

**Earlonne:** That's [earhustle.sq.com/newsletter](http://earhustle.sq.com/newsletter) to get "The Lowdown."

**Nigel:** Thanks for doing it. [music fades out]

**Michelle Garcia:** I'm very open and um, but this is one subject that's still really stinging, so, if I, yeah... Don't let my tears freak you out.

**Nigel:** How many years ago were you sentenced?

**Michelle:** I've been home nine years. [music comes in]

[as narrator]

**Earlonne:** This is Michelle Garcia. She got locked up in 2006.

Michelle has four children, two sons and two daughters. We heard the Avary kids talk about how when their parents were incarcerated, it really changed their relationship with their parent, permanently. We wanted to know what it felt like from the other side.

[music fades out]

[ambient noise from inside moving car]

[to Michelle]

**Nigel:** Can you describe the day that you had to leave your family?

**Michelle:** Oh gosh. March 6<sup>th</sup>. I knew for about a week that I had to turn myself in. My younger ones were six and eight, so, how do you explain to them? Basically, mom had done something wrong and needed to go see a judge. I just didn't know how to explain it to them. And so that was just the best that I could do. I was holding onto this hope I was gonna come home. That it was gonna be okay. I had no idea what was gonna happen. I never imagined getting a ten-year sentence. I remember the morning very well. Took my kids to school. And I had taken my wedding ring. And his mom had just passed away. And we're Catholic and so the crucifix was on the table and I put my ring on the table. And I left. And I met my husband and my brother-in-law at Starbucks across the street from the police station. And I had a chai latte and an old-fashioned donut. And I walked in. If I would've known what was going to happen to me that day on March 6<sup>th</sup>,

I'd probably still be at Mexico and I'm not lying. I think I would have just ran, really, really hard and never came back. [Nigel affirms]

**Nigel:** Would you have left your family?

**Michelle:** Yeah, I think I would. But, not in a bad way, just to save them from all of this. It really got– it got ugly. We had no idea what was ahead of us. No idea. [music comes in]

**Nigel:** Michelle turned herself in and was taken to jail where she spent the next year and a half waiting to be sentenced.

**Earlonne:** When her family came to visit her in jail, Michelle was sittin' in a little cubicle, separated from her family by a pane of glass.

**Nigel:** But her son, who was only six at the time, would still try to touch her.

**Michelle:** You know how we put our hands up to touch each other? He was pressing so hard against the glass that his fingertips were white. Just so desperate to touch me. Not being able to touch your kids when they're like *this* close to you and they're hurting and... you know, it could be something like six-year-old stuff. [music fades out] Like, *he took my toy!* But I can't comfort my kids. And there's nothing worse than just, as a mother, knowing that I was actually the root of what their pain was coming from.

**Nigel:** After Michelle was sentenced, she was transferred to Central California Women's Facility in Chowchilla.

**Earlonne:** The prison was four hours from her house. Every couple of months, her husband took the kids to go see her.

**Nigel:** She was so excited about them coming and she wanted to look her best. She said that she would press her clothes under the mattress the night before, so they didn't have to see her in wrinkly prison garb.

**Earlonne:** But the visits were always over too fast. And saying goodbye was terrible.

**Michelle:** How do you even descr– their necks turned around. Like, just staring at you. You're going that way, they're going the opposite direction, but eye contact. And you're both looking the way that you're not walking and just standing in line being ready to be stripped searched, crying. And you have to just bare yourself like that. When you had just been nurturing, a mom, and feeling normal. And then *bam!* And there's always that one CO that, *what the fuck you crying about?* And it's like, you know, *hard to say goodbye to my kids. I miss my kids... Well, you should've thought about that shit when you did your crime.* That was really demoralizing.



[to Michelle]

**Nigel:** What was Mother's Day like inside?

**Michelle:** It's bittersweet. You're so excited that you have your family with you, your kids with you. But then you sit there and they're gonna go back to school Monday. And they're going to be asked, "What'd you do for Mother's Day?" And I always wondered what my kids said. [voice breaking]

I remember I— I was still in county jail. I hadn't been to prison yet. But it was probably the first Mother's Day I was gone. Maybe the second. And my son had entered a contest: Why He Had the Best Mom. And I believe he got selected to be either the winner or a finalist. And the teacher called him and asked if I would be able to be there to accept it... when I heard that, I just remember feeling like something you scrape off the bottom of your shoe. And Mother's Day from there out, is seriously a day I wish I could just erase off the calendar. [emotionally] It starts three weeks before and it takes me about a month after, just to be able to shake it.

[as narrator]

**Nigel:** Michelle's relationship with her older son had been strained even before she went to prison. But while she was away, it got much worse.

**Michelle:** My second child, my son, was very angry. He did not speak with me for four years. I thought, for sure, he'd come around. And he didn't. I pretty much thought I would never see my son again. I'd write him a letter every week. Wednesday nights. Week after week, year after year. With nothing in return. People ask me, "What did you write about?" I still don't frickin' know what I wrote. I just was trying to do the right thing.

**Earlonne:** Michelle told us how she'd write these eight-page letters to her kids just all, "I love you." And "I miss you," and "I'm sorry." And on and on.

**Nigel:** Yeah, and she felt like she was saying what she needed to say to them. But E, this actually really reminds me of what we heard from those Avary kids. You know, those long letters that Laila got from her mom that she just couldn't answer.

**Earlonne:** I think some parents don't communicate enough. And others really just say far too much. And it becomes a burden on the kids.

**Michelle:** ... what that does to the receiving end of the children hearing those letters of mom crying and being sad; and the damage that they can cause. It was my therapy writing that letter, but not every letter has to be mailed.

[as narrator]

**Nigel:** Towards the end of her sentence, Michelle's son got engaged. And his fiancé urged him to go see his mom.

**Earlonne:** By this point, Michelle was at a fire camp, which is low security. She and her son sat down at a picnic table.

**Michelle:** He sat where you were, and I sat where I am, and he let me have it. He let it all out. *I fucked up his life. He was angry. It was bullshit.* "What the fuck were you thinking?" It was not sugarcoated. It was pretty black and white. Mmhm. Yeah. "I blame you." And I took it and oddly enough, that is the strongest relationship to this day because he did what he had to do to get through it.

**Nigel:** In 2011, Michelle was released from prison. She realized she didn't know all of these basic things about her kids. Like, what they'd like to eat for lunch or what kinds of things they'd done while she was gone.

[music comes in]

**Michelle:** You know, it can be Thanksgiving, Christmas, and the niece and nephew or sister-in-law, like, *yeah, we did that...*like, they know my kids better is what I feel like they're saying. They're probably not even thinking that, but that's what I'm hearing. And there's something in me that, *don't, you dare talk about that like you know, my kids better.* [Nigel affirms] But the truth of the matter is they probably did know my kids better than I did. [music fades out]

**Nigel:** While Michelle was incarcerated, her older daughter basically became the caretaker for the whole family. And that included things like sending Michelle pictures about what everyone was up to. She also made sure that Michelle had everything she needed in prison, like textbooks for her college classes.

**Earlonne:** But Michelle's crime put the family in serious debt. They had to sell the house and it had real consequences for her older daughter.

**Michelle:** She was in college in DC. Eventually she had to leave because of financial reasons. [pauses] And, um, sorry. [getting emotional] So, then when I got home, she was there with the pom-poms greeting me with the rest of them. Shortly after that, I would say within like three, six months, you could see the resentment coming. I remember calling friends on the phone after I would be with her. And I'd be like, "Why is she so mean? Did she know what she said?" Finally, somebody just telling me she's hurt, maybe she doesn't even know she's hurt. [Nigel affirms] And it's still a struggle today out of all honesty. It's that area that just never completely heals when it comes to my kids and my family, I really fucked up. And it's not a mistake that you can just go do your time and come back and relive, you're just— it's a mistake that ripple effects.

[music comes in]

**Nigel:** I mean, Earlonne, this is something we don't talk about that much. Usually when we do stories about people getting out, it's just about how exciting it is and how they're getting their life back. But the truth is for some people, there's just things that have happened that just cannot be repaired.

**Earlonne:** Yeah. I don't think a parent probably will ever see that, you know? I don't think a parent would see how important it was for the parent to show up at the Kids' Day at school or show up at a basketball game, show up— you will never get that. You will never understand what the kid was going through. And the kid is still holding on to that.

**Nigel:** Yeah. I mean, the thing is for some people, those relationships come back and for others, it doesn't. And I think this is really about accepting it. Accepting where people are. [music fades out]

**Project Avary Group Members:** [singing] *I believe in the power of love. Honeybees love sweetness to help the world bloom bringing love to the power from the flower to the fruit, we can learn a thing or two. So, give a little, give a little, give a lot, don't stop. A helping hand makes the world go 'round there's more than enough. I believe in the power of love...*

**Earlonne:** Our inside co-host Rahsaan "New York" Thomas has two sons: Brandon and Nicholas.

**Nigel:** Oh yeah. And I remember he had pictures of them down in the media lab at San Quentin.

**Earlonne:** Yeah. I mean, it's just like an office outside. You have pictures of your loved ones.

**Nigel:** Exactly.

**Earlonne:** New York's been locked up for over twenty years now. And he obviously deals with a lot of these communication issues that we've been hearing about.

[over the phone to New York] Is there any question you wish you could ask one of your kids right now?

**Rahsaan "New York" Thomas:** [over the phone] Yeah, I would ask Nicholas, like, why he don't mess with me no more, man. Like, why is he not talking to my whole side of the family? I don't have no clue, man. One day he just stopped talking to my whole side of the family: my brother, my mother, and me. I don't know what's going on.

**Earlonne:** So, if one of your kids is listening to this episode, right? [New York affirms] What would you like to say to him?

**New York:** I would say to Nicholas, I would say, "Feelings ain't facts, man. The fact is we love you. We love you. Call us. Call your grandmother. Call me. Put some money on your phone, so I can call you, rather. Let's work this out, man, considering the fact that we love you. And I'm sorry. Like, whatever it is I did, I'm sorry. No need to not speak to each other, na'mean? We can't work it out if we can't communicate. So, there's too much love here to just throw away."

[music comes in] [guest speakers share the following credits]

**Speaker 1:** Yeah. So, we'd like to thank Ziri, Laila, Maurice...

**Speaker 2:** Chris, Anthony, Cesar

**Speaker 1:** Gerardo, Michelle, and Eric.

**Speaker 2:** And Janeisha

**Speaker 1:** Thanks to Michelle Garcia for being in the episode.

**Speaker 2:** Thanks to Alex Escalante, Zach Whelan and Amy DeLeon at Project Avary.

**Speaker 1:** Thanks to Kele Mitoto. He played the music at the Avary Fire Circle.

**Speaker 2:** Ear Hustle is produced by Nigel Poor, Earlonne Woods, and Rahsaan "New York" Thomas, John Yahya Johnson, and Bruce Wallace.

**Speaker 1:** This episode was sound designed and engineered by Antwan Williams with music by Antwan, David Jassy, and Richie Morris.

**Speaker 2:** Amy Standen edits the show. And Julie Shapiro is the Executive Producer for Radiotopia.

**Speaker 1:** Ear Hustle would like to thank acting warden Ron Bloomfield. And as you know, as every episode of Ear Hustle has to be approved by this guy right here.

**Lieutenant Sam Robinson:** This is Lieutenant Sam Robinson, the Public Information Officer at San Quentin State Prison and I do approve this episode.

**Speaker 2:** This podcast is made possible with support from the Chan Zuckerberg initiative, working to redesign the justice system by building power and opportunity for communities impacted by incarceration.

**Earlone:** Ear Hustle is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX, a collection of the best podcasts around hear more at [radiotopia.fm](http://radiotopia.fm).

**Nigel:** And listeners, we wanted to let you know, we will be back in three weeks instead of our usual two the week of the election. We just feel like we are all going to be focused on other things.

I'm Nigel Poor

**Earlone:** And I'm Earlone Woods. [music fades out] Go vote.

**Project Avary Member:** [singing] *Hey now, call me when you need a friend. Facebook, now. Direct message, now. Oh, I gotchu, Myspace, now. Uh-huh, that's right. Black Planet, c'mon. Tik-Tok now. Hey, Tik-Tok me! I'm just kidding.* [laughing]

**Nigel:** Before we go, we want to tell you about some exciting news from our friends at fellow Radiotopia podcast, 99% Invisible.

**Earlone:** They just published their first book, *The 99% Invisible City*. It's a beautifully designed and illustrated field guide to the hidden world of everyday design.

**Nigel:** If you're already a 99% Invisible fan, or if you've ever found yourself wondering, *what do those bright squiggly graffiti marks on the sidewalks mean? Or, why don't you see those iconic metal fire escapes on and new buildings?*

**Earlone:** Or, *how did car dealerships become home to those dancing inflatable figures?* [Nigel laughs]

**Nigel:** For sure. I've always wondered. So, if you've wondered about those things too, then the 99% Invisible City book is made for you.

**Earlone:** You can find links to purchase the physical book and audio book read by Roman Mars at [99pi.org/book](http://99pi.org/book).

**Nigel:** That's [99pi.org/book](http://99pi.org/book).

[music fades out] [Radiotopia jingle]

**END OF EPISODE.**