



Episode 56: Lifer Bakery
Air Date: April 14, 2021

Aaron “Showtime” Taylor: My name is Aaron “Showtime” Taylor. I’m a play-by-play commentator for basketball as well as other sports. I’m the voice of the American Basketball Association and the Venice Basketball League. This episode contains language and content, including discussion of sexual assault that may not be appropriate for all listeners. Discretion is advised.

[music comes in]

Earlonne Woods: Hey, Nigel. Hold on.

Nigel Poor: Yes. Yes.

Earlonne: Those are some nice pants you got on.

Nigel: Oh! What do you like about them?

Earlonne: They’re like 70-ish, but 2021.

Nigel: Well, you know that’s me. 70’s coming in 2021. But... you know what I’m really happy about today?

Earlonne: Whatchu happy about?

Nigel: I'm really happy that we are actually back in our office recording in an official studio and kind of out of our closets. But... there's something else I'm happy about. And that is... you got your job!

Earlonne: Ah [sighs]...

Nigel: [chuckles] Thank you.

Earlonne: I was reluctant...

Nigel: I know.

Earlonne: You know, I didn't wanna take the vaccine.

Nigel: I know.

Earlonne: I wanted everyone else to take it, so I don't *have* to take it. [Nigel affirms] But based on the work we do and probably going back inside the institutions, I had to get my job.

Nigel: I'm just so happy you did it, so thank you.

Earlonne: Definitely.

Nigel: So now we're ready to go out there. With masks...

Earlonne: Of course. We're ready to get into the thick of things.

Nigel: Yes.

Earlonne: And speaking of that...

Nigel: Yeah?

Earlonne: Let's get into this episode.

Nigel: Alright.

[music fades out] [abstract industrial transition comes in]

[to Isaac]

Nigel: We have a nickname for your bakery. I want to know what you think of it.

Isaac: OK.

Nigel: We call it the “Lifer Bakery”.

Isaac: The Lifer.

[as narrator]

Earlonne: This is Isaac.

[to Isaac]

Nigel: We started calling it that because you hire a lot of formerly incarcerated people.

Earlonne: [in the background] Lifers.

Nigel: Lifers.

Isaac: Well, I mean, “The Lifer” can have many meanings.

Nigel: It’s true.

Isaac: It’s actually... sounds like a positive name. [music comes in]

Nigel: Yeah, totally.

Earlonne: Customers for life.

Nigel: Yeah. Well, also, like food... bread, all that stuff gives you life.

Isaac: I like the name. No, it’s a good name [Nigel laughs]

Nigel: I’m Nigel Poor.

Earlone: And I'm Earlone Woods. This is *Ear Hustle*, from PRX's Radiotopia. [theme music comes in] *Dun-dun-dundun-dun*. [mimicking bass drop in theme]

[music fades out]

Earlone: So Nyge. [Nigel affirms]. We've been calling it "Lifer Bakery"

Nigel: We have.

Earlone: But the government name for Isaac's place is Frena Bakery. [music comes in]

Nigel: That's right. Frena Bakery. It's in downtown San Francisco. And Earlone, I'm not gonna say it's in the most charming neighborhood...

Earlone: Uh... it's a rough part of town. But Frena is kind of an oasis for that area. [Nigel affirms] It's got this nice orange awning out front and it's really welcoming, you know? [Nigel affirms]

[ambient noise from Frena Bakery comes in - two soft beeps as front door of bakery opens]

Nigel: So, you walk in and the first thing you see is this really beautiful brick oven painted orange. But then, your eyes go down to this glass counter and inside of that, are all these Jewish and Middle Eastern staples and delights... like, challah and other sweets and savories. But Earlone, my favorite thing... [Earlone affirms] is this amazing pita bread.

Earlone: Oh yeah, I seen you in there. [rubs hands together vigorously]

Nigel: Oh! It's so fluffy!

Earlone: And Isaac is the guy in charge. We heard him a couple minutes ago.

Isaac: In Israel, a bakery—c when you say the word bakery, it's different than saying bakery here. In Israel, the idea of bakery is not just sweets, but it's also savory. And that's what we have here. Like you just ate the pocket with the feta and green olives – it's a meal. And it's good for breakfast, lunch dinner, a night snack, share with friends.

Nigel: Isaac opened Frena Bakery about five years ago. And one day, he's working at the counter and this guy strolls in.

Isaac: He starts throwing some words in Hebrew, you know, 'cause he learned Hebrew I guess when he was in prison. And he told me that he's looking for a job. And his name is, if I can say his name... [Nigel affirms] Carlos.

Carlos: And he comes and he sits down at this table and this is how he talk, [imitating Isaac] 'So, what do you want?'

I'm like, 'I want a job.' And I tell him just like this... I tell him, 'But before we get into that, I'm gonna tell you about myself.' I go, 'I just got out of prison three days ago for doing 23 years for the murder of an innocent man. I've never had a job. I don't know how to bake, but I've always wanted to be a baker. I'm a hard worker. I got a college education. I'm a monster when it comes to working, like, I can really help you out'.

He looks at me, 'Eh, I hire you Sunday.'

I was like, 'What the heck!?'

[music comes in]

Earlone: So, Carlos.

Nigel: Yeah... Carlos. We've had him on the show a few times. And Earlone, he's amped up. His energy is intense. But I have to say, I totally enjoy being around him.

Earlone: Every time I see Carlos you know what comes to mind? [Nigel laughs] [imitating club music] *Ooo-ch Ooo-ch Ooo-ch*. 'Cause that's him. He's just moving, he's moving all the time.

Nigel: Never stops, never stops. And when you talk to Carlos about his life, it's just like one crazy thing after another. It always sounds impossible. But... Earlone, I believe everything he says.

Earlone: Me too.

[music fades out] [to Nigel]

Carlos: I know ancient Greek.

Nigel: Oh, you do? [laughs] [Carlos affirms] Are you Greek?

Carlos: I was actually only like 8% Mexican... English, Irish, Scottish, Spanish, Basque, Senegalese... I actually lived on a reservation for a while with some Morongan Indians... wrestled for about seven or eight years. I went three years undefeated. I was actually conceived in prison. Got cancer around the age of seven or eight.

Nigel: Wait, wait. What?! [music comes in]

Carlos: My father killed himself shortly after that. So, it was like a really traumatic time. So I ended up going back with my mom who was kind of, like, basically kind of homeless at that time.

[as narrator]

Earlone: When Carlos was sixteen years old, he was out with a group of friends when they decided to rob a store. And in the process, one of Carlos's friends shot and killed the guy who was working there.

[music fades out]

Nigel: Carlos was tried as an adult and sentenced to fifteen years to life.

[music comes in]

Carlos: Initially I went to YA.... As an adult, but get kicked to the pen, you know, you're scared.

Nigel: How old were you when you...?

Carlos: Went to the pen?

Nigel: Yeah.

Carlos: Eighteen. I remember when I first got busted, when I was getting booked, I remember the words of one of the officers. He said, 'You beat cancer and you killed somebody?' And him just looking at me like, "Pff." And I was just like, 'Ugh.' [hits fist to his chest as if it were a knife] It's a knife to the chest.

[music fades out] [as narrator]

Nigel: While Carlos was in prison, of course he stayed busy. He took college classes and learned a few languages... including Hebrew.

Earlonne: And then, after 23 years locked up, Carlos got paroled.

Nigel: Yeah. And when he got out it was pretty intense. I mean, Earlonne, he was 40 years old, and he was basically just starting his life outside, from scratch.

Earlonne: Right.

Carlos: I was very... reserved, confused. You know, I was really discombobulated. I didn't believe I was getting out. When I walked out of the prison, I just couldn't believe they were *actually* going to let me out. I thought up until the moment I got to the gate— I thought when I got to the car, they were still gonna call me back. Like, it just didn't seem real. So as those three days went on, I was... really... kind of like in a daze. Didn't feel real.

Earlonne: The first thing Carlos really needed was a job. But he just had no idea about how to do that.

Nigel: He was living in a transitional house. He met a woman there who told him about this bakery down the street where he could practice his Hebrew. [music fades out] And maybe... even find work.

Earlonne: So, Carlos being Carlos, he just walked in and straight-up asked for a job.

Isaac: And then he told me that he was... he just got out of jail. He was thirty years in prison. I wanted to hire him even more.

[to Isaac]

Nigel: Why?

Isaac: Why? First of all, we as Jews... we have a kosher bakery... kosher, not just the food, kosher needs to be everything: The way you conduct business, the way you treat your workers. Kosher is a way of life. Just, you know... eating kosher food and be a bad person. It's everything. So, the first fundamental rule in Judaism is that everybody deserves a second chance. It doesn't matter what you did. If you regret and you change

your ways, you deserve a better chance, a second chance, you know? You can't judge people for things they did when they were young. Or they were heat of the moment and nobody stopped them. If nobody stopped us, most of us would go to jail, too. You know? Many times.

[ambient noise from inside Frena Bakery's kitchen] [as narrator]

Earlone: So Carlos took the job, learning how to be a baker.

Nigel: Anytime Isaac brings on a new baker, he starts them out on the night shift.

Earlone: Yeah. It's the most demanding shift, so Isaac gets to kind of try them out and see if they're gonna be up to the task.

Nigel: Yeah, and the baking starts around midnight. [kitchen ambient noise continues - music plays in the background while employees work.] And Earlone, we went to that kitchen. Remember it's super *tight* space. And the guys are methodically moving around, twisting up challah, putting trays in the proofer, and cranking up that pita oven.

Earlone: Oh, the one that that Isaac imported from Israel?

Nigel: Yes. [whispering] And that's why the pita is so good...

Earlone: And the shifts are long.

Carlos: And it is *the* hardest job I've ever had. It was *nothing* compared to working in that bakery. It is *very* hard work. Anybody...

Nigel: What makes it hard?

Carlos: Huh?

Nigel: What makes it hard?

Carlos: High pressure situation. Lots of bread. You need timing, accuracy. Bread is like... it's a living organism. I compare it to a baby. It's growing! If you don't intervene into that child's life at the right time, it's going to grow up to be a monster.

[as narrator]

Nigel: I love how Carlos talks about this. I mean, it is so clear he loves his job.

Earlonne: And pretty soon, word gets around. Carlos is telling other guys who've just gotten out... 'Hey, you should check this place out.'

[music comes in]

Isaac: And then, he start bringing his friends! 'I have another guy. Do you want him? I have another guy, another guy.'

I said, 'Yeah, for sure. Of course, bring them. Bring, bring, bring.'

Carlos: He ended up hiring another guy, another guy, and, you know, feeding off of those other guys, it's been over 25 lifers, now. I lost count at 25... that have gone through there.

Isaac: Looking back and I said, 'Wow, 90% of the people work here... everybody in the bakery, specifically, were lifers.'

[as narrator]

Earlonne: So, you've got a bunch of people who *just* got out, after years of being locked up.

Nigel: Yeah, all working in this tiny kitchen.

Earlonne: And you know, I think it's inevitable. Sometimes some old prison shit is gonna come up. Like, for instance, in prison, everything – and everyone – is segregated by race. But at the bakery, it wasn't like that.

Nigel: No. And for some of the parolees, that took getting used to. [music fades out]

Carlos: This one particular incident where the guy said– you know, straight stop me, 'You're, you're Mexican, I'm Black. I'll talk to them.'

And I was like, 'Nah, dude, you're going to talk to me. That's stuff can stay in there. We're not in the prison kitchen talking, like, you got to go talk to your people. I got to go talk to mine. It's you and me.'

It was *really* intense. That had to diffuse, like, ‘Hey bro, like this is not what this is about.’ And through that stuff comes growth. Because it allows you to see: *I’m not in prison no more. I’m not talking to you as a nation-state Mexican, and you’re a nation state Black, bro. Like, we’re out here working for some people who care about us and we need to get stuff done.*

[to Carlos]

Nigel: Wow. Did he understand that?

Carlos: Oh yeah. Yeah.

Earlonne: So, before that, did he hang in his area? [Carlos laughs]

Nigel: Yeah. I mean, were there race areas in that kitchen?

Carlos: No, there's not race areas. Yeah, there's no race areas; you got the left sink. I got the right sink.

[as narrator]

Nigel: Carlos said even though the work could be brutal, he took to it immediately. And the place became really important to him.

[to Carlos]

Nigel: How did they instill so much loyalty in you?

Carlos: The love.

Nigel: Can you talk about that a little bit?

Carlos: I mean, they genuinely – you can see it – care about people. I was having some issues kind of with my family, and they were like [snaps fingers] – it was like a ready-made family! It was weird. They gave me love and a sense of security and they were giving love and a sense of security to dudes that were around me. And that kind of kept snowballing.

[music comes in]

[as narrator]

Nigel: So, E, when you first get out of prison, everything's a milestone, right?

Earlone: Yeah, I mean, Carlos was just starting on a bunch of stuff that most people have been building up for years. [Nigel affirms] I always tell cats, like, 'When you get out of prison, you're \$25,000 in the red.' You got to get clothes, car, everything! So, each time you accomplish things, it's a big deal for people.

Nigel: Yeah, yeah. [music fades out]

Carlos: When you see people get their first car out of there. You know, get their first place in the city. We celebrate that! Like, 'That's cool!' Like, 'Damn, yeah, he got his place!' You know, and it's cool.

[to Carlos]

Earlone: You know, it's a trip because a lot of people that's coming out of prison, you know, they first car was drug money. They first car was robbery. They first car, you know, people's first wasn't working. [Carlos affirms] You know what I'm saying? [Carlos affirms] So that's a good look to see... [crosstalk]

Carlos: [crosstalk] You see guys...

Earlone: Cats that really like earning their money for the first time. [crosstalk]

Carlos: [crosstalk] Making donuts and buying their car, you know, cash, 'Here.'
[imitating paying in cash]

Nigel: Well, that reminds me of something Earlone said about... he had these very expensive shoes he showed me from a long time ago. And I was like, 'Would you buy them now?' And he's like, 'No, 'cause I have a different feeling about money now.'

Carlos: Yeah.

[music comes in]

Gregory Rand: My name is Gregory Rand. I went to prison at seventeen years old. Did 25 years.

[to Gregory]

Earlonne: And how long have you been home?

Gregory: I've been home since November 1st, 2018.

[as narrator]

Earlonne: I went to talk to Gregory where he was living over on Treasure Island. He's a cool dude; smiles a lot. Kind of like a... muscular teddy bear, if that makes sense.

[laughs]

Nigel: When Gregory first got out, he started applying all over the place for jobs.

Earlonne: FedEx, UPS, Amazon...

Nigel: Yep. [music fades out] And he kept getting turned down.

Gregory: I don't have no problem with getting a \$10 job. I'll do that. If nobody do it, I'll do it. So after being rejected a few times without receiving a response, it kind of bothered me. It messed with my confidence in finding employment because I've never had a job.

Nigel: Then, Gregory heard about Frena Bakery.

Earlonne: He walks in and starts choppin' it up with Isaac.

[to Gregory]

And what was that conversation like?

Gregory: Uh... it was nerve wracking. I've never been on a job interview. In prison you just get a work card, show up to work. So, it was nerve wracking. I didn't know what to expect. He asked about the gap in my employment and that stumbled me. So that's when I told him that I was incarcerated, and this is what I did, and this is who I am today. He asked me how do I know if this job is where I want to be? And it kinda shook me up. So, I told him I worked at metal-fab for about a year and a half prior to coming home. And seeing a piece of metal turn into a shovel – seeing nothing turn into something, being a part of that motivates me. [music comes in]

I went from pots and pans and cleaning to prepping, just solely cutting food. Then I went from there to solely mixing the yeast. I wouldn't cook. Just mix it. [imitating Isaac] 'Gregory!' Mix– Just make this– mix the ingredients. [music fades out] [pause] Now you start baking.

[as narrator]

Earlone: Learning to cook at Frena – it's a whole *thing*.

Nigel: Yeah, you're just learning how to bake; you're learning all the rules about how to keep a kosher kitchen.

Gregory: You cannot put no dairy onto the parve.

[to Gregory]

Earlone: And I'm still lost on what a parve is. Is it a plate? Is it a food item? Is it dough?

Gregory: It's food, it's food. [Earlone affirms] It's dough.

[as narrator]

Nigel: So parve is anything that's *not* meat or dairy.

Earlone: And at Frena, they've got different stations for different kinds of food. And everyone's gotta learn to follow the rules.

Nigel: You gotta keep that meat and dairy separate.

Gregory: There's no mixture of the two. [Earlone affirms] Like, you can't... you...

[to Gregory]

Earlone: Keep them separate.

Gregory: Keep them separate.

Earlone: Crips and bloods.

[music comes in]

Gregory: When they first started showing me the ins and outs, I had messed up some pecan buns. Opposed to lashing out at me, and slamming stuff down and, you know, basically belittling me... [imitating Isaac] 'Gregory, Gregory, what did you do?' So I explain what I did, he said, 'Okay, this is what you missed. Once they proof, you spray them with water.' Then, you they poke the holes in 'em. I poked the holes in them, then sprayed the water which made them collapse. So, we started everything.

He said, 'Watch me.' And he showed me step-by-step exactly how it is to make the perfect vegan buns. It gave me a sense of comfort in knowing that I'm human. I'm not a machine. If I can stumble, just pick up dust myself off, regroup and do it right.

Earlone: So would you consider yourself a hell of a baker nowadays?

Gregory: Oh, absolutely!

Earlone: [jokingly] So, you would turn a woman on, like...

Gregory: Oh, no! I keep that that on... I keep that on... [stumbling] and that's what...

Earlone: You ain't trying to expose that part?

Gregory: No, no, no. [Earlone laughs] [jokingly] Me, a baker? Greg a baker... No, but you know...

Earlone: Whatchu mean? I mean, that's talent!

Gregory: That's talent... but you know... and that's what a seventeen-year-old mentality comes in at: *How can I embrace the title of a baker with...* um...

Earlone: Your masculinity?

Gregory: There you go.

Earlone: No, come on, man! [Gregory laughs] I wish I was a baker. I wish I knew how to make some shit that would make a person just start smiling and shit.

Gregory: At the opening of the store, when the store is open, when I used to look out there, it made me feel good to see the little boys or little girls look, "Ooh, look at that!"

Look at that!' And it's something that I did. Turned flour, turned dust into jelly donuts with hearts on 'em... to turn into just... everything turns into something!

[music comes in]

[as narrator]

Nigel: After the break... the pandemic hits.

Earlonne: And Nigel... goes out on a delivery run.

[music fades out]

By 2020, Frena was doing real good [Nigel affirms] to where Isaac was gonna open a second location.

Nigel: Which was super exciting. But then, the pandemic hit. And everything closed down. [Earlonne affirms] The catering was like half of their business and it disappeared. And of course, you know, people walking by, you know, that just stopped... it dried up.

Earlonne: And Isaac realized they had to go out and find some new customers.

Nigel: Yep. So, Frena started driving vanloads of food all over the Bay Area, setting up in the parking lots of synagogues and Jewish community centers.

Earlonne: And Jeremiah, that's the main guy from Frena doing those deliveries. [Nigel affirms]

[to Jeremiah] [in the field]

Nigel: OK, what are we about to do? What's the adventure we're about to go on?

Jeremiah: So, next we're off to San Jose and we're gonna set up outside of a synagogue and we're going to make sure that everybody who's unable to come up here is getting the best kosher food that we can supply to them.

Nigel: So, what's gonna be in the truck?

Jeremiah: Oh, I've got pita, I've got challah, I've got sambusaks, sufganiyah – jelly-filled donuts, I've got burekas, I've got baba ganoush. Oh! And I've got our world famous sabich sandwich boxes.

Nigel: Oooh. I hope that we don't eat a bunch of the food on the way down...

[as narrator]

Nigel: OK, so E, you and I had met Jeremiah for the first time on one of our earlier visits to the bakery.

[to Jeremiah]

Nigel: So, can you tell us where we are right now? Can you describe the space we're sitting in?

Jeremiah: So, we are currently in the office space... it's a rather spacious basement, [Nigel affirms] with a very nice little employee lounge area.

[as narrator]

Earlonne: Every day at 9 a.m. Jeremiah goes down into the basement at Frena, and he sits there. For an hour.

Jeremiah: So, what am I doing right now? [Nigel affirms] So, between 9 o'clock and 10 o'clock in the morning, and 9 o'clock and 10 o'clock at night – so, twice a day for an hour – I have to plug in an ankle monitor, a GPS monitor.

[as narrator, to Earlonne]

Nigel: We should describe this ankle monitor.

Earlonne: Yeah. It's about the size of a big ass old school garage door opener. [Nigel affirms] And it got this band around it like a watch band.

Nigel: Yeah, but thick.

Earlonne: Hella thick.

Nigel: Thick, thick, thick. And that ankle monitor is part of Jeremiah's parole. He has to wear it for *eight years*.

Earlonne: That's a looong time to have something attached to you

[music fades out]

Jeremiah: It is really difficult to readjust back into society when you know that every twelve hours for a total of an hour, each time, you have to stop everything you're doing to plug in. So, say I wanted to get a job like this: My job starts at 7:30 in the morning, at 9 o'clock, I have to clock out. So, I can come down here and, and do my thing. And then I go back upstairs and clock in. And, you know, that's really difficult for most employers. I... didn't think I was going to get a job, even here in San Francisco, honestly. Most people turned me down. And it was the charging from 9 o'clock to 10 o'clock that stopped me from getting a job. [Nigel affirms]

Nigel: I've actually never met someone whose parole is longer than the time they served.

Earlonne: No, I think it's... [mumbling] I don't understand that one. 'Cause I was about to say, maybe I missed it – [to Jeremiah] Why are you on it for five years– or eight years?

Jeremiah: Because [clears throat] ... so, sixty days before you are released from prison, when you have a victim, they notify that victim. If said victim decides that they feel threatened, they can contact the parole office and tell 'em, 'You need to keep an eye on 'em for *my* protection.'

Earlonne: Have you had to explain that ankle monitor? And in what situation?

Jeremiah: Every situation. I'm required by law to explain to any employer my situation. And why I went to prison.

Earlonne: Have you explained that to us? Or do you want to put that on here?

Jeremiah: I will explain it. This is part of my [inhales deeply] recovery. I just don't like bringing it up. So, in 2016, I had been married for ten years. And we had a BDSM type relationship. She had a lot more experience than I did in those kinds of things. And, um... I was a willing learner [chuckles uncomfortably]. And... one night, we were being intimate, and she explained that it was uncomfortable for her. And I went ahead and continued to force myself on her. Um... I completed. I finished. And she told me that if I went to the store and got a pack of cigarettes and a bottle of vodka for her, we could go for second round. And so, off to the store I went. And when I got back, the police were waiting for me. They asked if I had had sex with her. I told them everything that had happened. How it had happened. And he told me, 'Well, that's rape.' [music fades out]

While I was in prison, I started taking some therapy classes and talking to a counselor. And he helped me understand that the nature of our sexual relationship was really deviant. We didn't have like a safe word. We didn't... you know, there were just certain things that you need to have if you're going to have that kind of relationship. And we didn't have it. And so, I came to the understanding and realization that I had raped my wife. Which is a very difficult thing to come to grips with.

[as narrator] [ambient noise comes in van door closes]

Nigel: I went back to Frena a week later to go on a delivery run with Jeremiah. [ambient noise continues – cars driving down road]

Earlonne: Yep. We were reporters, seeing every side of the business. [Nigel laughs]

Nigel: OK, if you want to say that. But actually, I just wanted to hear a bit more about Jeremiah's life.

[to Jeremiah]

What year did you go to prison?

Jeremiah: In March of 2016, I committed my crime.

Nigel: So, tell me about... if I had met you in March 2015, who would I've met?

Jeremiah: You would have had a pretty rough and tumble individual. I was riding a motorcycle. I had a shaved head. I was working out a lot. And... taking supplements to get big.

Nigel: Like, give me five adjectives that would describe you.

Jeremiah: Loyal, honest, hardworking... [pauses] ruthless and maybe sadistic.

Nigel: Do any of those five still describe you?

Jeremiah: Loyal, hardworking, trustworthy.

Nigel: Do you feel like a sex offender?

Jeremiah: No.

Nigel: It sounds like you said you were guilty, but you don't think of yourself as a sex offender. So, that seems like a contradiction.

Jeremiah: I know. When I think of a sex offender, I think of somebody who... I don't know, plans those kinds of things. [Nigel affirms] Or maybe somebody who thinks about deviant things. [music comes in] You know, somebody who dresses as a clown or drives around in an ice cream truck, picking up little kids. [Nigel affirms] Somebody who cruises the internet, looking for inappropriate porn. Those are sex offenders.

I was guilty, though. She told me to stop, and I didn't. I was guilty. I accept that. Regardless of the situation that led up to it, I should have just stopped. Regardless of even if we had a BDSM relationship or not.

Nigel: Why didn't you stop?

Jeremiah: I'm selfish.

Nigel: When people go to prison, they lose obviously so much of their privacy. You lost a very particular kind of privacy. Was it embarrassing for everyone to know the details of your intimate life?

Jeremiah: Yeah.

Nigel: What's that done to you? Sometimes I wonder if like, something really humiliating happens to you and you get past it, maybe you're... you're stronger because you realize you can survive that and it's not the end of the world, or maybe it's done some kind of psychological damage that you can't get back from?

Jeremiah: Well, I'd like to say yes on both actually. I've come out of it definitely feeling a lot stronger and more secure in some things. Mostly in how I hold relationships with the opposite sex. I've learned to develop my communication skills with not just my relationship partners, but with everybody.

[as narrator]

Earlone: You know how we were talking earlier about Carlos? [Nigel affirms] I mean, he and Jeremiah are really different people, and they're in different situations... but it's

like no matter how you get to prison, you're kind of in the same spot when you get out. You're starting your life all over again.

Nigel: Yeah, and Earlonne, it's not just the material stuff like buying a car or whatever, but relationship stuff too. Like, how to communicate and how to earn respect and trust from people.

Earlonne: And for Jeremiah, Frena was a big part of that

[in the field]

Jeremiah: It's nice being somebody who's been incarcerated to have that knowledge and feeling of being trusted by a business owner with a bunch of cash... The vehicle I'm driving currently right now actually belongs to one of the owners. [Nigel affirms] So, I mean, they've, they've put a lot of trust in me.

[to Jeremiah]

Nigel: So, when interviewed you last time you talked about this and so did Isaac about it feeling like a family. And it actually sounds like it does, like that's not just lip service.

Jeremiah: No, it's absolutely not lip service. There have been times where I was going through either a loss in the family or my mother was not feeling well. And I got a lot of emotional support from Isaac and Avi and the rest of the crew at Frena. And I know that I can call them at night any time of the hour, whether it's six in the morning or two in the morning, they're more than willing to answer the phone.

[ambient noise continues – van pulling up to location]

Nigel: Where are– we're about to pull in somewhere, I think. Where are we now?

Jeremiah: So this is normally where I would pull in right there. But *today*... we are going to pull– You know what? I really like it over there in the shade. [in the background Nigel says, 'I think shade's a good idea'] Yeah, I'm gonna pull into the shade.

[as narrator]

Nigel: And that's where we left him: Doing his thing.

Earlonne: Slangin' dough.

[music fades out]

Nigel: OK, so there's one more person at Frena we wanted to talk to: Brandie.

Earlonne: Yep. Because during this whole pandemic thing, Brandie was a big part of keepin' things going at the bakery.

Nigel: Oh yeah. And she came out to talk to us on her lunch break, so we all sat in your car, Earlonne, to do the interview. And she really rolled with it. She was gracious and sweet, but you also pick up on something that was really strong and determined about her.

Earlonne: She was a go-getter.

[ambient noise as Brandie interviews inside Earlonne's car]

[to Brandie]

Nigel: Did you ever think you'd be sitting in a car being interviewed by people?

Brandie Talavera: No! Not at all. [laughs] [someone says in the background, 'With masks on?'] With masks on? No, not at all.

Nigel: Can you start by just identifying yourself?

Brandie: OK. My name is Brandie Talavera. I'm 41 years old. I've been released for about two years and doing good!

Nigel: And how much time did you do?

Brandie: 36 months. But I did a drug program called RDAP out in Phoenix, Arizona... in federal prison, and it allowed me to get seven months off.

[music comes in] [as narrator]

Earlonne: Jeremiah told Brandie about Frena when she was just a couple of days out of prison, living in a transitional house in San Francisco.

Nigel: Yeah, he told he thought the bakery might need somebody to work the front counter.

Earlonne: So Brandie thought she'd check it out. Isaac hired her on the spot.

Brandie: So I went in just to do cashier and they said, 'No, I see something more in you. I need somebody to answer my phones, basically be my right-hand man. And I think he could be the girl.'

Nigel: So what did he see in you?

Brandie: They like to say the street term: *hustler*. [laughs] So I ran with it. I was like, 'You know, so true.' 'Cause I was!

Nigel: So, what was your first impression of Frena Bakery?

Brandie: It was very overwhelming. But I was like... at my first week, I was like, 'I can't do this.'

Nigel: What did you think you couldn't do?

Brandie: Well, I haven't been in work for several years before that. [music fades out] So, I was just like... the food and just getting to know the recipes and everything. I was just like, 'I don't- what is this? What am I doing?' [Nigel affirms] And so, I actually studied every single department. So I can go... if there with no baker was there, I'll go be the baker. If there's no front cashier, I'll go be the front cashier.

[as narrator]

Nigel: I think Brandie was kind of surprised at how much she ended up liking this job – it was hectic at first, but Brandie's a fast learner and she just fit right in.

[music comes in]

Brandie: I got my independence back. I got my work ethic back. I got my skill back. It's been years since I worked in the office. It's been years since I had to direct and correct and... people. And he gave me the opportunity. And so, by that, I just took it and ran with it. And I grew up, as you could say... more than anything. [Nigel affirms]

Nigel: Pretty soon, it was Brandie's job to manage all the bakery's catering relationships, including with a bunch of big tech companies in San Francisco.

Earlonne: So, when the pandemic hit and all those clients disappeared... Brandie hit the phones looking for new business.

Nigel: And that's how Frena Bakery ended up with a customer they weren't expecting...

[music fades out]

Earlonne: This one really all kinda came full circle, Nyge.

Nigel: Oh yeah.

Isaac: Surprisingly we did... for two weeks, we did kosher meals for San Quentin.

Nigel: Earlonne, people might not know this but in prison you can request special diets for health or religious reasons.

Earlonne: Right. You have different needs. [Nigel affirms] You have vegetarians, you have halal, and you have the kosher [Nigel affirms] – the Jewish cats.

Brandie: One of the prisoners sent a letter and they told them like, 'These are the best meals that we've gotten... ever.'

[music comes in] [to Isaac]

Nigel: What was a typical meal you made for them?

Isaac: We made three meals a day...

Nigel: So what was it? [crosstalk]

Isaac: ...Seven days a week [crosstalk] We gave them bagels, lox, and cream cheese... muffins, and granola with yogurt.

Nigel: They got that quality of food?

Isaac: Yeah!

Nigel: Wow.

Isaac: Why not?

Brandie: These guys are eating so good! Like, we would do salmon for them. Salmon, rice, vegetables. We did these really good cheese sandwiches. We were doing, what, 115? And then it started increasing after these other guys started seeing what these guys were getting.

[to Brandie]

Nigel: A lot of people converted, right? [crosstalk]

Brandie: [crosstalk] They started increasing by five, by five, by five. [Nigel affirms] So we're like, 'Oh shoot!' So we were doing almost 400 meals a day.

Isaac: Getting a lox and cream cheese bagel after 30 years you didn't eat it... it's probably...

Nigel: [crosstalk] I'm sure the food you brought was better than anything...

Isaac: ... [crosstalk] Amazing. We get them falafel; we get them shawarma... So we... for two weeks... we thought it'd be a little longer because also, it was gonna save the business. [Nigel affirms] We got letters from a few inmates thanking us, saying it was the best kosher food they ate, and they haven't ate such good food in years. It was nice. It was definitely a [rumbling noise in the background] nice kind of karma. [music fades out]

[as narrator, to Earlonne]

Nigel: Alright, Earlonne. It's been a while since you and I have been to Frena Bakery. I mean, we started working on this story last year. So, let's give an update.

Earlonne: Yep. Carlos, Gregory, Jeremiah, and Brandie have all moved on to new jobs, though they do stay in touch with Isaac.

Nigel: Oh yeah, of course they do. But there is a sad note: last week, Frena closed the doors of their shop in downtown San Francisco, hopefully, temporarily.

Earlonne: Yeah, the pandemic has been real tough on businesses.

Nigel: Oof, yeah.

Earlonne: They're gonna take a little time and retool what they offer there. But in the meantime, they're still catering, and that truck is still making weekly deliveries all over the Bay Area.

Nigel: Nice.

[music fades out] [abstract industrial transition comes in]

Earlonne: Hey Nyge.

Nigel: What's up, E?

Earlonne: You didn't by chance watch the Golden State Warriors game on Saturday, did you?

Nigel: Mm, no – why do you ask?

Earlonne: Well, if you did, you might have heard this familiar voice.

[archival clip - Aaron "Showtime" Taylor chants over PA system at Golden State Warrior game, (drawn-out for dramatic effect) 'Waaaaarriors!' while audience cheers]

Nigel: Oh my God, it's Aaron "Showtime" Taylor!

Earlonne: Yep. The return of Chick Hearn.

Nigel: Oh my God. So, OK, we have to explain a little bit about him. [Earlonne affirms]. Inside of San Quentin, whenever there was a sports game, mostly basketball... [crosstalk]

Earlonne: [crosstalk] Basketball, baseball, whatever.

Nigel: He called the games! [Earlonne affirms] Like, he was an official game-caller. And even when the Warriors would come in, which they did, [Earlonne affirms] he would call the games

Earlonne: He would definitely do that.

Nigel: He was so good.

Earlonne: And now, [Nigel affirms] he's made the big times.

Nigel: Nice.

Earlonne: He was on the mic at the Warriors game last weekend. And at the end of the game, Steph Curry came and gave him the game ball.

Nigel: Oh! So exciting. So now that he's made the big time, we weren't sure that he would do it – but he did make time to record the credits for this episode.

Earlonne: Take it away Aaron!

Aaron: *Ear Hustle* would like to thank Peder Coleman and David Monroe for also talking about their time at Frena.

Ear Hustle is produced by Nigel, AKA Ni-gel [pronounces *Nee-jelle*] Poor, Earlonne [pronounces as *Earl-line*] "Skillet" Woods, Rahsaan "New York" Thomas, John "Yahya" – "I Don't Smile Too Much" Johnson, and Bruce Wallace.

Amy Standen edits the show, Shabnam Sigman is our digital producer, and Julie Shapiro is the executive producer for Radiotopia. This episode was sound designed and engineered by Antwan "Banks" Williams, with music by Antwan, Rhashiyd Zinnamon AKA "Cinnamon" and David Jassy AKA "DJ The Sweetest Phenom".

Thanks to acting Warden Ron Broomfield, and, as you know, every episode of *Ear Hustle* has to be approved by this guy here... the man who stands taller than anyone else in the room; yet doesn't reach anybody else's shoulder and whose face needs to be on the \$1 bill: Public Information Officer, Lieutenant *Saaaam* [draws out "Sam for emphasis] Robinson.

Lieutenant Sam Robinson: Man, how do you follow Aaron "Showtime" Taylor? This is Lieutenant Sam Robinson, the public information officer at San Quentin. And it's amazing when you see partnerships and people who really look out for folks who are behind the walls of prison. And so, I don't have too much more to say other than I do approve this episode.

Earlonne: Indeed. [Lt. Robinson laughs]

[to Earlonne]

Lieutenant Robinson: Did you check them out?

Earlonne: [in the background] I did, I did!

[to Lt. Robinson]

And will you be going to the Lifer's Bakery?

Lieutenant Robinson: Of course I will. I'm not gonna [laughs] lie and say that I knew about it before this story; but no, I didn't know it even existed before. But definitely I'm going to support the brothers who are out there working hard and trying to do the right thing, man. So yeah, definitely. [music comes in]

Aaron: This podcast was 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.

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END OF EPISODE.