



Episode 57: Catch a Kite 6
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Nigel Poor: Hey, Earlonne.

Earlonne Woods: Hey, what up, Nyge?

Nigel: You know, since the beginning, *Ear Hustle* has always been about getting voices from inside prison out into the world...

Earlonne: And I think we've accomplished that because from my last check, we're worldwide.

Nigel: Yes, we are. But there's other ways to do it besides the podcast. You know that for the last effing eight years, I have been working on a photography project inside of San Quentin.

Earlonne: Yeah. You actually started that before we even thought about *Ear Hustle*.

Nigel: That's right. The project involved a small group of men inside San Quentin and myself looking at and writing about photographs from this amazing archive of images taken at San Quentin from as long ago as the 1930s.

Earlone: Yeah. We even did an episode based on that called “This Place” in season numero three.

[clip from “This Place” begins]

Norman Willhoite: [Photo paper shuffling] I’m looking at a picture. It looks like a training photo for people that escaped. It’s probably the back of a truck. There’s a bunch of boxes of cans that are empty, they’re tomato cans, and inside these tomato cans is a cleared-out space where it looks like an inmate’s sitting to escape. And, uh... I’ve known a few people that escaped from here.

Nigel: You do?

Norman W: Yes.

Nigel: Oh! Can you tell...?

Norman W: Well, there was one dude named Red, I don’t know if I can use his real name because he ended up getting killed here. But Red escaped in a truck kinda like this, just like this.

[clip fades out] [music comes in]

Nigel: Earlone, there are so many damn stories to tell. And this book that I’ve been working on based on the photo archive project is *finally*, finally being published by Aperture Foundation.

Earlone: It’s called *The San Quentin Project*. And I got a sneak peek at it, and I gotta say, partner, it’s a fly ass book.

Nigel: Aww. Thanks. I really appreciate those words. I have to admit, I am quite excited about it. [music fades out]

Earlone: You can find out more about the book and where you can buy it in our show notes on our website, earhustlesq.com

Nigel: OK... Earlone?

Earlone: Hey

Nigel: [laughs] Let's get to the show now.

Earlonne: I'm still looking at the book, Nyge! [Nigel laughs]

Nigel: Thank you.

[music comes in]

Earlonne: Nyge.

Nigel: Yes?

Earlonne: You know this is one my favorite episodes we do.

Nigel: Well, tell me why? I know why it's one of mine, but I wanna know why it's one of yours. [crosstalk]

Earlonne: [crosstalk] I love when our listeners get involved in what we do. [Nigel affirms] I love it on social media, and I definitely love when we do these episodes of them asking questions.

Nigel: And that's what we're doing today on "Catch a Kite". And we've been doing it since Season 1 I believe.

Earlonne: Indeed. Answering those questions.

I'm Earlonne Woods.

Nigel: And I'm Nigel Poor. This is *Ear Hustle* from PRX's Radiotopia.

[music fades out]

[sound collage comes in featuring abstract sounds like that of a dial-tone at sped-up voices on the phone, followed by metal door closing]

Danni: [over the phone] Hi, my name is Danni from Toronto, and I'm just wondering if any of the inmates keep up with reality TV as it airs and how easy that would be.

Nigel: This is the first of a couple questions we got about media and entertainment in prison.

Earlonne: And for this one... we thought we'd bring in our producer John "Yahya" Johnson into this fold.

Nigel: Yes. Yahya, I believe you were one of those *Big Brother* guys when you were inside, right?

John "Yahya" Johnson: Oh, absolutely. *Big Brother* was one of my mainstays in prison.

Nigel: Why?

Yahya: Because it got me through a lot of stuff. I would look at *Big Brother* – how individuals are confined to a small space, and how they would strategize on *Big Brother*. [*Big Brother* theme comes in] Orchestrated moves and backstabbing cutthroat people and, it's about survival. It wasn't a hard stretch to the imagination to see that stuff happening on a prison yard and correlating it to what we saw in *Big Brother*. [*Big Brother* theme fades out]

Nigel: Well, Yahya, I have to say, you are not the first guy I've heard talk about their affection for reality TV. It's actually pretty popular in prison. [music comes in]

Yahya: Definitely, Nigel. Reality TV is super huge in prison. I mean, shows like *Survivor*, *Big Brother*... you name it. In fact, me and my cellie used to love *Big Brother*. And we had a ritual that we would do every time *Big Brother* came on.

Nigel: What did you do?

Yahya: So, we would make a spread... Go into the bunk, into the sweet box, get some *zooms zooms* and *wham whams* and just talk [Nigel laughs], just talk *Big Brother* shop.

Nigel: [laughing] I love that. What about *The Bachelor*? 'Cause that was super popular outside.

Yahya: Yeah, you had a lot of people watch *The Bachelor*. Me personally, I never watched it because they didn't have a Black bachelor and there was always controversy centered around that. [Nigel affirms] But when they did have a bachelorette that I thought was cute, I would tune in.

Nigel: Mhm. I hear you.

Yahya: So, yeah, Nigel, guys inside can't get enough of that reality TV show stuff.
[music fades out]

[as narrator]

Nigel: And so, we asked our colleague inside San Quentin, Rahsaan “New York” Thomas, to hit the yard and ask some questions about it.

[in the field, from San Quentin – voices chattering in the background]

Rahsaan “New York” Thomas: [to Dan] Do we watch reality TV shows in prison and which ones is more popular?

Dan: Yeah. My name is Dan. I've been down almost twenty-one years. Reality TV shows? Well, they got one, 5 channel, it's kind of like *Survivor*... games.

New York: Are you talking about *Tough as Nails*?

Dan: *Tough as Nails* is good.

New York: Tell me you wasn't watching [laughs] *Love Island*.

Dan: Uhhh... I did for a minute and I got bored, man. And I shook that. [laughs]

New York: You got bored? [mockingly] What you get bored of? The bathing suits?

Dan: Nah, I just got bored of the drama. Too much drama in that, man. It ain't no play...
[indistinguishable]

New York: It really was “*Backstabbing*” *Island*, huh...

Dan: Whole lotta backstabbing going on.

[music comes in]

Nigel: And E, I'm pretty sure there's a lot of TVs inside prison.

Earlone: Yes. Pretty much everybody got a TV and if they don't have a TV, they cellie got a TV. And if you're in a dorm room, there's usually a TV room or TV area that you can watch it in.

Nigel: How many channels are there?

Earlone: It all depends on where you at. [Nigel affirms] In some prisons, you might just have a couple of channels. But if you in a cool prison, whatever, you might have thirteen, fourteen channels, even sports channels. [music fades out]

Nigel: So, I know when you were inside, you watched a couple of things – but what was your favorite?

Earlone: Uh... it's a... you know... [dramatic piano instrumental comes in] I was a *Young and the Restless* cat.

Nigel: I remember you loved your soaps... [Earlone laughs] Your stories. [laughs]

Earlone: You see when we went out to Wisconsin, I was looking for Victor Newman. Genoa City, you know. [Nigel laughs] [music fades out]

Nigel: I also remember those Spanish shows which were quite popular inside. But you don't speak Spanish. So, what's up with that?

Earlone: Well, I was trying to learn Spanish from watching the shows and then I was realizing that, *Hey, this is a difference between American shows and Spanish shows.* You know, they're, like, sexy [Nigel laughs] and everybody know that part, Nyge.

[in the field, inside San Quentin]

Speaker 1: I got a guilty pleasure with the *Enamorándonos*. OK, so check it out. It's a Spanish dating show, and I don't understand a lick of a word they saying, but I'm watching it! [laughs]

New York: What are you watching, bruh?

Speaker 1: Man, it's a.... I'm just captivated. That's all I got to say. [both laugh]

New York: Is anybody watching this show with you?

Speaker 1: Oh man, sometime my cellie – he speaks Spanish, so, sometimes I got to get him to join me with me so I can have an interpreter telling me what's going on. You know what I mean? [laughs]

[sound collage comes in featuring abstracted industrial sounds and automated voicemail box message, 'Please leave your message...']

Julien Oswald: [over the phone] Hi, my name's Julien and I'm calling from New York. My question is – Do people play video games in prison?

Sam Lewis: I found it funny that they said, '*Do people play video games?*' And I'm like, 'Oh, okay. Not while I was inside.' [music comes in]

[as narrator]

Earlonne: This is our friend Sam Lewis. And I first met Sam when he strolled through San Quentin suited and booted while I was incarcerated. [Nigel affirms] And I can say, Nyge, when a formerly incarcerated dude come back into the prison, that got out, they're successful – it's an inspiration to the rest of the individuals that's there serving time.

Nigel: Oh yeah, no doubt. Sam served twenty-four years in prison. And Earlonne, we always love the opportunity talking with him.

Earlonne: Yup. So not long ago, we drove down to his office in LA to hit him with a few of these questions. [music fades out]

[in the field]

Sam: I was in prison from 1988 to January 12th, 2012.

Nigel: So, you could have played Tetris.

Sam: I played Tetris before I went in

Nigel: That's my era, the Tetris years. [laughs]

Sam: Atari... Caleco.

Nigel: What do you think people... or guys did in prison to fill their time instead of video games? Like, what was the equivalent of video gaming if you didn't have the ability to video game?

Sam: Oh wow. Pinochle, chess, spades. But once you play pinochle, normally you don't even want to play spades anymore. Backgammon. If you're lucky, you'll have sometimes a floor officer that allow you to check out dice. And then they will make sure that you're not doing anything you shouldn't be doing with the dice. [laughs]

Earlonne: Ahhh! [Sam laughs]

Sam and Earlonne: [simultaneously] Hit, seven! [laughs]

Nigel: What's that?

Earlonne: Come on. [Sam laughs] [indistinguishable] We can gamble right now, Nyge.

Sam: Seven, eleven comin' out.

Earlonne: See?

[music comes in]

Sam: I really... I enjoy chess now. I think it's a thinking person's game. Dominoes, pinochle... all of those are games of chance because you can't see what the other person has. On a chess board, everything is right there in front of you. You know what a person can and can't do. The only question that you have to ask yourself: *Are you gonna miss the move that that person is going to make? Is that person three or four or five moves ahead of you?* And so, it's like life: If you stay focused, you can be really good. I see that with everyone that's coming out that really knows what they want to do with their life. They stick to the script. They don't stop. They don't quit. And success is inevitable. That's why I like chess.

[music fades out]

Nigel: E, when we first got this question, I thought, *actual video games in prison? Hmm. That's gonna be non-starter.* [Earlonne laughs] I mean, people don't have personal computers and those fancy video game consoles that the young folks play with, right? [laughs]

Earlone: Not so fast, Nyge! Not so fast. Sam got out nine years ago. You know what I'm sayin'? [Nigel affirms] There have been some changes since then. Nowadays, people have these tablets, and they're kind of like... I'll describe them as "special prison iPads."

Nigel: That is being way too generous, Earlone. [both laugh] I mean, It's not like they have internet...

Earlone: True, but they come with some games on them. And if you got a little cheddar, you can add a *whole* lotta games.

[in the field, from San Quentin - voice chattering in the background]

Big Mike Senior: Call me Big Mike Senior.

New York: Big Mike, how long have you been down?

Big Mike Senior: Well, right now it's been what...? Three and a half years - I'll be going home soon.

New York: Let me ask you something – because when people think about video games in the street, they're thinking about Xbox 360, PlayStation 17... when you say video games, what you talking about?

Big Mike Senior: Like, chess on the tablets, you know what I'm saying? Little solitaire. Card games. Stuff like that. It's not Xboxes or anything like that, but it's something. It keeps me going, keeps me sane... so that I won't be thinking about other things. I won't be depressed. I won't be mad at everything.

New York: So, how many hours a day do you play video games?

Big Mike Senior: You want me to add them up? [laughs] [New York affirms] I would say, in all honestly, I would say 96 hours, on and off.

New York: A day?!

Big Mike Senior: Every day.

New York: There's only 24 hours in a day.

Big Mike Senior: I'll be up there playing in my sleep. [laughs]

[music comes in]

Norman Fisher: I was out in Arizona. We had Xbox, we had PlayStation, we had tablets... we had it all out there.

[as narrator]

Nigel: This is Norman Fisher. And he is actually talking about *real* video games.

Earlonne: Because this was at a private prison in Arizona where rules were... a little different, I'll say.

[in the field, from San Quentin]

Norman: We sat in our cell, just played Madden 15. That's when I was out there. Played Madden 15. I mastered that. It was cool.

New York: So, that's crazy! You had an Xbox in your... [crosstalk]

Norman: [crosstalk] I had an Xbox and my cellie had a PlayStation. Yeah... that was easiest time I ever done. [music fades out]

[as narrator]

Nigel: Having an Xbox in your cell... uh, Earlonne... that's a pretty unusual situation.

Earlonne: And an unfair one too, Nigel. [Nigel laughs]

Nigel: I know.

Earlonne: We're all serving time. Everyone should get that shit.

Nigel: [laughs] I hear you. But E, we did talk to one guy who managed to do some pretty serious gaming while he was inside a state-operated prison in California.

Earlonne: Yeah. He had to... *er...um...uh...* [Nigel laughs] ... bend the rules a little bit, shall we say.

[in the field, from San Quentin]

Quan: Yeah. I am a huge video game addict and I used to play video games inside.

Nigel: This is Quan Huynh. We actually met him because he sent us a copy of his book.

Earlonne: Yup. It's called *Sparrow in the Razor Wire*, and it's about his life, including the twenty-two years he spent in prison.

Nigel: While he was in there, Quan was a *huge* gamer.

[in the field, from San Quentin]

Quan: I was part of this guild called Reservoir Dogs. And we were known as the Space Ninjas, and we were the number one ranked guild in the world. And there was one time that I was ranked number two in the world on combat experience.

[to Quan]

Nigel: Wait, okay... wait, wait... can you explain more about this? How could that be?

Quan: Well, because— it was funny because the guys on my guild... you could have up to like, 200 or something people on a guild. And so, it's a real time strategy game. It's like a military, economic strategic simulation. [answers that follow edited in montage format, sped up to convey information in quick succession] Let's say we launch tonight at 12:00 a.m. and there's an eight-hour flight to go into this galaxy, we have to be online at 8:00 a.m... [montage fades out as Quan continues to share a whirlwind of information]

[as narrator]

Nigel: Oh my God. E, this guy, he was so intense! As he was talking, I just pictured him in a command chair taking care of this whole game universe.

Earlonne: Yeah! And he wasn't using one of those prison tablets to do all that either.

Nigel: Nope. Quan had a phone in his prison cell... which is very much against the rules.

[to Quan]

So you're playing on a little cell phone screen?

Quan: Yeah! I had— my very first one I remember that I was playing that game on was the Blackberry Pearl—

Nigel: —But how could you do all that on a little screen?!

Quan: I don't— I mean... I did it on the screen. I mean, I think we're spoiled now, but that's how it was for me.

[as narrator]

Nigel: There are like 200 guys in this video game guild; Quan is the only one of them who's incarcerated.

Earlonne: And Quan knew that if he got caught with that cell phone, it'd be gone... and he'd be out of the game. So he thought he better warn the guy in charge of the guild.

Quan: I go, 'Hey, this is a real possibility that I could lose this phone.' And by that time, I built up a pretty big account. So, I gave him the passcodes to it. I go, 'If my phone gets taken, here's the passcode so you guys could log on. If I never get a phone again, then you have this account that's pretty impressive, and you guys could— that's for the guild.'

[to Quan]

Nigel: Oh, wow.

Quan: And when I walked away, that's when I gifted my account to the guild. So, when I came home, I contacted them, they said, 'Where you been? Are you ready to join us? You ready to play again?'

I said, 'No way. It takes up too much of my time.'

[music comes in]

Nigel: Did it help you with your time there... to be doing so much of that?

Quan: Yeah, that was a great escape for me. And I think it gave me a sense of community and where I belong. Like, suddenly I'm not only part of this community. I'm in

a community that accepts me, and I excel in this community, and it's based on a lot of my strengths and talent that I could bring in. And I feel like I fit in with these group of guys for once.

[music fades out]

[sound collage comes in - abstracted industrial and electronic sounds]

Ruben Hernandez: Ruben Hernandez.

New York: How do you feel about being called “an inmate”?

Ruben Hernandez: Nah, I definitely don't like being called an inmate

New York: How would you prefer people to refer to us?

Ruben Hernandez: By our names. We human beings just like anybody else.

[music comes in]

Nigel: This conversation came out of a question we got from *Ear Hustle* listener Rae, in my home state of Massachusetts.

Earlonne: Rae wanted to know, ‘What are the words or phrases used about incarcerated people that aren’t cool?’

Nigel: Yeah. And I know for our colleague New York, there’s a couple terms at the top of the list: “Inmate” and “prisoner”. New York does not use those terms.

[in the field, from San Quentin]

New York: I say incarcerated people because people is the noun. Incarcerated just described where the noun is at, where I’m at. [people in the background affirm] When you start saying prisoner, prisoner becomes the now.

[to New York]

Arthur Jackson: Don't incarcerated person does the same thing?

New York: No. No. Because it reminds you: I am a person. [someone in the background says, “Every time you say it” followed by “and I agree with you”] Every time you said it... ‘cause when you forget that we’re people, you don't treat us like people.

[as narrator]

Earlone: Arthur Jackson, who’s also incarcerated at San Quentin, has a whole ‘nother take on the matter.

[in the field, from San Quentin]

Arthur Jackson: I believe we should be addressed as to exactly what we are: Prisoners.

New York: Why do you say prisoners?

Arthur Jackson: Because that’s what we are. I think I take exception to such terms as “incarcerated person” because that nice’s up actually what condition we're in, and what conditions we are suffering from. “Inmate” is the term that’s referred to it referring to mental patients. And so, why not call us prisoners? That’s what we are. And it tell society exactly what we're dealing with. We’re in prison; we are prisoners.

[music fades out]

[sound collage comes in featuring abstracted dial tone sounds, sound of dialing numbers, and automated voice mail box message, ‘Please leave your message...’]

Tor: My question is, while in prison what is the proudest moment you've had?

[music comes in]

Earlone: Tor, in Alberta Canada, thanks for this one. We thought we’d run it by our friend Sam Lewis.

Sam: For me, it was when I graduated from college. My mom, ever since I was a kid, always pushed education. And when I went into prison, I was a high school dropout and I could barely read and write, and my mom would send me all of these books. And then she would ask me to write her about the books: *Manchild in the Promised Land*, *Native Sun*, a lot of different literature. And then, it switched from her sending me books to *get* me interested to, ‘What kind of books do you want?’

Earlonne: Pretty soon, Sam starts taking college courses.

Nigel: And now there are a lot more programs that help incarcerated people go to college while they're in prison. But it was a lot harder back then.

Sam: I had to smuggle books in... there were a number of different things I had to do to get my textbooks at times. You couldn't have hardcovers. I remember having to take exams with my back to a door where they just had a huge race riot, and every time the door opened, I have to look over my shoulder. [music fades out]

Earlonne: At one point, Sam's getting ready to take his exams when he finds out he's being transferred to another prison.

Nigel: And sometimes when you're transferred, your property gets lost in the mix.

Earlonne: And it might take months before you see that shit again.

Nigel: So, in the course of moving, Sam got separated from all the books he needed to study.

Sam: The exam that I was actually taking was for statistics. And I had a window of time that I had to take this exam. And I remember being really, really upset that they did this to me.

Nigel: Finally, ten days before the exam – his books show up.

Sam: And so, I crammed as best I could, and I was in a panic. It was the only C that I ever got in college. [Earlonne affirms] The only C... I've never dropped a grade lower than that. And I remember telling my older sister how upset about how upset I was about it. My older sister said, 'You shouldn't be upset.'

And I was like, 'Why? It's like a blemish on my record.'

And she said, 'No, it's not.' She said, 'You persevered.'

And so, those are my proudest moments. The accomplishment, not because of the system, *despite* the system – being able to overcome and do those things.

Nigel: Sam got his diplomas.

Earlone: Two of them!

Nigel: That's right.

Earlone: An associate's degree and a bachelor's.

Nigel: Oh Sam.

Sam: I think, for me it was being able to send it to my mom and have her half... and so she could see that her son was working toward becoming the man that she always knew I could become. [music fades out]

[in the field, from San Quentin]

Reggie Thorp: My name is Reggie. I've been down for twenty-three years, and my proudest moment in prison is when I discovered that I was the only African American inside of the institution that was taking a calculus, or calculus II course.

[to Reggie]

New York: When I saw that calculus II course, and I just ignored it. I was not even thinking about taking it, bruh. What made you sign up for that get down?

Reggie: Since I started tutoring GED students, I felt that I needed to excel in that area of math just in case somebody else might need to get tutored in higher mathematics.

James Humphrey: Hello, my name is James Humphrey. I've been down seven and a half years. And my most proudest moment while I've been incarcerated is when I married my wife after knowing that I'm... looking at seventy or twenty-five to life, and she married me before I even went to trial.

[to another speaker]

New York: And what's your proudest moment since you've been in prison?

Speaker 2: When I complete building maintenance. When I get in there, I'm like, *Man, I'm just trying to just get past this. I'm not really feeling this.* Three months into it, we get a contract with Monterey County to build the mini home project for the homeless. After

the first house that we built, I was addicted to building houses. I'm like, 'What's the next project? What's the next project? What's the next project?'

[music fades out]

Quan: I would have to say my proudest moment when I was in prison, was when I had to remind my mom that I committed the murder, and that there was another mom that was suffering more than she was. [music comes in]

[as narrator]

Earlonne: This is Quan, again. He's the video game master we heard before.

[to Quan]

Nigel: Why was that your proudest moment?

Quan: Because... I think my whole life I had always made excuses or justified a lot of things that I did. And I think my mom and family members being what they are, they basically enabled me in a certain sense.

Nigel: Did your mom not believe that you had done what you did?

Quan: Yeah, well, I told her I didn't do it. And then she attended every day at my trial. And, just to give you context, I shot and killed another man by the name of Min Nguyen in 1999 in Los Angeles. And I went to trial, I lied at trial, I had already got rid of evidence and I coached witnesses. So, they originally tried me for the death penalty, but because there wasn't enough evidence and everything like that, I was ultimately found guilty of second-degree murder. And the jury did not believe that I was the shooter. So, I just held onto that for those years. I think my mom, of course... what mom wants to say that her son committed murder? I think there was a part of her that always knew but didn't want to admit it to herself too.

[music comes in]

And I just told her, 'Mom, you do realize what I'm in prison for, right?'

And that's when my mom cried and said, 'No'.

And I said, 'Let's just be happy that I'm better now, and let's be happy that I am alive and that we could hug him and spend time with each other.' I go, 'There's another woman just like you that's lost her son that cannot do this.'

[music fades out] [to Romarilyn]

Nigel: Can you tell us what your proudest moment was while you were in prison?

Romarilyn Ralston: I have many proud moments during my incarceration, but my proudest moment was when I saw my youngest son for the first time since my incarceration. It had been seventeen years. [music comes in]

[as narrator]

Nigel: We've had Romarilyn Ralston on "Catch a Kite" before.

Earlonne: I met her at San Quentin.

Nigel: Oh yeah?

Earlonne: Yeah. She was at an educational seminar.

Nigel: Romarilyn is really focused on education. She works for an organization called Project Rebound.

Earlonne: Project Rebound helps formerly incarcerated individuals get their college degrees.

Nigel: And It's a great organization.

Earlonne: But before she worked for Project Rebound, Romarilyn spent twenty-three years in prison. And for the first seventeen of those years, she didn't see her son.

[music fades out]

Romarilyn He was two years old when I was arrested and sentenced to life in prison. And when he walked into prison to visit me for the first time, he was nineteen in his Marine Corps uniform.

When he walked through the door, the idea of him in my head was this two-year-old baby. And now he's a 6' 4" chocolate brown man and I had to get on my tippy toes to give him a hug... and I'm tall.

Nigel: You're tall, yeah.

Romarilyn: I'm almost six foot myself! So, it was amazing. We just walked around the visiting room and held hands and kind of looked at each other... 'cause, you know, he had grown into this man that looked a lot like me. [laughs]

Nigel: Do you remember how he smelled or any of those other details? You know 'cause like children, they have a smell, and you remember it even if it's been a long time – Do you remember if he had any familiar smell?

Romarilynn Ralston: Well, he was all cologned down, so the aftershave was smelling. [both laugh]

[music comes in]

But I do remember what the hug felt like. If I were to describe it, it just kind of felt like walking out into the warm sun. And, you know, when you feel that warmth and you kind of hold yourself; that's what it felt like. [Nigel affirms] I felt like a mother again, it had been a long time. [music fades out]

[music comes in]

Nigel: We're gonna take a short break.

Earlonne: And when we come back: stimmy checks and the prison economy.

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Eddie: [over the phone] Good evening, *Ear Hustle*. I am from London and my name is Eddie.

Earlonne: This guy sounds kinda familiar...

[as narrator]

Nigel: Eddie from London is a regular on our “Catch a Kite” episodes. Eddie, it’s great to hear from you again.

Eddie: My question is: Since COVID, what has changed regarding the economy in prison? Thank you very much. I hope I find you both well.

Nigel: When our colleague New York brought this question to guys on the yard at San Quentin, there was one thing everyone was talking about.

Earlonne: Stimulus checks!

Nigel: [amused] Yes, that’s right. Incarcerated men and women can now receive stimulus checks as long as they are qualified, and they file a claim with the IRS. And as a result, a bunch of incarcerated guys inside San Quentin have gone from having nothing on their books to having something like a thousand bucks.

Earlonne: And suddenly... everyone’s ballin’. Everything at the commissary – sold out.

[in the field, from San Quentin]

Speaker 3: All the stimulus checks hit, it’s like a Christmas. Those who did get stimulus checks – me, myself, I didn’t get one, I’m still broke – but people who did get stimulus checks was able to go to the canteen and get what they want. Get the hygiene, or the packages.

New York: That canteen, man, it got limits now! Everybody ballin’, so, now you can only buy five mackerels and they out of fifty items every–

Speaker 3: So now you can only get two of everything, maybe three of this, three of that. But, you know, it’s fair for everybody to get at least something they want.

[music comes in]

[as narrator]

Nigel: This actually dovetails with another question we got... about how much money an incarcerated person needs on their books to pay for stuff that they need, like extra food or hygiene – you know, items like deodorant and toothpaste.

Nigel: So, Earlonne, why don't you answer that one – How much money did you feel like you needed per month in prison?

Earlonne: I'll say it like this: You can have as much money as you want on your account. [Nigel affirms] But you definitely have to budget that shit. You know what I'm saying? Like, technically you can spend \$220 a month in a canteen. [Nigel affirms]. But you definitely don't need to spend \$220 a month *every* month. You know what I'm saying? So, me, I used to just spend like 30, 40 bucks, all depends

Nigel: And there's a couple of ways that people get money on their books.

Earlonne: Right. You have a job inside that pays, or your family members or your friends on the outside can actually put money on your books.

[music fades out]

Nigel: I do always wonder about what happens to the guys in prison that don't have anything – like no family. No one's putting money on their books.

Earlonne: Well, for those guys it's hella tough. Those are the cats that gotta have a hustle [Nigel affirms], or they just... gon' be begging.

[in the field, from San Quentin]

New York: What's your name and how long have you been incarcerated?

Ellison Lewis Spencer: My name is Ellison Lewis Spencer. I've been incarcerated twenty years, going on my twenty-first year.

New York: What's the longest you have gone without money on your books.

Ellison: Uh... [pauses] about five years...six years.

New York: Straight?!

Ellison: Straight.

New York: How did you survive? Like, what is life like when you have no outside support... in prison?

Ellison: How did I survive? Just as far as getting my three meals a day, and friends and people I meet, you know, give me a little soup here, of rice here, something. And I just maintain. Most of the time I'll fast a lot. Eating fruits... different stuff like that. My vegetables, salads and stuff like that. And I fast.

New York: So, on them days when they got that kind of meal at chow that nobody wants and everybody's giving their food away – Do you eat all that stuff nobody else wants?

Ellison: I pick over what, you know... like salads and stuff... peas and beans. The stuff that they don't want, I eat. I'm from Texas. And I was raised up on that.

New York: Do you feel like you could survive indefinitely off the state?

Ellison: No. No, because they don't even feed you proper. I got diabetes right now from eating the stuff that the state feed you. And it's all carbs. A gang of carbs. Everything you get is a gang of carb.

New York: So, let me ask you this: How has your life changed since they've been givin' out stimulus checks?

Ellison: Well, really, my life is still messed up because [chuckling] they takin' the money! They give me the money and then they want to take the money. And they wasn't supposed to. I'm down to three cents. I still got three cent on my books right now. Because they took the money from the stimulus check for the restitution that I shouldn't even be paying the restitution... 'cause I didn't tell the police to chase me and wreck his car. I didn't tell him to chase me. I didn't wreck my car. He wrecked his car.

New York: Couldn't just let you get away, they had to apprehend you...

Ellison: Yeah. Well, [laughs] he can apprehend me two months later because he had my license though. But I got to pay \$80,000.

New York: \$80,000?!

Ellison: Yeah. They want to charge me for *his* wreck. [music fades out]

[sound collage comes in featuring abstracted industrial sounds and automated voicemail box message, 'Please leave your message...']

Emily: [over the phone] Hey, y'all this is Emily from Portland, Oregon. You might not be able to answer this one, but I've always been curious about menstruation and prison.

[music comes in]

Nigel: Thanks Emily. And of course we can answer that one.

Earlonne: We brought it to Alissa Moore who was just released from prison in August 2020. [music fades out]

[to Alissa]

Nigel: So, can you tell me how long you actually were in prison?

Alissa Moore: Just over twenty-three years.

Nigel: And how old were you when you went it? [crosstalk]

Alissa: [crosstalk] I was seventeen [Nigel affirms] at the beginning of my incarceration in 41 when I was released.

Nigel: Okay. Okay. Alright. Can you talk a little bit about how... what was different between having your period on the outside and having it inside prison?

Alissa: One of the major differences is that usually outside, it's a private matter. You know, you always see in the movies when you send your boyfriend or your brother or some male family member to go buy tampons or pads, and it's hilarious, right? Well, in real life, it's not that hilarious to have to ask a male for sanitary supplies.

[music fades out]

Nigel: So, you would get your period, and then you'd have to go to a CO and ask every time for either tampons or pads?

Alissa: Well, it just depends on the type of incarceration too. Like, are you in solitary confinement? Is the institution low on those items? Have you bled heavy? Have you used your allotted amount?

Nigel: And what do you mean your "allotted amount"?

Alissa: Well, they have a certain amount that each unit orders and some staff will order plentiful... because they probably have daughters or wives, and then some are just not trying to do anything above, so they order less. [Nigel scoffs] And then that means there's less to go around. The inmates that are in charge of passing it out, get their issue. [Nigel affirms] So, they take as much as they want, and then there's even less for the population.

Nigel: But it's someone else deciding what your needs are. [Alissa affirms] Like, how heavy your period is, or making the assumption of what you would need.

Alissa: Absolutely.

Nigel: And it's probably a man.

Alissa: Yeah. And a stranger at that.

[music fades out]

Nigel: So, what do you do if you run out of products?

Alissa: Some people that are issued them, you know, people that have obviously went through menopause, and they'll sell them.

Nigel: And that's just something you learned along the way, like, how much, what it "should" cost... in quotation marks.

Alissa: Well, everything in prison is five dollars. [chuckles] Whether it's a bag of tampons or a roll of trash bags or new sheets or a new pair of state tennis shoes – it's all five dollars.

Nigel: Are you talking about trading like five dollars' worth of soup?

Alissa: Yeah. Five dollars' worth of items [Nigel affirms] from the canteen or our care packages.

Nigel: Right. I actually remember when I got really bad period cramps, like the best thing was to take a hot bath...

Alissa: Oh yeah

Nigel: ...Which I know is not available when you're in prison. [Alissa affirms] So were there any things like that you could do to comfort yourself?

Alissa: We would get black market trash bags, fill them up with hot water and put like a towel in there and use that sort of like a hot water bottle.

[music comes in]

If we come out of our cell, for any reason, we're strip searched. They need to have us bend at the waist and open our vaginal and anal cavities so they can shine a flashlight in there and verify that we don't have any objects hidden in there. Let's say they feel something in that area; they want to know what it is immediately, and you have no choice, but to be like, 'Oh, it's a pad, it's a Kotex.' [music fades out] And some of them want to see. [Nigel affirms] 'Cause they don't believe you.

[as narrator]

Earlonne: Ooooh.

Nigel: Yeah...

Earlonne: I thought the men used to go through some shit. [Nigel affirms] You know what I'm sayin'. [Nigel affirms] Seem like, *shit*, nobody like these searches.

Nigel: No... I mean I've heard that from some of the men about what goes on inside. But for some reason, hearing Alissa talk about it, it was really tough, and it clearly took a toll on her.

Alissa: Even now that I'm older and I'm out here, I'm pretty lackadaisical about clothing. I have no modesty or humility left, like, that was stripped away from me at such a young age. These essential things that would make me shy or modest or [Nigel affirms] any of that, were stripped away from me. So, I don't even have, today as an adult, those feelings.

[sound collage comes in featuring abstracted industrial sounds and dialtones]

Nigel: Are there things inside that people want to talk about, but they don't because it's just too painful?

Earlone: Big thanks to Benjamin from Ann Arbor Michigan, for calling in with that question.

Nigel: We brought it to Romarilyn Ralston.

Romarilyn: The main thing is your crime. That's the number one no-no – you don't ask people what they're in for.

[to Romarilyn]

Nigel: Were you ever curious about why someone got to prison? Even though you couldn't ask, did you ever look at someone and be like, *I just wanna know...?*

Romarilyn: Oh, I wanted to know a lot. But I never asked. [Nigel affirms] I never asked.

Sam: When you lose somebody you love.

[as narrator]

Nigel: This again is Sam Lewis.

Earlone: And while Sam was incarcerated, a friend of his, another incarcerated guy, found out his mother had passed away.

Sam: We didn't talk about it. We just sat on a tier. He cried, and we drank coffee. And that was it. Like, just me being there to support him. That was it. You get a phone call. Can't go to the funeral. There's nothing you can do. So, you don't necessarily talk about how much you miss someone, how painful it is, how hurt you are that you feel that you let that person down. You don't talk about those things... you internalize them, but you don't talk about them. [music fades out]

[sound collage comes in featuring abstracted industrial and electronic sounds, coins dropping in payphone and dialing, and automated voicemail voice]

Gina: [over the phone] What's up *Ear Hustle*? This is Gina from New York. I work at Mount Sinai Hospital doing transplant research. And I'm so curious to know if incarcerated persons are allowed to be organ donors, both living, or if they die in prison.

Earlone: We had to do some reporting on this one, didn't we, Nyge.

Nigel: Yes, we did. And we found out that incarcerated people – just like everyone else – can designate whether or not they want their organs donated after they die.

Earlonne: In terms of living donations, like a kidney, that's a little more complicated. In California, incarcerated people are allowed to donate organs to family members, only.

Nigel: And they or their families have to cover the costs of the surgery, transportation, and any other costs that come up.

Earlonne: Our colleague New York went on the yard to talk to some of the guys about it.

[in the field, from San Quentin]

New York: Have you ever tried to donate an organ from prison?

Speaker 4: No, I've never tried to; but... however, I was talking to my daughter and I really wanna. She's got a 70% on one kidney and the other kidney's pretty much gone. So, I was thinking, *man, that would be a great to be able to help my daughter with a kidney.* But I've never heard of anybody doing it, so, I never pursued it. But it's something that I have to live with that being incarcerated, I can't. Even if I was a match, I couldn't even give my daughter an organ.

New York: Yeah. I tried it. They wouldn't let me do it for my step-pops and for my homegirl, Sika. [Speaker 4 affirms] And then Sika died.

Speaker 4: There's a good handful of us that would love to give back to the community and save a life, you know what I mean? Or a lot of us won't have the opportunity to be in freedom and freedom again. And to help anybody to live a legit life would be awesome. [New York affirms]

New York: So, this movie starring Will Smith called *Seven Pounds*; and in it he found seven worthy people to donate his organs to... 'cause he had killed seven people in a car accident. And so, he ended up, like, committed suicide in a way where his organs were preserved, and he saved seven lives to make up for the seven he took. I always thought that was awesome thing.

Speaker 4: I think if a kid, I would do anything for... or any child. I mean, I'm going to grow old and probably die in here. To give my organs to so somebody can have an awesome life out there, that seems like that's all that's left. Why not? Hey, you know

what, instead of just going old and dying in here, I could help somebody else live an awesome life out there.

[music comes in]

Earlone: Thanks to Danni, Julien, Rachel, Tor, Eddie, Mary, Benjamin, Emily, and Gina for their questions. And we want to thank Saul-ay, Ro, JC, Tommy and the other currently and formerly incarcerated men and women who answered questions for us. Good lookin’.

Nigel: And also, a big thanks to everybody who sent in questions that we didn’t get to on the show. I mean, all of the questions are so great. And Earlone, you know I love reading all of them because they are just endlessly interesting to read all of them.

Earlone: All 30,000 of them we love reading! [Nigel laughs] And people ask about all kinds of stuff that make you go, *hmmmm... never thought about that*.

Nigel: Oh totally.

Earlone: We’ll do more Catch a Kites in the future, so please keep sending us those questions.

Nigel: Yes, we love getting them.

Earlone: And don’t forget about one thing, Nyge.

Nigel: What’s that?

Earlone: Your book! *The San Quentin Project*. [Nigel laughs]

Nigel: You can find out more information about that on our website, earhustlesq.com.

Earlone: I’m going to find out now.

Eddie: *Ear Hustle* would like to thank Kyle Buis and Terry Thornton at the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

Ear Hustle is produced by the empathic Nigel Poor, a man that in London we would call a “diamond geezer”, Earlone Woods, a trio of greats: Rahsaan “New York” Thomas, John “Yahya” Johnson, and Bruce Wallace.

This episode was sound designed and engineered by Antwan Williams, with music by Antwan, Maserati E, and David Jassy. Amy Standen edits the show. Shabnam Sigman is our digital producer. And Julie Shapiro is the executive producer for Radiotopia.

Thanks to acting warden Ron Broomfield, and as you know, every episode of Ear Hustle has to be approved by this guy here. [music fades out] A man whose voice is so smooth, you could lay it flat and ice skate on it, the esteemed Lieutenant Sam Robinson.

Lieutenant Sam Robinson: Hey Eddie, much love brother, much love. [laughs] And so with that, thank you Eddie and I will say that this is Lieutenant Sam Robinson at San Quentin State Prison and I approve this episode.

[music fades out]

Yahya: 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.

Earlonne: *Ear Hustle* is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX. Radiotopia is a collection of independent, listener-supported podcasts.

Nigel: Some of the best podcasts around. hear more at radiotopia.fm.

I'm Nigel Poor.

Earlonne: I'm Earlonne Woods.

Nigel and Earlonne: [simultaneously] Thanks for listening.

[music fades out]

Lieutenant Sam Robinson: Eddie floored me, man. I'm pretty dark skinned and normally I don't show red, but I'm sure if I had a camera in front of me, anybody was next to me when I heard that, [laughs] I would have been blushing all over the place, man. [laughs]

End of Episode.