

Ear Hustle
"Gabrieleen Silver Queen"
April 13, 2022

Jack: Hey, I'm Jack Jacqua from the Omega Boys Club, and this episode of Ear Hustle contains language that may not be appropriate for all listeners. Discretion is advised.

[car stops]

Nigel: Tuesday, it's just after 11:00 and we're in Susanville. We just drove out to the prison here that's closing. We got here last night with some trepidation about what it would be like, because we heard it's heavy Trump country out here. I expected that there would be hostility towards us. But I don't know, it's oddly friendly here.

Earlonne: I think when they see me, they probably think I'm a correctional officer. What'd you think? Being a black guy.

Nigel: Probably.

Earlonne: But it is quiet though.

Nigel: When we're looking out in front of the prison, it's pretty empty. There's mountains all around us that I think might be the sierras. There's snow on top of them. It's kind of scrub brushy, if they grow anything here, I don't know--

Earlonne: Couple of cows.

Nigel: Couple of cows. There is across the street, looks like a kind of dilapidated farm that's for sale.

Earlonne: And that for sale sign has been there forever.

Nigel: Ever. And there's a guy on the porch, I swear he's looking at us with binoculars. [laughs]

Earlonne: Oh, you see-- you can see him.

Nigel: [laughs]

Earlonne: Susanville has been in the news a lot, because it's on the verge of a really big change.

Nigel: Mm-hmm.

Earlonne: It's a prison town that's about to lose its prison.

Nigel: Yes. And it really made me wonder about how people in the town are dealing with this idea that they'd created a life in a town that's been sculpted by the prison system. I just wonder, are they wrestling with that? What was it like to build a life on a prison? And what is it going to be like in a town when and if one of those prisons' closes?

Earlone: Yeah. And this one been there, what, how long?

Nigel: 60 years. The first prison opened there about 60 years ago.

Earlone: Ooh.

Nigel: Yeah.

Earlone: So, a few months ago, we headed up to Susanville, took a cool little road trip.

Nigel: Yes. Always love to get on the road. One of the things that I was so excited about with this trip, Earlone, was that we didn't have a specific agenda. We were just going to go, get there, and then try to find people to talk to. And just see how the story was going to unfold. That's something we haven't really done before.

Earlone: Damn. We haven't done that?

Nigel: Mm-hmm.

Earlone: I'm Earlone Woods.

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

[Ear Hustle theme]

Earlone: When we got to Susanville, it was winter, a lot of snow.

Nigel: It was freezing.

Earlone: Lot of ice.

Nigel: [laughs] And the first place we decided to go was this really sweet little historic museum. It was like in this house. It's perfect.

Earlone: So, we walked in there, and that's when we met Susan.

Susan: *This is our Woman Suffrage display. The lady up on top is Philinda Spencer and she was known as The Mother of Suffrage in California. [voice fades away]*

Earlone: Susan of Susanville.

Nigel: Yeah. Not that Susan. This one, runs the museum.

Susan: *I volunteer here at the Lassen Historical Museum. I'm the secretary for the board. I write the newsletter and I volunteer as a docent. I'm also in charge of maintenance and housekeeping. What else? I do research.*

Nigel: This museum was beautifully curated. They did not waste an inch of space. I mean, there was stuff from floor to ceiling. And literally hanging off the ceiling too.

Earlone: Yeah. I remember they had old clothes.

Nigel: Mm-hmm. With tiny waists. Those women's waists were tiny.

Earlone: Oh, yeah. [crosstalk] -things that were tiny though, Nyge.

Nigel: Of course. [laughs]

Earlone: They have old maps, huge collections of license plates.

Nigel: Yeah, and arrowheads. Do you remember I brought you over to show you the case of camera equipment?

Earlone: Yeah.

Nigel: It was just like full of intrigue.

Earlone: But one of those crazy things was that perm machine.

Nigel: [chuckles] Oh, my God.

Earlone: [laughs] Like a medieval torture device or something.

Susan: *That is the Gabrieleen Silver Queen perm machine.*

Nigel: [laughs]

Susan: *I've had a perm in one of those when I was a little girl.*

Earlone: *Hmm.*

Susan: *Really wind your hair, really, really tight. And then, they put these horrible chemicals on it. And then, they turn on the electricity and it heats it up.*

Earlonne: *Oh, is it electrical?*

Susan: Yes.

Earlonne: *You want to get hooked up?*

Nigel: No.

Earlonne: Susan's family moved here in 1962 when her father took a job at the then brand-new prison in Susanville, the California Correctional Center.

Nigel: But everyone now just calls it CCC.

Susan: *When my family first moved here, there were things that we didn't understand. I went shopping with my mom one day in a dress shop uptown, and they would not wait on us because we were newcomers from out of town. And my mother was a very shy, meek person and I was just stunned that they would treat her like that.*

Earlonne: Susanville was a really tiny town here. And the people were still kind of spooked on what a prison was going to do to their community.

Susan: *There was a real rift between those people who were in town, and the people who lived on the farms and ranches out in the valley. The prison was going to bring prosperity to the town people, but the valley people didn't see it. They didn't see how they were going to profit by this. And they were worried about inmates escaping, and that kind of thing.*

Nigel: Susanville had always been a logging town. But when CCC came in, suddenly there were all these new prison jobs. And basically, that industry took over.

Earlonne: And then in the 90s, another prison opened up in Susanville. High Desert State Prison.

Nigel: And between those two prisons, there are now a lot of correctional officers living in the area.

Earlonne: Susan says they're pretty easy to pick out.

Susan: *The story is that the guy moves here and he becomes a correctional officer and he gets a new truck and the boat, and the RV. Where I live, they get a tractor. They have all the fancy things.*

Nigel: *So, your son is a correctional officer?*

Susan: No, my grandson.

Nigel: *Okay, your grandson. Does he fit the stereotype?*

Susan: *Oh, yes.*

Nigel: *[laughs] He does.*

Susan: *And he would like to have more things.*

[laughter]

Earlonne: Susan says the prison changed the town in other ways too.

Susan: *They brought in new ideas, because this town had been so stagnant for so long. And then, you had new people come in, and they forced local people to change their attitudes about things. It's like inbreeding, and then suddenly new genes come in, we have that kind of thing with the community. The town always had music, but now we have a symphony, that kind of thing.*

Earlonne: In the spring of 2021, residents of Susanville got the news. The town's oldest prison was closing.

Nigel: Yep. After being open for almost six decades.

Susan: *We were living in our comfortable life and didn't think about it. And then, it was like disbelief, nobody thought it would really happen. And then, they started really worrying. That was the week my granddaughter was hired at CCC, [laughs] the week they announced they were closing.*

Nigel: All right, we already mentioned that there are two prisons in Susanville. There's CCC, the one that's closing. And then, there's High Desert. And these two prisons are very different places.

Earlonne: Yeah, because CCC is not necessarily a minimum security, but it's a lower security.

Nigel: Yeah.

Earlonne: Like, we can compare it to San Quentin or something.

Nigel: Yes. So, that means there's more programs that guys can do.

Earlonne: Exactly. College programs, fire stuff, all kinds of things

Nigel: And High Desert is a higher-level security with a very different vibe. In fact, Earlonne, do you remember the episode we did some seasons back where that guy talked about first getting to High Desert and what his impression of it was?

Earlonne: Yeah, you're talking about Terry Kitchen in that episode, Respect the Paper.

Nigel: Exactly.

Terry: *When I first arrived at High Desert, I was 18 years old. And it says, "Welcome to high drama state prison. Once you're here, you never leave." The yard was a place where there's no such thing as fistfights. It's all about stabbing. So, the tension was always thick in the air. It was just bad. It was like a war zone.*

Nigel: Even if people from CCC can go and get a job at High Desert, that doesn't necessarily mean they want to work in a place like that. I mean, can you blame them?

Earlone: I don't blame them at all.

Susan: *My grandson who will be moving to High Desert from CCC when it closes, does not want to work up there. People, they're afraid, a lot of the violence that's involved with that.*

Earlone: And even if they do go work at High Desert, that means someone there gets bumped.

Nigel: Yeah. A lot of people around here are going to be out of work. And, Earlone, there just aren't a lot of job options in Susanville.

Susan: *We are so isolated here. There's no jobs here. So, they will lose their job. They will have to move away. Somebody says, "We'll go work at so and so." Well, we don't have so and so here.*

Nigel: After CDCR announced its plan to close California Correctional Center, the town fought back. They had rallies, they protested in Sacramento, and they filed a lawsuit trying to stop the closure.

Earlone: Everywhere we went in Susanville, you saw those signs.

Nigel: Mm-hmm.

Earlone: "Keep California Correctional Center Open."

Nigel: Yeah. I mean, we stopped counting how many there were. I swear, every time we went into a restaurant or a store, I hear people-- I was ear hustling because I could hear people talking about it. It was the biggest issue in the town.

Earlone: That's what we do, we ear hustle.

[chuckles]

Earlone: Lindsey Martin is one of the organizers of the Keep CCC Open movement. We met her at a soccer game where her husband, a CCC correctional officer was coaching.

Lindsey: *We do kind of sadly refer to it as like a family business just because there's really not a whole lot of opportunity here. My father retired from the Department of Corrections. My brother's currently working there. My father-in-law retired, and my husband's been there for 14 years.*

Nigel: Lindsey says news of the potential closure was felt in the town immediately.

Lindsey: *When they did the announcement, we had like 200 homes go on the market within like a week and a half. Yeah, it was really bad. Really bad.*

When a facility closes, it's not just the correctional officer and the free staff leaving. It's their kids, it's the spouses, it's everything. So, we're looking at thousands of people leaving, not just losing thousand jobs. I love the small-town aspect, but it's sad because we're afraid it's going to turn into a ghost town.

Nigel: Do you remember when Lindsey mentioned her husband was a CO?

Earlone: Yep. And I know your eyes lit up.

Nigel: [laughs] You know they did. Because, Earlone, for years, we've tried to get COs to talk to us. And I know we've had a few on the show before, but it's really hard to get them to open up and be personal.

Earlone: Right. But for this story, these are the people who are losing their jobs. So, we really needed to hear from them.

Nigel: Exactly. So, we decided to take our chance and ask Lindsey.

Nigel: *Any correctional officer anywhere and if you know that they can be totally anonymous, and we stand behind that. [crosstalk] -trying to get anyone in trouble.*

Lindsey: *Right. Yeah, I think most of the ones that are even really allowed to talk are everyone that's pretty much retired. I know my husband will talk.*

[laughter]

Lindsey: *The morale has just gone down totally with the correctional officers and stuff. So, he just keeps his head down, goes to work, and comes home.*

Earlone: So, we kept on trying. We weren't going to give up that easy.

Nigel: We asked our waitress at dinner the first night we were there. She said her ex-husband was a CO, but that he was an asshole.

[laughter]

Earlone: We also left messages, we tried Facebook, called the union.

Nigel: People in town reached out to COs on our behalf, and nothing.

Earlone: Finally, we braced ourselves and went to T&A, a bar.

[laughter]

Nigel: Not the kind of bar. [laughs]

Earlone: No. T&A is a bar in town we heard COs hang out at.

[background conversation]

Earlone: We walked into this bar.

Nigel: And it was like a movie because every head turned.

Earlone: I thought they were looking at me first.

Nigel: They were looking at all of us. We sat down at a table and then the three of us negotiated who was going to be brave enough to go talk to the bartender.

Earlone: Right.

Nigel: I ended up doing it. I walked up to the bartender. Remember, it was this old guy?

Earlone: Yeah. He was about 90.

Nigel: Yeah, he was about 90. I was standing at the bar forever. I finally got his attention, and I told him what we were doing. And I said, "Are there any COs here?" He looked around, he's like, "Not right now." And then, I said, "Well, would you tell me if any COs walk in?" "Nope."

Earlone: No, won't do it.

Nigel: Nope. So, I slunk back to our table. Every time I looked over, he was pointing us out to people, and they were like--

Earlone: Like this, "Them, right there." It felt kind of weird, Nigel. Really weird.

Nigel: Like, we weren't really welcome.

Earlone: Yeah. So, it was time to bounce.

Nigel: Yeah, and then when we got outside there was this guy that had been inside the bar, Earlonne, who was fucking loud and obnoxious. I remember looking over at him like, "I would never talk to that guy." But when we got outside, he was leaning against this truck that was filled with like 500 empty beer bottles. And you know that caught my attention.

Earlonne: No, definitely.

Nigel: I love that kind of discarded stuff. And so, I just went over to talk to him and ask him about the beer bottles.

Earlonne: We ended up getting into a conversation with Josh, the guy by the truck, and his friend, Zeke.

Nigel: Yeah, and they were nothing like I thought they were going to be.

Earlonne: No, they were cool as fuck.

Nigel: *Do you have anything to do with the prison here?*

Josh: *Nope. I don't have anything to do with the prison.*

Nigel: *When did your family move here?*

Josh: *My family moved here in 1979.*

Nigel: *To do what?*

Josh: *They were hippies. They grew weed here.*

Nigel: *Have you seen the town change over time because of the prison?*

Josh: *Absolutely.*

Nigel: *Do I think that the prison might have saved this town because the mills shut down? Maybe. I don't know what else this town would be without the prison. But on the other hand, prison guards are assholes. [chuckles] I've been to prison. I know what they're like.*

Earlonne: *So, Zeke, the question is, we're talking about the prison, is it cool it's shutting down? Is it not cool? Is it hurting the community? Is it not hurting the community?*

Zeke: *I don't know that it's hurting the community, what I do know is that this town used to be way more liberal. Should we have prisons that cost so much money and people in there that are for growing pot and got arrested for shit that I do now, that's illegal is ridiculous, where our taxes are paying for that. Do we need to close down more prisons and reform our judicial system? Abso-goddamn-lutely.*

Nigel: And eventually, they invited us back into the bar and we ended up having a couple of drinks with them.

Zeke: *Let's cut this off and go have some drinks. Next drinks on me.*

[bar music playing]

Earlonne: That bar was so loud, but luckily, our producer, Bruce, could hear his phone because it was actually that night at the T&A Bar-

Nigel: T&A Bar.

Earlonne: -that we finally got the call we've been waiting on.

Nigel: Yep. From this guy.

Dave: *My name is Dave Harwood. I'm signed as lieutenant out at California Correctional Center.*

Nigel: Dave called us because he agreed to be interviewed. He's 50 years old, a seventh generation Susanviller. He's worked at CCC for 20 years. And the minute I heard his voice, I was like, "Oh, man, that's the CO."

Earlonne: Yeah. Yes, sir. Negative.

[laughter]

Nigel: The day after the bar, we drove to meet Dave at his house. And he lived in this pretty nice neighborhood, single-family homes. Obviously, everything was really well taken care of.

Earlonne: Indeed.

Nigel: Yeah.

Earlonne: And when we pulled up at his house, he was standing out front in a short-sleeved shirt. He was on swole, huge muscles. And he was breaking up all the ice from the snowstorm.

Nigel: He let us in and showed us around his house.

And what were you just showing us in the other room?

Dave: *One of my secondary hobbies is my 90-gallon saltwater fish tank and coral-growing tank.*

Nigel: *It's like a coral garden in there or something.*

Dave: Yeah. That's quite the project, keeps me busy quite often.

Nigel: Yeah. Do you find that calming to have that hobby?

Dave: Yeah. I find it calming to be able to come in here and sit down and look at it.

Nigel: Yeah.

Dave: The water itself moving, it's like sitting next to a river.

Nigel: Earlonne, how cool, a CO talking to us about personal stuff?

Earlonne: Finally.

Nigel: Finally. Exactly. We had to come all the way to Susanville to be welcomed into a lieutenant's house.

Earlonne: It was worth it.

Nigel: Totally. Dave is a lieutenant at CCC now, but he hadn't always planned to work in a prison.

Dave: I actually have a degree in automotive sciences, but in Susanville, that doesn't pay a lot of money. When you're looking at a final end-of-the-year paycheck that says \$25,000, and your brother hands in his paycheck over, and it says \$50,000, you're like, "Wow, maybe I need to change things."

Nigel: Yeah. So, when you started 20 years ago, can you describe who you were at that point?

Dave: Probably a lot more outgoing than I am now. I'd probably be a lot more trusting than I am now. A lot more relaxed than I am now. I'll be honest, I've been through a lot in the last few years, there's probably undiagnosed, my self-diagnosis, probably some PTSD. I'm still kind of the same guy as far as my activity levels go. But yeah, way more trusting than I am now.

Nigel: So, what changed those things?

Dave: Seeing what humans can do to each other, and how quickly people can turn on each other.

Nigel: So, when you go into a restaurant, what's your--

Dave: I sit where I can see what's coming. My wife will adjust where she sits. I have to see it coming. So, I sit where I can do that.

Earlonne: You've got to watch that door.

Nigel: *He's the same. He always thinks about where we sit.*

Earlone: *You've got to know who coming through the door. You want to at least see it coming.*

Dave: *Well, yeah. You guys walked past things that I use as protection as you walk through my house, but you never saw them.*

Nigel: *I have been wondering--*

[laughter]

Nigel: *What are those in the corner?*

Dave: *Those are actually dog collars.*

Nigel: *Oh, I thought they're ankle monitors, I was like, "He's got his own ankle monitors here?"*

Earlone: *I remember when he told us this. We were sitting at his kitchen table.*

Nigel: *It was very cozy. We were sitting very close together. I was looking around everywhere. It was a very feminine kind of kitchen, right?*

Earlone: *Hmm.*

Nigel: *My view was directly at the refrigerator, which was covered with adorable photographs and little notes with sweet messages on them.*

Earlone: *That's what's up.*

Nigel: *So, I'm looking around, I assume you're a father, you might even be a grandfather.*

Dave: *Yes.*

Nigel: *And so, how do you bring those feelings of discipline and some of the other things you talked about, like the stress, and maybe the PTSD that you experience, how do you turn that off and deal with all those cuties on the refrigerator?*

Dave: *The gym. Every day. That's where I go.*

Nigel: *Yeah.*

Dave: *That's my outlet to take my frustrations out so they don't come home. It's not 100%. But the rough side of what I have to deal with inside stays. I don't bring here at all, especially with those little darlings.*

Nigel: Yeah. Do you feel having to have those two very different ways of being in your life has caused stress?

Dave: Oh, absolutely.

Nigel: You also said when we started talking that you've learned about how bad people can be or how violent. Plenty of people go through life, and they don't encounter violence, and their lives are fine.

Dave: Correct.

Nigel: And they don't have to carry that knowledge.

Dave: Correct. God bless them.

Nigel: Okay.

Dave: That's a benefit that they don't ever need to really realize what truly is out there.

Nigel: When was the last time you were 100% relaxed?

Dave: [sighs] 100% relaxed. I would say the only time I'm 100%-- No, I can't even say that. I don't know.

Nigel: How about like 80% relaxed?

Dave: Being in the woods, odds are, the only thing I got to worry about bears and mountain lions and that's probably going to happen, maybe one out of a million. So, I relax a lot more, just because I'm not around people.

Earlonne: What are your thoughts about the CCC being closed?

Dave: [sighs] I have a couple of different thoughts. One, I'm very frustrated with our local government and the inability to find other industries over the course of the years. And I'm very good friends with the mayor of Susanville, nobody has stepped up and looked for other industries. And if we close, that's a huge failure on our government, local government.

Nigel: You know what's was interesting? The more time we spent there, I started to think there's more kind of nuance than just if the prison is going to close or stay open. I mean, for one thing, there seems to be a difference between the people who work at CCC and High Desert.

Earlonne: And that also causes tension in the town.

Dave: *I know a lot of COs at High Desert. So, I hope if they hear this, they don't take this the wrong way. But that institution alone has totally changed this town. 100%. We knew California Correctional Center was here when we grew up. We knew what they were doing. They were breaking horses out there. It was a great system on top of the fire camps. The town didn't see the COs as being cocky or running the town or having that bad attitude. Then, bring in High Desert. Okay. It's a level four pen. Level four pen brings in a total different mentality, both on the staff side and the inmate side. Way bigger violence causes staff to have a really cocky attitude.*

Like I said, I hunt. I got pulled over with my son, we were out deer hunting by Fish & Game, doing their job. He asked for our licenses, I handed him over, everything was checked out. And he goes, "Where do you work?" I said, "Well, I work for California Department of Corrections." "You must work for CCC because you don't have a bad attitude." That's how prevalent it is. Even our law enforcement knows the difference between who works at CCC and who works at High Desert.

Nigel: *We are always trying to get COs to talk to us and we never can. Why do you think that is?*

Dave: *The training is that we don't speak much about what goes on inside. Tight-knit family, people are afraid of being called snitches or having administration looked down upon you.*

Nigel: *So, how did we get you to talk to us?*

Dave: *Let's just say that I'm real close to the end of my career. I could walk out tomorrow if I want to. I'm not really trying to be derogatory in any way, shape, or form. But I don't have a problem with pointing out issues that need to be fixed.*

Nigel: *So, were you suspicious of having us come over?*

Dave: *Yeah.*

Nigel: *What were you suspicious of?*

Dave: *I'm nervous now.*

Nigel: *I can tell. I've been watching your hands.*

Dave: *Uh-huh.*

Nigel: *Have you been relaxed at all since we've been here a little bit?*

Dave: *No.*

Nigel: *[chuckles] You've smiled some and laughed.*

Dave: *I try to soften it, I guess you could say, but if you could see my feet right now, they're dancing.*

Nigel: *[chuckles]* As I said, I've just been watching your hands.

[laughter]

Earlonne: We're going to take a quick break.

Nigel: When we come back, what life in a prison town looks like when you're fresh out.

[upbeat music]

Arthur: *Actually, I'm used to a lot of noise. And so, when I first got out, it'd be quiet, I would get anxiety. Like, why is it so damn quiet? I hear my own heartbeat. But I appreciate that I don't have to watch my back. I still do, but out of habit.*

Nigel: Arthur Delgado is 29 years old. He's not particularly tall, but he has like this super powerful build, kind of like a firefighter. And as far as I could see, he was covered with tattoos from basically his neck down.

Earlonne: I would have said like a middle linebacker.

Nigel: Okay. Yeah, you're right.

Earlonne: He just got out of prison four months ago after spending 13 years locked up in a facility in Central California. Went in when he was just 16.

Nigel: Yeah. When he got out after all of those years in prison, this is kind of surprising to me, he moved straight to Susanville. Basically, the most prison centric town you can imagine.

Earlonne: Well, I mean, his brother lives here, and thought that it would be a good place for him to start over.

Arthur: *He's told me that if I wanted to get away from my gang lifestyle, and from my preventing-- from getting shot out or hit up or going back into gangbanging, "Just come to Susanville. You don't have to worry about-- you can wear red, blue. Just be yourself. You'll have a couple of knuckleheads, but that's a couple of them, compared to like 100 or 200 gang members in Merced."*

Nigel: Now, he's enrolled in community college in Susanville.

Earlonne: And he's starting to build new life out here.

Arthur: *I'm still getting adjusted to being free. And it's not a bad thing, being free, that's crazy. You know, being free. I was in there from, like I said, 16 to 29 years old.*

Nigel: *This new life is definitely taking some adjusting.*

Earlonne: *For one thing, it snows a lot up in Susanville, not like Merced where he used to be.*

Arthur: *I never shoveled snow. I was like, "How do you do this?" My brother is like, "Just do it." I'm like, "Dude, it's a lot of work," but it was fun. And then, that Dean Martin song, was it Dean Martin? Or Frank Sinatra, Let It Snow!*

Nigel: *Yeah, Let It Snow! Let It Snow!*

Arthur: *So, I put that on my cell phone, [singing] "Outside is kind of frightful, inside is kind of delightful." [laughs]*

Nigel: *[singing] As long as we [humming] Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow.*

Arthur: *[humming] Let it snow, let it snow.*

Nigel: *Yeah.*

[Frank Sinatra - Let It Snow! playing]

Nigel: *It's hard to imagine getting out of prison and wanting to live in that town. I mean, not because it's small, but because it is so prison centric.*

Earlonne: *Yeah. You'd think he'd want like a change of culture or something.*

Nigel: *Totally.*

When did you think about moving to a town that has two state prisons and a federal prison?

Arthur: *It gave me anxiety. It gave me resentful feelings, and it triggered emotions in me.*

Nigel: *When you drive by the prison, what kind of memories come back to you?*

Arthur: *Oh. I mean, violence, the hate, like a dog-eat-dog world, and a real type of evil and wickedness.*

Nigel: *You now live in a town and you're making this town your home?*

Arthur: *Yeah.*

Nigel: *Right. That very much supports for the prisons here.*

Arthur: *They do.*

Nigel: *And it's everywhere in your face. Almost every store you go by has a sign that says Keep CCC Open.*

Arthur: *Right.*

Nigel: *So, how does that make you feel?*

Arthur: *How does that make me feel is, it's like alone. You know what I mean? I don't really see, like, damn, I just got out from a warzone. One thing I would say to the person that's pro is that, "Look, there has to be a better way."*

Nigel: Earlonne, even before we went on this story trip, there was this question that was really nagging me.

Earlonne: What question was that?

Nigel: It was that question of, no matter how you feel about prisons, what is it like to live in a town and make a good life out of the prison industry? Do they struggle with that question? I really wanted to know?

Earlonne: Yeah, I think we brought that up with everyone we spoke with including Lindsey, who we met out there that day on the soccer field.

Nigel: *People have all sorts of feelings about prisons. I mean, some people think they should exist, some people think they shouldn't. And I just wonder, do you wrestle with that ever?*

Lindsey: *Yeah. But what do you do to fix that, I think, is the hard thing. There's people in there that shouldn't be in there or the ones who have been wrongfully accused and stuff like that. I don't know how you fix that. But correctional officers just going there every day, it sucks working in a prison. It really does.*

Earlonne: We brought this issue with Susan too, the woman who runs the local history museum.

Nigel: *Do you ever struggle at 3 o'clock in the morning when you can't sleep, and you have those moments about what it's like to have made a life based on incarceration? I mean, the town has flourished because of prison. So, do you ever struggle with that about having a good life based on a system that is--?*

Susan: *No. I think it's necessary. And I think a lot of mistakes were made. But that's something that is supposed to be taken care of by our justice system. Some people who are incarcerated who don't probably deserve it. Some people are given a sentence that's far more severe than somebody else who would have the same crime. But you have to somewhere have faith, that it's being done the correct way because I don't know, so I have to trust in the system. Now, if I was arrested, I might not.*

Nigel: *Do you think people in the town men that are incarcerated out there, do they consider them part of the community now?*

Susan: No.

Nigel: *Yeah. Can you talk about that a little bit?*

Susan: *I think most of the people think that the inmates, first of all, are not going to be there very long. And I don't think they want them to be part of the community. They consider that an element they don't want in the area. Yeah, it's brought a lot of good things, and mainly most people think of money. So, it's helped the economy, but it's not like they want the inmates. They want the jobs.*

Nigel: *So, how do you reconcile that?*

Susan: *I don't. [laughs]*

Nigel: Earlonne, I even asked you this question. Would you have a problem making a living off of prison?

Earlonne: When I was in prison, I have told myself, I would be a CO.

Nigel: Why?

Earlonne: Because this is an adult babysitting job, you don't do shit.

Nigel: So, you have the same attitude as the people in the town that work at the prison?

Earlonne: I mean, if I worked in a town with prisons, hell yeah, I would want the job that pays the most in the town.

Nigel: So, you wouldn't struggle--

Earlonne: About people in prison? Making money off people in prison?

Nigel: Yeah.

Earlonne: No, not at all.

Nigel: Wow.

Earlonne: Not at all. I wouldn't struggle with that one bit.

[somber music]

Misty: *My name is Misty Arteaga. And we're at my house in Susanville, California. Today is my birthday, February 11th.*

Nigel: *Happy birthday.*

Misty: *Thank you.*

Nigel: *What was supposed to happen this weekend?*

Misty: *I was supposed to have my family visit. I had it scheduled from today until Monday, which would have been a perfect weekend. Not only my birthday, but we had Superbowl coming up. And Valentine's Day would have been Monday.*

Nigel: Earlonne, the reason I wanted to include this last story is that it really illustrates what it's like to live in a town like Susanville, that's both so small, and also, completely dominated by two prisons.

Earlonne: Yeah, I mean, when you say small, it's just really one main street.

Nigel: Yeah.

Earlonne: That's how small it is. And Misty was a CO at High Desert State Prison, and her mom worked there too.

Nigel: And then Misty did something that's pretty--

Earlonne: Unthinkable?

Nigel: Unthinkable, kind of shocking. Something that is drilled into COs' heads that they should never do.

Earlonne: Which is smoking at the prison.

Nigel: [laughs] Something a little bit bigger than that, actually. She fell in love with an incarcerated guy named Michael.

Earlonne: And they tried to keep it on the down low. But eventually, they got cracked.

Nigel: Misty had to resign. And that's when life in Susanville got tough for her.

Misty: *I mean, if they see me in town, they turn the other way and walk away. I don't blame them for not wanting to talk to me. I've had to reinvent myself. One of the most frustrating things for me was trying to find a job. Even the pizza place wouldn't hire me.*

Earlone: Because of what Misty had done, her mom lost her job at High Desert, and her daughter got bullied in school.

Nigel: Misty was really on her own. She isolated herself. And to some extent, she still does.

Misty: *I really do just stay at home most of the time. I'll go to the casino. I go to work. I go grocery shopping, occasionally. This year was the first year I went out for the Christmas lighting of the tree. That was awkward. I try to go with friends or people, but it just a little awkward still, because you can see people looking at you when they walk by.*

Earlone: Even though Misty has been ostracized by everyone she used to work with at the prison, she still believes that CCC should remain open.

Nigel: Yeah. Earlone, it is kind of the one thing that unites her with that community that basically just shut her out.

Earlone: Right.

Misty: *Right now, we're kind of all on the same side when it comes to the CCC closure. The reason we like this prison is because it's not overcrowded, like majority of the other ones. So, anybody that wants to program, can program.*

Nigel: Misty means that at CCC, guys can take part in programs. Like college, self-help groups, and for some, those fire camps.

Earlone: But also, if CCC closes, it could get real hard for her to see Michael.

Misty: *It's going to be very hard to have visits, if it's video or in person, family visits. I mean, we have three-day family visits up here, where most prisons only have two days because they just have so many people, the volume.*

Nigel: So, the fact that you are pro keeping the prison open has that mended any relationships?

Misty: No. [chuckles] No. It's like you said, it's taboo. Some lines you're just not supposed to cross, and I crossed it.

Nigel: Yeah.

If you got sent somewhere else, would you feel displaced? Would you feel like you were leaving something that was home-like or familiar?

Michael: Yeah, because I've been up for so long, this is my community as well.

Earlone: A few days later, Misty's husband, Michael, called us from CCC.

Michael: Like it or not, I've grown semi relationships, mutual understanding and respect with the COs here. You know what's going on here. You ask questions and they're happy to tell you what's going on in this town, and what's around here. You can't help but be affected by it. In a way, the sad part about is I've been up here on this hill longer than I have in my own city. And that is the honest truth. Whether people will accept me in it or not, the fact is, this is my community too.

My opinions shifted even more when they had to-- was it the Dixie Fire out here? And we had no power, and so I had to listen to the radio. I listened to local radio station, and that whole outpouring of the community, how they pulled together for the pets, the animals, the elderly and all that stuff. I mean, that's [crosstalk] decent stuff, man. And that changed my view of the community. It kind of gives you like, "Wow, you know what? This isn't such a bad place," you know what I mean? Probably because it's a little bit more diversity, but you know what, hey.

Earlonne: When you get out, you're walking down the street in your town, and everybody you see, you start seeing like 40 COs, what's your thoughts going to be? Because you're going to see them in town.

Michael: Yeah. Honestly, I probably just give them a nod, and you know the old cordial nod and just keep on pushing, man, with a smile on my face, man.

Earlonne: [laughs]

Nigel: And your arm around Misty?

Michael: Of course.

Nigel: Originally, CCC was scheduled to close on June 30th.

Earlonne: But after the town filed a lawsuit to keep the prison open, that date has been pushed back a little.

Nigel: And I believe the case is still working its way through the courts.

Earlonne: Yeah. So, we could be on our way back up there for a follow-up.

Nigel: Ooh. I would be totally up for that. There is something that is just so great about going out there and not knowing what's going to happen. Can we do it again?

Earlonne: Sure. I'm waiting. I'm up being on the road. You know that.

Nigel: Yes, I do know that about you.

[upbeat music]

Speaker: Ear Hustle would like to thank Carlos Romo, Trevor Albertson, Roxanna Haynes, and Josh McKernan for also talking to them for this episode. Ear Hustle is produced by Nigel Poor, Earlonne Woods, Rahsaan “New York” Thomas, John “Yahya” Johnson, Rhashiyd Zinnamon, Bruce Wallace, and Tony Tafoya. It was sound designed and engineered by Antwan Williams, with music by Antwan, David Jassy, and Rhashiyd Zinnamon. Additional sound design and engineering by Terence Bernardo. Amy Standen edits the show. Shabnam Sigman is the digital producer, and Julie Shapiro is the executive producer for Radiotopia. We’d also like to thank Warden Ron Broomfield. And as you know, every episode of Ear Hustle has to be approved by this guy here.

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

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

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Earlonne: And don't forget to sign up for our newsletter, The Lowdown, where you can learn more about each episode, and find out what the Ear Hustle team is up to. Subscribe at *earhustlesq.com/newsletter*.

Nigel: Yup, that's *earhustlesq.com/newsletter*. I'm Nigel Poor.

Earlonne: I'm Earlonne Woods.

Nigel and Earlonne: Thanks for listening.

[upbeat music]

Speaker: That was fucking awesome, man. Thank you.

Earlonne: No, my pleasure, man. Appreciate it.