

Ear Hustle
Episode 96: San Quentin: The Magazine
October 18, 2023

Bob: *I'm Bob Goff with Love Does. In this episode of Ear Hustle contains language that may not be appropriate for all listeners. Discretion is advised.*

[Ear Hustle intro]

Earlone: So, this week we're doing something a little different. We've talked about this new team of producers that we have inside San Quentin, but listeners haven't had a chance to get to know them yet.

Nigel: So, we came up with this idea which is kind of a trial by fire. We asked each of them to come up with a story, then think about who they were going to interview. They had to edit it and work with our producers to sculpt a small story. Not a full episode, just a short story.

Earlone: We're calling it a Magazine. It's five different stories, each about something here at San Quentin.

Nigel: And we're going to listen to them for the first time right now and give them feedback and hopefully also celebrate with them.

I'm Nigel Poor.

Earlone: And I'm Earlone Woods. This is Ear Hustle from PRX's Radiotopia.

Nigel: First up, we have Steve Brooks. And Earlone, for some reason, this guy calls himself The Voice of San Quentin. Do you think at this point he deserves that title? That self-appointed title?

Earlone: You know San Quentin been around since 1852.

Nigel: So, this dude's old. [laughs]

Earlone: So, let's find out.

Steve: This is Steve Brooks. I'm an investigative reporter for San Quentin News, and I'm following a new craze sweeping through San Quentin. In every housing unit, classroom, hospital, church, at AA meetings and near checkerboards, chess sets and domino games, you can hear the beeping sounds of a detonator and the hot, buttery explosion of translucent endosperm being penetrated by high pressure steam. Thin fusible bubbles forming as the pericarp is burst by the water vapor at a pressure of about 9 atmospheres. Yes, you heard it here first. There is a microwave popcorn craze happening inside San Quentin, and it is ooh, so good.

Marcus: *Popcorn is stupid popular right now.*

Steve: This is Marcus Buckley. I spoke to him at a big event that was occurring on the yard at San Quentin.

Marcus: *I'm talking about you can get butter, kettle. We got all type of popcorn right now. But, you know, I pop in the can still, old school, like grandma.*

Tim: *I just like it. I like popcorn.*

Steve: That was Tim Hicks, the sports editor for the San Quentin News. I happened to run into him while he was carrying a bag of popcorn.

Tim: The way it smell, that aroma. I didn't used to get popcorn two, three years ago. It's been a while. So, when I finally was able to get some microwave popcorn, the buttery kind, the flavored kind, oh, man.

Steve: So, there are a couple of reasons for this recent popcorn craze. One of those reasons, I'll let my friend, Marcus Buckley, explain.

Marcus: *Why? Because we got microwaves. [laughs]*

Steve: So, this year, for the first time, incarcerated people have access to microwaves inside of their housing unit. The reason why? Governor Newsom's California model. The idea behind this is to make prisons more humane. So, now that we have these new microwaves, they've decided to start selling microwave popcorn in the prison canteen. But here at San Quentin, we're only allowed to go to the canteen once a month, and a lot of guys run out of popcorn way before then. So, there's one other option here at the prison.

So, how much does popcorn go for in the canteen?

Anonymous: *75 cents.*

Steve: This next guy, we're going to call anonymous for reasons that will soon become clear.

Rumor has it that there's also some popcorn being sold outside of the canteen. Is that true?

Anonymous: *I believe so.*

Steve: *And do you have anything to do with that?*

Anonymous: *I don't have anything to do with it, but I know somebody that knows somebody that's selling the popcorn.*

Earlone: So, Steve here is really on some investigative reporting type shit.

Nigel: I know. I mean, it's not the kind of stuff we normally do, so it really pricks my ears up. And I actually know that there's a rule that incarcerated guys can't sell things to other incarcerated guys.

Earlone: True.

Nigel: So, Steve, what do you think? Should we change this dude's voice?

Steve: Definitely. He was providing some valuable information. He was just trying to be honest. I think we should do it.

And how much do they sell it for?

Anonymous: *\$1.25 a bag.*

Steve: *And so, that's a markup. Is people buying it at that price?*

Anonymous: All the time, yeah.

Steve: If you see somebody buying popcorn all the time, what would you think?

Anonymous: If they have a popcorn habit, they're spending more money buying a popcorn from this guy than buying it from the store.

Steve: Do you see that as a problem?

Anonymous: Why would I get in their business with buying a popcorn when this guy's clearly making his money? I don't want to hate on his hustle.

Steve: Well, just put yourself in that position for a minute. Say it was you, we know it ain't you, but just say it was you. Would you feel guilty that maybe I'm feeding somebody's habit or addiction?

Anonymous: No. Why? It's just popcorn. It's just only popcorn. You want to buy some popcorn? Come buy some popcorns.

[laughter]

Marcus: The lines on the microwave, Oh, it's too long. Way too long. Yeah, way too long. Because they need more than one. We only have like one or two sometimes. We started off with two, went down to one. Now, we got none.

Steve: In West Block, where Marcus Buckley lives, the lines for the microwaves are long. People are getting into arguments and fights. Microwaves are breaking down on a daily basis.

Marcus: They was industrial microwaves. They wasn't meant to-- 700 people. You know what I'm saying? On one microwave. Yeah.

Steve: The microwaves are in constant use, so they're starting to lose power. Now, it's taking even longer to pop that corn.

Marcus: You got to put four, four and a half minutes to cook a bag of popcorn, which only takes two and a half minutes on the street, it's steady going over and over. So the microwave never getting a chance to reset. So, it really ain't cooking at the highest point like it's supposed to be.

Steve: So now, the microwaves are working slower, the lines are getting longer, people are getting more agitated. There are even rumors of arguments and fights. And not only that, here at Ear Hustle SQ, we've got another problem.

This is Steve Brooks, the most accurate investigative reporter for the San Quentin News. I'm sitting here with Ear Hustle's own Dr. Nigel Poor. Nigel, how you doing?

Nigel: I'm good, but I'm not a doctor.

Steve: Oh, excuse me. My bad. I'm mostly accurate.

Nigel: [chuckles] Yes, you gave me a higher degree than I have.

Steve: But you're the doctor of podcast.

Nigel: All right, I'll take that. I'll take that.

Steve: So, Nigel, let me ask you a question, and I know the answer already, but I just need to hear from you. You love the smell of hot buttery microwave popcorn?

Nigel: No, no, no, no.

Steve: Huh?

Nigel: When we are here working, we're engaged in our work, all of a sudden, this smell comes wafting over our wall. Ugh, no. I don't like it at all. It smells like rancid butter. So, first it's the smell that distracts us. Then, it's the [loud noises]. And the beeping noise, it's one of the worst things to happen at San Quentin, this popcorn craze.

Steve: Wow.

Steve: Wow.

So, at the end of the day, what does this all mean? A rising number of microwaves and a rising sale of microwave popcorn. It's all coming together to create the perfect storm. Some are possessed by this hot buttery treat, while others are appalled by it. Black market sales are up, and addiction rates are climbing. Many are now reporting that they are powerless over their popcorn addictions and that their very lives have become unmanageable.

***In Unison:** God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.*

***Moderator:** Welcome to PA. The most important person at Popcorn Anonymous is the newcomer. Do we have any newcomers today?*

***Steve:** Yeah, I'm Steve Brooks, and I'm an addict. Hi, Steve.*

***In Unison:** Hi, Steve.*

***Moderator:** Today, we're working on step one.*

***Man:** We admitted already that we powerless over our addiction, and our lives have become unmanageable.*

Steve: All we can wonder now is what will happen next. In the words of Marcus Buckley.

***Marcus:** Popcorn is stupid popular right now.*

***Steve:** From the San Quentin News, this is Steve Brooks reporting.*

***Man:** You're not even being accountable. You haven't even admitted that you powerless over popcorn, bro. You are powerless over popcorn.*

[laughter]

Earlone: Hmm, mm, hmm, mm.

Nigel: I do love your personality coming across in this.

Steve: Thank you.

Nigel: You are Steve, from beginning to end.

[laughter]

Nigel: And you also do something that we don't do in our show. It was this real mix of parody and trying to do real reporting. So how did you feel about doing the story?

Steve: At first, I thought it was a joke--

Nigel: It's not? [laughs]

Steve: But then I thought about it, and I said this is a very important story. We live in a new age here at San Quentin, and so it's now a new rehabilitation center. I think we have to follow important stories like this."

Nigel: So, popcorn is part of rehabilitation.

Steve: Absolutely. I mean, you pop into a new person here at San Quentin. It's kind of a transformative experience on all levels.

Nigel: So, Steve, one of the things I think would have been good is to figure out how to kind of pull the threads on some of those emotional topics that you started to get into, like what happens in those lines. And when there's tensions and fights, how do people feel about that? What kinds of memories does it bring up for them? That kind of stuff. So, maybe push the emotion a little bit in your next story.

Steve: Definitely. I'll definitely do that.

Earlone: Thanks, Steve. We appreciate that. That was a great first story. So, kudos.

[upbeat music]

Nigel: Next up, we have Tam Nguyen. But I don't know, what's your story, man?

Tam: So, my story is about the new phenomenon in the yard, the gazebos.

Earlone: Ah, the gazebos.

Nigel: Yeah, I've been curious about those.

Earlone: So, let's hear it.

Tam: About two months ago, I was coming down the yard, headed towards Vocation, and I saw these wooden picnic benches with space for about six people and a little roof attached to it. The first thing I thought was, "What the hell are these?" They look so weird. They're a light stained wood. It really sticks out in a place where most things are metal and the colors are really dull. And strange that they have this roof on them because in prison, the officers like to be able to have clear line of sight to you, and the roof of the gazebo is covering their line of sight. So, soon they were on the yard, and a lot of people were just thinking the same thing I was, like, "What the hell are these things?"

Man: *The first time I saw the gazebo on the yard, I was amazed. Never in a million years, not a million, I only been down 10, but I never seen one in prison in my life.*

Man: *I thought it was bullshit. Honestly, when I first heard gazebo on a yard, that's not happening. And then to see it, I'm like, "Wait a minute. That's an actual gazebo."*

Man: *I said, "Holy shit. A gazebo in San Quentin."*

[laughter]

Man: *Now all we need is a hammock. You know what I mean? [chuckles]*

Steve: *When I came down to the yard and I seen him out there sprinkled about on the yard like some lower-level tree houses is what they look like, they weren't that inviting. I felt like I was going to be back in my cell if I went in one of these gazebos. Everybody was kind of hesitant at first. They're like, "What the hell is this?" And they didn't even know if they was allowed in the gazebo. So, they was like, "What is this?"*

Tam: *This is Steve Brooks. He's the guy you just heard doing the popcorn story. He told me that these gazebos, like the microwaves, are part of this larger vision of turning California prisons into something closer to what they do in Norway, which some people consider the most humane prisons in the world. I even heard a rumor that these so-called gazebos may have been actually made in Norway. But that seemed crazy. So, I dug around a little bit, and I found out these gazebos were actually made in the vocational building located right off the yard.*

So, Bruce and me just walked through the work change for Vocation. Looks like a little workshop back here for like woodworking. [machine running] And that's where I ran into Kenny.

Kenny: *Warden Ron Broomfield, he came in and said that I guess he had found these pictures of these gazebos in the Norway prison. So, he brought a picture of them and asked, would it be possible we can make them? We told him yeah, and we just drew up some plans.*

Tam: *So, they figured out how to make one of these things. Then, Kenny's coworker, Steve, told me they had to figure out where they would go.*

Kenny: *We couldn't just build one because we had to think of transgender, black, Mexicans, Asians, and others. So, if you built, for example, one table, blacks don't want this guy sitting with the blacks. Just basic prison politics is why we had to build different gazebos for different races.*

Tam: *When you guys did that, was that the incarcerated people coming up with the idea, or was it the staff?*

Kenny: *The inmates got to give their input, but the staff run it.*

Tam: *It's not just that every group gets one. It has to be put in the exact right space for that group.*

Kenny: *For example, we got different sets of blacks. If I put the gazebo in this one certain area, it wouldn't be right, because this certain group will say, "Hey, why is the gazebo over there?" So, blacks got at me, and I told them, "We'll keep it neutral. We'll put it in the center," and that solves the problems for the black area.*

Tam: When the gazebos first hit the yard, some people wondered why, if this is the new San Quentin, are the gazebos being placed according to race? I asked Glenn Jincko about this. He's been in and out of prison for the past 20 years.

When you talk about the separation with the race, how would you feel about people saying that races being segregated on the yard, having their own area is against rehabilitation?

Glenn: *I believe you can't just throw people into the ocean. You got to crawl first before you begin to walk. And inmates that have been behind this wall for a significant amount of time have been conditioned for years and years at a time. They cannot just undo it overnight. You will make another man uncomfortable, and he'll react to it. You believe one thing for 30 years, and then someone tells you to start believing this. It doesn't happen overnight.*

Tam: Glenn actually thinks what would make San Quentin a better place is to improve the relationships between incarcerated people and the officers. Maybe those are the groups who should integrate.

Glenn: *Between the officer and the inmate, we're two groups that don't normally function together. So, if a correctional officer can treat me as if I'm not an inmate and start giving me the interaction that I can use in the real world beyond these walls, then it'll give me more incentive to remove the barriers also.*

Tam: And maybe the gazebos could be a part of that. In fact, according to Steve Brooks, that's the real goal for the gazebos, providing a place for COs and incarcerated people to interact.

Steve: *So, I think the gazebo idea is an idea to be able to bring officers and incarcerated people together to do some type of things together. Sit inside the gazebo and whatever issues you got going on. I mean, I could just see like an officer sitting on one side, incarcerated person sitting on the other, and the officer just saying, "How's your day going as far as your rehabilitation program?" Or, "Do you want a haircut today? I'm one of the best haircutters there is. Do you want a haircut?" Or "Do you want to play some dominoes? You're talking all that shit about dominoes. Maybe we can sit down and solve this." But it's an officer and it's an incarcerated person. It's meant to just kind of like help bridge that gap between the two.*

Tam: I was really curious what the COs would have to say about this idea, that they could have a different kind of relationship with incarcerated people. But to answer that question, I needed to find one who would actually talk to me on mic. Luckily for me, Officer Wallis, a correctional officer who used to work near the Ear Hustle studio, said she would.

The idea about these gazebos, for example, on the yard, was that for the incarcerated people and officers to be able to sit and have conversations? How would you feel about that?

Wallis: *I had no problem with that because I talked to everybody. I still do. Everybody comes and talks to me. It doesn't hurt to talk and have a conversation and laugh or smile in prison. Who cares?*

Tam: *A lot of people don't even realize how what you just said, a smile or somebody listening to you for a moment, how it could change, for example, my attitude. Officers in the past, because of the way that it was trained, was to punish and just--*

Wallis: *You already got punished when you came in, right? You got punished, you went to court and everything else. Whatever you did is what you did. Doesn't mean you're going to*

still be that person when you come in. It does take a minute for people to change. Big people do change. It's really amazing.

Tam: *So, it sounds like you're on board with the idea that officers can now be an active part of an incarcerated person's rehabilitation.*

Wallis: *Most definitely. I totally can see that happening.*

Tam: But Wallace told me she thinks she's in the minority here and other COs may not really agree with her.

Wallis: *Sometimes you got to watch your P's and Q's and you know how that is because I'll be judged and looked at and criticized, probably.*

Tam: *We appreciate it, Ms. Wallis.*

This is Tam Nguyen reporting from San Quentin for Ear Hustle.

Earlonne: I'm amazed that on your first story, you got an officer to talk. To have an officer just sit there and express herself and her beliefs. That's dope.

Nigel: Yeah. How was it?

Tam: I was fortunate with her, and because she used to work down here. Officer Wallis, I think her attitude about just people in general is pretty cool. You know what I mean? But I did try four other officers first. And as soon as they asked me what the questions were and I told them that I'd be asking about the Norway model, they said no, they shut me down hard.

Earlonne: That's interesting though to have the state issuing the Norway model and then the people that are not accepting it is the people that actually work here. That's the crazy part.

Nigel: Well, it sounds like it's not just them. The guys aren't either. They're still on their thing about race. We've got to have all the-- I see it both ways if they're still insisting that they have to be broken up by race.

Tam: I kind of agree with you. I think it's both sides.

Nigel: But you definitely took on a challenging subject for your first story, so congratulations on your ambition.

Tam: Thank you.

Nigel: Up next, we have the first of our two Tonys. This is Tony Tafoya.

Tony: That's me.

Earlonne: You're our inside managing producer, and you've been here the longest, so we have high expectations with your story.

Nigel: Definitely high expectations. Definitely.

Tony: I hope I live up to your expectations.

DD: When they first came on Monday, they locked everybody down. They didn't want no movement, and the anxiety was up. Everybody's just yelling out the cell, just waiting, "Give us the tablets, where they at?" Just having fun. And then finally, like around 9:15, they started calling people. Like, they called you down there. They gave you accessories, they gave you the earbuds with a mic, they gave you the charger, and they gave you the actual tablets.

Tam: My tier, as soon as everybody came out, they go, "What are we going to do?" There was like 30 of you guys, and all I heard was, "Hey, man, we're going to have private phone sex." And one guy goes, "Yeah, man, I've been doing it in the payphone," but there's like 30 guys lined up. And I'm thinking, "Damn, all this time I've been waiting and you standing in the booth having phone sex next to 30 guys."

Tony: Every incarcerated person at San Quentin and throughout the entire state was issued a tablet for free. The tablets are run by a company called ViaPath. Each of us gets 20 free text messages a week, and after that, it's 5 cents a message. You can also pay for subscriptions to movies and music. All in all, these tablets have changed the vibes at San Quentin in a big way.

DD: So, everybody's on the tier on their tablet. Like, nobody's actually in my building. I don't see anybody watching TV. I don't see anybody doing anything but having a head their down on their tablet. It's turning to the outside world. It's actually turning to the stuff that's on the street.

Tam: Like, people walking into me looking at their tablet, if we're really trying to be like people on the streets, hey, man, might as well walk around looking at tablets, bumping into people. That's what's already happened in two days since my building got it. You guys had it for like a week.

[phone trilling]

Automated: This is Global Tel Link. You have a prepaid call from--

Tony: Tony Tafoya.

Automated: An inmate at the California State Prison, San Quentin, California.

Tony: Hello?

Mom: Hello.

Tony: What are you doing?

Mom: Nothing. I'm cutting out some dyes for my scrapbook. What are you doing?

Tony: Oh, you're about that craft life right now? [chuckles]

Mom: Yeah, of course. [chuckles]

Tony: Before I got the tablets, if I wanted to talk to my mom, I had to go downstairs, wait inside this half a mile long line, and sign up for a one 15-minute phone slot to use the landline phones in the housing units. Now, I can talk to her whenever I want, and I do.

What do you think of the tablets?

Mom: For the most part, they're really good. I mean, they've changed. Easier to talk to you and not have to worry so much about being right by your phone 24 hours a day because you only get one shot at calling. Been nice. And the texting has been very nice too.

Tony: Do I call you a lot?

Mom: No, you only call once a day. But I mean, in the beginning you called a lot, [chuckles] but this way I can think about something and text it to you and not have to remember it for later or whatever.

Tony: Do you wish I called more or do you wish I called less?

Mom: I think you call the right amount.

Tony: Okay. [chuckles]

Mom: Okay.

Tony: All right. Thank you, mom. Love you.

Mom: Love you. Bye.

In the pre-tablet days, people used to argue over the phones all the time. Like, for example, maybe someone wouldn't get off the phone even after their 15 minutes were up. Or sometimes, people would just cut you in line. Now, all that drama is just over.

Tam: Well, like in North Block, because there's like 800 of us and the phone line, it would be like just packed. There's 12 phones. We'd have like 30, 40 people just lined up. The first day we got it, there was three people on the phone line. Like, no more arguing, no more fighting over the phone, screaming at each other. And I just feel like it's way more peaceful now.

Tony: Tablets let you make phone calls from your cell, but that's not all they do. They also let you do what we call video visits, which is basically FaceTime. Now, when something happens on the outside, you can almost be a part of it instead of hearing about it later in a letter or a phone call.

Jesse: My name is Jesse Milo, and I have been incarcerated for 22 years. Fourth of July, my cousin in Oahu had messaged and she's like, "Hey, would you like to video? Would you like to see the ocean from the island in Oahu?" And so, for me, it was like I was there. They were barbecuing on the ocean, her and the rest of their church in Oahu. And I seen my cousins that I hadn't seen since they were like five years old. And now, they were grown women with babies. She was like, "Hey, that's Gordy. That's so and so." And I was like, I didn't even know, just because so much time has, so it's really great to be able to see the world. It's a little bittersweet at times.

I haven't seen my mom since I've been incarcerated, and that weighs heavily on me. When I was young, my mother, she used to always try to hug me and love on me, but she was addicted to drugs, and I was always kind of like, "Don't hug me. Stay away from me." I was a little boy. What young teen wants to be hugging their mom, right?

Tony: Me.

Jesse: [laughs] And that is one of my biggest regrets, is not hugging my mom every time she wanted a hug. Getting these tablets was a big deal for me. One of the first things I did was I called my sister and I told her, "I want to videochat mom. I want to see mom." There

standing in the dayroom in North Block, it's just so surreal on the wall of my little tablet was my mother's face. And she was a little self-conscious. She's like, "I didn't get to do my hair." I'm like, "Mom, you look beautiful." And we got to laugh. And she showed me her cats. I guess she's a cat lady now. [laughs] I got to see the home that I grew up at. I got to do that because we got these tablets.

Woman: *You're going to be talking to Dancer?*

Nigel: *We're going to try.*

Woman: *You're going to try. Good luck.*

Nigel: *I knew that you really wanted to talk to this guy Dancer for the story, and you and I had made a date to talk to him, but I got there first, and you know how things go at San Quentin, and I felt like I just had to go for it. So, I hope you don't mind.*

Tony: *Oh, no. I'm glad you went for it. He's elusive, and when you see him, you've got to go for it.*

Do you know that I'm here to talk to you?

Dancer: *I have bad luck with cameras.*

Nigel: *Oh, no, it's audio. No cameras. Can I ask you a few questions? What's your name?*

Dancer: *Dancer.*

Nigel: *How did you get that name?*

Dancer: *I was born with it.*

Nigel: *Oh, is your birth name?*

Dancer: *Yes, my last name.*

Nigel: *Oh. I thought it was like--*

Dancer: *I know all the reindeer jokes and all that stuff. Yeah, I grew up with that. [laughs]*

Nigel: *I thought it was like a nickname.*

Dancer: *No, that's my name.*

Nigel: *Oh, okay. And are you into new technology?*

Dancer: *I'm trying to catch up with it.*

Nigel: *What's the most challenging part of it?*

Dancer: *All of it.*

Nigel: *What do you think about these new tablets?*

Dancer: *I don't know. I didn't take one. I don't want one, period. They can keep them. Well, I came to prison when they used to hold things over your head to make you cooperate, so I'm*

structured like that. So, I don't want nothing that they have to give me where they can come back later and take it because I don't do this or do that. If I want to talk to somebody, I use a telephone.

Nigel: *There's nothing on the tablet that intrigues you?*

Dancer: *I don't know what's on it because I didn't take one. [chuckles]*

Nigel: *But was there pressure to take one?*

Dancer: *No.*

Nigel: *Do you think that they listen in on them?*

Dancer: *Absolutely.*

Nigel: *I wonder about that.*

Dancer: *Yeah.*

Nigel: *There's nobody on the outside you'd like to email or talk with?*

Dancer: *No. Everybody that was in touch with me, family and friends and stuff, my daughters, my sons and my grandkids and my wife, they all passed away. So, I don't communicate with nobody.*

Nigel: *Your grandchildren?*

Dancer: *I had two grandchildren that passed away.*

Nigel: *Sorry. That's hard.*

Dancer: *A lot of deaths in the family. I've been locked up a while.*

Nigel: *How long?*

Dancer: *Too long. 20 plus.*

Nigel: *20 plus. Okay.*

Dancer: *So, I do mine a day at a time, by myself, within myself, and I get along a lot better. I don't have no temper no more or nothing else. I found out that dealing with a lot of people gave me a lot of anxiety, and I was taking it out people that shouldn't have it taken out on. So, I found a way not to go through that, and I don't do it anymore.*

Nigel: *Do you spend time with any of the other men that have been in prison a long time that are here?*

Dancer: *Just about everybody I do spend time with been locked up a long time because we understand each other.*

Nigel: *Who are some of the other guys that you hang out with?*

Dancer: *Well, just people.*

Nigel: You're secretive.

Dancer: Yes. [laughs] Old school. Don't give them no information that ain't necessary.

Nigel: That's actually a pretty good rule.

Dancer: Yeah. It keeps you from having a lot of headaches.

Nigel: He's looking at me with needles.

Tony, you finally showed up. I kept peeping. "Where's Tony? Where's Tony?" And I looked up and there you were.

Tony: Yeah. I've been looking around everywhere for you.

Nigel: I'm sorry.

Tony: Let's see, as someone who's been down a long time, what's it like to see all these tablets inside prison?

Dancer: I don't think nothing about it one way or the other. [chuckles] If you have one, I hope you enjoy it.

Tony: I do enjoy my tablet. Yeah. Do you think that you feel free because you don't have a tablet?

Dancer: I don't feel like I'm shackled. To each his own. I'm old school. I don't dictate my policies to anybody, and that's just me.

Tony: When you get out, are you going to get a cell phone?

Dancer: No. Use a regular telephone.

Nigel: I understand what you're saying, but do you know how hard it is to find a phone outside now?

Dancer: I don't have anybody to call. If I meet somebody, they can call me.

Nigel: Can I ask what year you were born?

Dancer: '47.

Nigel: Okay.

Dancer: I had a birthday yesterday, matter of fact.

Man: Happy birthday.

Dancer: Yeah.

Nigel: How come you don't have any wrinkles?

Dancer: I don't worry.

Nigel: Mm, that's really good advice.

Dancer: *I don't smile that much. I read a book about it. They said you get just as much wrinkles in your face from smiling as you do from frowning.*

Nigel: *Wow. It's hard for me not to smile though.*

Dancer: *It's not hard for me. It's easy.*

Nigel: *Come on, smile once.*

Dancer: *I'm looking at you now. I'm smiling.*

[laughter]

Nigel: *I hope that didn't give you any wrinkles.*

Tony: What do you guys think?

Nigel: Okay, first of all, I've got three notes for you.

Earlonne: You sounded nervous.

Nigel: [laughs] I love the cold opening, I love the range of emotions, and I love the audio texture, especially when you call your mom, it's really beautiful.

Earlonne: Oh, I had a note there. Where is that at? Hey, Tony, just so you know, you call your mom too much. She did not want to tell you that.

Tony: [laughs] She would have told me.

Earlonne: She said it's just enough.

Nigel: Well, every day. I call my mom every day too. She called every day.

Tony: My mother would have told me if it was too much.

Nigel: She didn't say call more.

Earlonne: [laughs] No, she said it's just enough.

Nigel: Just enough. That's just right.

Earlonne: I think it turned out well, Nyge.

Nigel: I agree. Good story. He found great characters. I mean, to me, it was a very Ear Hustle story. Very Ear Hustle. Yeah. Anyway, kudos to you. Nice job. Nice job.

Earlonne: Definitely. We'll be right back after the break.

[upbeat music]

Earlonne: Welcome back to the San Quentin Magazine, stories from our new team of rookie producers. And we've been hearing some good stuff. What do you say, Nyge?

Nigel: Yeah, I think so. We had Steve talking about the popcorn craze, Tony Tafoya on those new tablets that everybody's getting.

Earlone: Tom talked about the gazebos.

Nigel: Mm-hmm. Yeah, it's interesting. I mean, a couple of the stories touch on this conversation that's been going on about making San Quentin in the image of the Norway model.

Earlone: Hmm. We've been there. What do you think?

Nigel: I think they're starting down the path.

Earlone: Okay.

Nigel: What do you think of that? The gazebos to me seem to be the most promising aspect of this new idea.

Earlone: Yeah, they still in the parking lot.

Nigel: [laughs] In the parking lot. So, we've heard a great range of stories and we've got a few more left to hear.

Earlone: Who we got next, Nyge?

Nigel: So, we've got the second Tony, Tony de Trinidad. And I've heard he has this very different way of taking on the story. So, instead of interviewing people, he's actually interviewing buildings, giving them a personality. Yeah, the buildings are going to tell us stories.

Earlone: Hmm, this should be interesting.

Nigel: Yes.

Tony de Trinidad: Hey, what's up? How you doing?

Canteen: All right. What's going on, man?

Tony de Trinidad: Yeah. Aren't you Canteen?

Canteen: Yeah, I'm canteen. What's up? What's your name? Do I know you?

Tony de Trinidad: Yeah, I'd be the one getting the ice cream.

Canteen: Yeah. Ice Cream Tony.

Tony de Trinidad: Yeah, that's me.

Canteen: Okay. What's good?

Tony de Trinidad: Yeah, he always calls me Ice Cream Tony. But my name is Tony de Trinidad. And right now, I'm having a conversation with a building here at San Quentin, The Canteen.

Tony de Trinidad: When you run out of stuff, do you really run out of stuff? Are you just like, "This motherfucker played me last week. He tried to come to the window with short change me. So no, we don't got no ice cream this week?"

Canteen: Man, listen, that is certified classified G13 information that you're asking.

Tony de Trinidad: I know that.

Canteen: Hold on, hold on. You got some money?

Tony de Trinidad: I mean, I always got money.

Canteen: You pull up to this front, man, you got to have some bread, man. If you ain't got no dough, then you got to do a moving.

Tony de Trinidad: Talking to Canteen, I realized this is the perfect opportunity to ask a question that's been on my mind lately. See, I've been at San Quentin since 2018 and I've lived in two different housing units. But I've always wondered about the other buildings. I mean, the cells are pretty much the same no matter where you live. Small and ugly, but each building has its own distinct vibe and personality. So, is there one where I'd fit in better? I wanted to see what Canteen thought about that.

Tony de Trinidad: So, you sit in the middle of all the buildings. They all come at you asking for stuff.

Canteen: I'm on the blade, baby. I see everything moving right in the middle of everything.

Tony de Trinidad: In your opinion, man, what's the best place for me to live here?

Canteen: Look, man, you got yourself together, man. Alpine, Donner.

Tony de Trinidad: Alpine or Donner?

Canteen: Yeah, man.

Tony de Trinidad: You know, I really wanted to thank you for this little sit down. I just wanted your unbiased opinion on that. I knew you would come through for me, so I appreciate that.

Canteen: You only got \$5 left. No refunds, man.

Tony de Trinidad: No refunds. [chuckles]

Canteen: Sorry.

Tony de Trinidad: All right. Respect. Thank you, man. Right on.

Tony de Trinidad: So Alpine, Donner, that's actually two different buildings. They're both designed for those who work hard and stay out of trouble.

Right now, I live in Alpine. It's a quiet, calm atmosphere, but I already know about Alpine. I'm more curious about some of the other buildings, like North Block.

Tony de Trinidad: Hey, what's up, man?

How you doing?

North Block: *Doing okay. How you doing?*

Tony de Trinidad: *So, you're North Block, right?*

North Block: *Yes, I'm North Block building.*

Tony de Trinidad: *This is one of my first times talking to a building. So, if I say anything that's like disrespectful, or I use a term that's offensive to buildings, just let me know and I'll back up and I'll learn.*

North Block: *I'll lock my doors, make sure you don't get in.*

Tony de Trinidad: *Okay. That'll work.*

Tony de Trinidad: *See, North Block used to be the calm building, but then Alpine and Donner opened up, and a lot of the guys who were what we call Programmers, those are the guys who were staying out of trouble and trying to get home, those people moved out, and a lot of young guys moved in. And I hear it can be a bit chaotic.*

Tony de Trinidad: *So before, what was your typical resident like?*

North Block: *Quiet, old men. They wasn't off the hook like there is now.*

Tony de Trinidad: *Okay, now what's your typical resident like?*

North Block: *Running up and down the stairs. Up and down the stairs. Fighting on the fifth tier.*

Tony de Trinidad: *So, you got people running up and down your back all day?*

North Block: *Running up and down my back all day long. If you come up the stairs, look like I'm leaning, that's the youngster.*

Tony de Trinidad: *What's your favorite type of resident that lives in you now? Like, do you still have some good guys in there at all?*

North Block: *I like the ones that leave out at 7:00 and come back at the end of the day. Them the good guys.*

Tony de Trinidad: *Do you think North Block would be a right move for me?*

North Block: *No.*

Tony de Trinidad: *No? Why not?*

North Block: *You ain't going to mix.*

Tony de Trinidad: *Huh?*

North Block: *You're not going to mix with them guys. Youse a good guy. Them guys, they're off the hook.*

Tony de Trinidad: *So, it's not my speed?*

North Block: *There's too many of them.*

Tony de Trinidad: *Okay, you know, I appreciate that. I appreciate that. I wouldn't want to go into a crazy situation. Well, man, you have a lovely day, man.*

North Block: *All right. Thank you very much.*

Tony de Trinidad: *All right. Peace.*

Well, that was interesting, but I think I'm going to go holler at Donner next. One thing you should know about Donner is that it's like Alpine, but even more exclusive. And it's got a lot of perks, like the dog training program. And guys get their own cells, no cellie. But I'm not 100% sure if I fit in there.

Tony de Trinidad: *So, hey, how are you doing?*

Donner: *Oh, blessed, as always.*

Tony de Trinidad: *Could you tell us your name?*

Donner: *Hi. I'm Donner.*

Tony de Trinidad: *Because I've heard several names I don't know.*

Donner: *Like what? Like Honor Donner?*

Tony de Trinidad: *I've heard Honor Donner. I've heard Donner Darlings.*

Donner: *Oh, those are cute.*

Tony de Trinidad: *You like those?*

Donner: *Yeah.*

Tony de Trinidad: *Okay.*

Donner: *That's adorable.*

Tony de Trinidad: *I've been kind of looking around for a best place to live in San Quentin.*

Donner: *Oh, there's no better place than Donner.*

Tony de Trinidad: *What's daily life like there?*

Donner: *It's pretty quiet and relaxed, and then they have nearly completely eliminated disrespectful posture and aggressive verbiage, and just laziness. It's pretty amazing. The typical residents that I house are not your average person in blue. We're above average and special in so many kinds of ways. I'm not saying there's people that will tell on other people for having loud music, but--*

Tony de Trinidad: *I wonder. So, if somebody is a Programmer, they're trying their best to just figure themselves out and be the true person they are and get home to the people they love, you think that'd be a good Donner resident?*

Donner: Only if they haven't had a write up in the last six months.

Tony de Trinidad: Yeah, that's me.

Donner: Hmm.

Tony de Trinidad: Do you think Donner would be a good fit for me?

Donner: Mmm, are you part of the elite few? The few, the proud, the Donner?

Tony de Trinidad: I don't know if I'd ever consider myself elite.

Donner: Well, I mean, you have to be a certain kind of somebody to be there.

Tony de Trinidad: Uh, okay.

Donner: Right?

Tony de Trinidad: Yeah, I can't deny that. So, listen, I really appreciate that.

Donner: Yeah. But what I'm trying to tell you is my story. We're here to hear about me, not wrap it up. That's really cute.

Tony de Trinidad: Well, I'm not trying to be rude. I'm just trying to say--

Donner: Oh, my gosh. Are you mansplaining me?

Tony de Trinidad: I'm just trying to get to class, man.

Donner: Oh, my.

Tony de Trinidad: I'm sorry, I only had to schedule so much time for this interview.

Yeah, that was a bit much. Let's try Badger. Badger's kind of the opposite of Donner. There are zero entry requirements, and I'm sure he'll be happy to talk to me.

Hey, Badger, can I talk to you for a second?

Badger: Yo, yo, I'll do no interviews, bro.

Tony de Trinidad: Look, man--

Badger: Hold up. Is that thing on? Cut that off, bro. I'll do no interviews.

Tony de Trinidad: Look, I just-- It's a--

Badger: No.

Tony de Trinidad: All right, man.

Badger: Big Badger in the building. We don't do interviews.

Tony de Trinidad: All right, man, I respect that. Peace.

There was just one more place I needed to go. West Block.

Tony de Trinidad: Man, I've been kind of thinking about what the right place for me to live in San Quentin is. And--

West Block: You know what the right place to live is? Not in San Quentin.

Tony de Trinidad: You know, you might be just right about in fact, I know you're right about that.

West Block: But if you got to live somewhere, I guess West Block's all right.

Tony de Trinidad: I know West Block pretty well because it's the first place I lived when I got to San Quentin. Half the building faces the rest of the prison, but the other half sits on the bay facing Mount Tamalpais. The best view in prison is from West Block's fifth tier. But when I lived there, daily life could be kind of unpredictable. Sometimes it'd be nice and calm, but other times, it would just go nuts.

Here we are today with a very special person. I guess I couldn't call you a person, could I?

West Block: No. My name is West Block, and I long for watching the sunset. And I'm just hoping one day that somebody come in and pressure wash my windows.

Tony de Trinidad: I know you've been around this place for a many--

West Block: Long time.

Tony de Trinidad: Like, I heard you was off the hook for a minute. [crosstalk]

West Block: Oh, yeah. I've seen a couple people yesterday fighting over a phone. And then, when they stopped fighting, neither of them even used the phone. They just left.

Tony de Trinidad: Where do you think I should live in San Quentin? You think I should go back to West Block, or should I stay in Alpine?

West Block: I guess it depends on your interaction skills. You was all right when you was over there, so if you're comfortable where you at, I say stay where you at.

Tony de Trinidad: It is one question I almost didn't want to ask it, but I got to ask it.

West Block: Okay.

Tony de Trinidad: Do you miss me?

West Block: I do. You know what I'm saying? Because you left things alone. You left it a little better than you came into it with, so it's okay.

Tony de Trinidad: All right, West Block, thank you so much. You have a beautiful day.

West Block: Thank you, man. I'm looking forward to a good sunset. And thank you for interviewing me and taking time to hear my perspective. You know what I'm saying? I love you, but don't come back is what I'm saying.

Tony de Trinidad: Straight up, I think I'm worrying about the wrong thing. Every living situation is going to have its ups and downs. I might as well make the best of it and focus on

the one move I need to really worry about, and that's the move home. So, until then, this is Tony de Trinidad from Ear Hustle, San Quentin, saying peace out.

Nigel: That was such an interesting take. Where'd that idea come from?

Tony de Trinidad: While we were doing our training, we listened to a podcast called Everything is Alive where the guy interviewed a can of cola.

Nigel: Louis.

Tony de Trinidad: Yeah. And I really liked it. I liked the concept. It was very interesting.

Nigel: Sometimes when you're doing interviews, you have to be able to explain to somebody what the story is, what you want. So, I'm curious, how did you explain this concept to people?

Tony de Trinidad: It actually wasn't that hard. People really took to it pretty easily. It was a matter of a sentence, usually. "Hey, man, I want you to play the voice of the building. Can you do that?" "Yeah. What building?" It was just on from there.

Earlone: Hmm.

Nigel: Wow. This is a really good example of why it's so important to listen to other people's work. When you want to learn more and get better at something, you've got to listen to what other people are doing. So, good for you for taking that on. Good job. Thank you.

Tony de Trinidad: Right on.

Earlone: Next up, we have Derrell Sadiq Davis.

Nigel: And you know what makes his different?

Earlone: What's that?

Nigel: His is done as like a diary.

Earlone: Okay.

Nigel: Yep. So, his story is going to unfold over different diary entries.

Earlone: Hmm.

Nigel: Nice idea, huh?

Earlone: This should be interesting.

Nigel: Mm-hmm.

Sadiq: I'm right here at the front gate by visiting, waiting for the dogs to walk through the gate. I'm so anxious. Me and my partner right here, Carrington, waiting to pick up the supplies and the dog.

Junebug is a service dog that I'm about to train. I've been waiting a month and a half now, just waiting for her to come in, just anticipating it, as part of a program here at San Quentin where we take these dogs in and we train them to be service animals. And I'm going to have

Junebug for about a month. And it's been like a whole lot of less sleeping, just tossing and turning, getting ready for this day. And it's finally here.

[background chatter]

So, Junebug just jumped at the mic. She jumped at what we call a dead cat. The dead cat is a cover for the mic to protect her from the wind. Junebug is going to be a handful.

Looking everywhere. She's like, confused. She's like, "What's going on? What is going on? What is going on?" This is something that she's never seen. She's making me more confused now.

Man: *Are you more nervous now that there's a lot of people walking around.*

Sadiq: *Yeah, so now I have to be mindful of these types of things all these people walking around. I can just imagine on the street, because you got to keep an eye on her and keep an eye on the surroundings, make sure she's not overstimulated. So now, I'm about to head back to the building, take all the supplies back, and just get acquainted with her. And she don't know how to stop moving, and I don't know how to stop being jittery. [laughs]*

Today is Saturday, July 8th. As soon as Junie seen me, she started wagging her tail. I was like, "Hey, mama. Hey, Mama." I spoke. She instantly jumped at me, responding with joy. Our walk from the cell to work was a struggle because she's curious about everything. She want to pick up everything, she wants to lick everything, she wants to chew on everything. So I got to constantly watch her. Every little thing that she put in her mouth, I had to take out. Old orange peelings, something that looked like some old baloney meats sticks, sometimes rocks. I'm on like daddy duties with her, basically. Now, I'm scanning the floor everywhere, as soon as I walked in, I had my vacuum eyes on.

So now, it's midnight, but as I was woken up by Junebug tossing and turning. She has a bed set up just right under my bed. She was just grunting, like just kind of whining just a little bit. My first instinct was she was having a bad dream. And I thought maybe it's nothing or maybe I'm tripping. So, I went back to sleep. About 30 minutes or so, maybe less than that, she was doing the same thing again. So, I put my hand on her to see if she was cold. And yes, that's what it was. Her body was a little cold, so I took my sheet that I was wrapped in and just put it on her. She went fast asleep, but now I was just up watching her, feeling proud, like I accomplished something. It's crazy. I stayed up for about 45 minutes and maybe an hour just to make sure. I felt like a dad watching this baby girl in the cradle or something. I don't know. Who knows?

[contemplative music]

Being with Junebug reminds me of my daughter. I wasn't there for my daughter when she was born. I wasn't there for the birth. I saw her for the first time in county jail right after I got arrested, but it was only behind the glass. Then, I was shipped off to Calipatria State Prison near Baja, California. I was in Calipatria for 10 years, so it was definitely too far for her to come visit with her mom, so I didn't see her for all of that time.

Then in 2022, I came to San Quentin, which it was about an hour from where she lives. I remember the first visit. So, when you first come into visiting, everybody get their hugs out the way, hugs and kisses. When it came time for her to hug me, she kind of came in with her head down. She was all shy and stuff, and she gave me, like a side hug with one arm. But I still embraced her because I knew what it was at the time. And then we sat down, and she couldn't even look at me for a long time. It took about an hour for her to actually just look at me and talk because she was just so nervous.

I was nervous too, but I just kept looking at her, and I kept telling, like, "You're actually my daughter. You look just like me." And just being with Junebug always remind me of the little things that I've missed with my daughter and the things that I want to do with my daughter when I get out. Just spend time with her.

Okay, June, it's time to go. So, me and Junebug just headed to the West Block yard so she could play around a little bit. We call it a little doggy park that we set up on the West Block yard. Junebug is a little aggressive in her playfulness, but she likes to establish her dominance. Don't you, girl? And then, we're like, "Okay. Okay, now it's time for the water." They all run into the same bowl, which is crazy. They're fighting to get their licks in.

So right now, she's kind of like laying down right by my feet with her eyes open. I know you. I know you hear me. Speak, Junie. [bark] Speak. [barks] Good girl. You's a good girl.

Is it on? Is it on? I'm going? So, the program with Junebug was supposed to be for a month, but three weeks in, we got this email saying that they were taking two dogs. So, they were supposed to just take Artemis and Wendell. But when the email came in, it had Junebug's name on it. Some of the guys came over like, "It might just be a typo, it might just be a typo." This morning when they came, the lady Susan was like, "So, we're taking Artemis, Wendell and Junebug."

[pensive music]

I put Junebug's vest on her. I put her leash on. Then went out for our Friday training routines one last time. I gave Junebug a hug and gave her some treats. Then, I handed the leash over to Susan. I watched her disappear behind the wall. So, I just jumped in the shower and tried to wash it off. But I think I'm still a little sad. Not too sad, but you probably can see it on my face, maybe. It feels like not having somebody when you were just so attached to that person, they just up and just leave without any explanation.

When I was a child, my dad just up and left. I ended up finding out that he went to prison when I was a kid, but I didn't know at the time, and I never seen him for a long time. And it kind of felt like that. Like you just up and leave one day and not know what's going on, and your mom just telling you he left, he'll be back, and he never came back. So, I kind of feel like that a little bit.

I'm a little sweaty, a little hot, and I'm a little distraught. I feel distraught.

Earlonne: *So, if you was to freestyle a poem right now about your dog that you just lost in a country song or something, what would- it-*

Sadiq: *[laughs] Oh, man. Oh, I miss my dog, I miss my dog. Where's Junie going to? I miss my dog. Oh, Junie come back because I miss my dog.*

[country song]

*Whoever would have thought I'll make a song about you on a Friday
Way back in July because when you walk through, you came into my life.
I knew you make it right. I never cared about what you used to do.
I looked into your eyes, and I smiled, oh, Junebug, come on back to me.
I miss my dog.
I miss my dog.
Oh, Junebug, where are you going to?
I miss my dog.*

Oh, Junie, come back because I miss my dog.

Earlonne: I did not see that song coming.

Nigel: Wait, you suggested it, I thought.

Earlonne: I was just bullshitting. I was just clowning. And he took that serious.

Nigel: I'm glad he did, because I love that part of the story. It's so charming.

Earlonne: Yeah, he did his thing. He did his thing. What do you think about his story though?

Nigel: I really like that he decided to do it as diary entries. We haven't really done that before.

Earlonne: And part of his diaries, he brought in the conversation about his daughter, not being around her and building that relationship back up. What'd you say? Good job?

Nigel: I'd say good job, Sadiq.

Earlonne: Definitely good job.

Sadiq: *Oh, June, come back. Because I miss my dog.*

Earlonne: So, Nyge, how you think it went?

Nigel: Well, you know what I really like the most about doing it is that it allowed these guys to experiment and sort of push the boundaries of what they know right now and that each person's kind of way of being comes across in their story. There's five very different ways of telling stories, and I think that bodes well for creativity to come.

Earlonne: I can tell you what I'm waiting on.

Nigel: What's that?

Earlonne: The pitch session at the end of the season. See who come with the best ideas, who come with the best through line for the story. So, we definitely going to see.

Nigel: I like it.

Rhashiyd: My name is Rhashiyd Zinnamon, sound designer for Ear Hustle. And I just finished helping produce that wonderful song you just heard. Special thanks to Katie Gilbert, Officer Wallis, and John Zeretzke who played the fiddle. Ear Hustle is produced by Nigel Poor, Earlonne Woods, Amy Standen, Bruce Wallace and Rahsaan "New York" Thomas. Shabnam Sigman is the managing producer. The producing team inside includes Steve Brooks, Derrell Sadiq Davis, Tony de Trinidad, Tam Nyguen, and inside managing producer Tony Tafoya. Earlonne Wood sound designs and engineers the show with help from Fernando Aruda, Rhashiyd Zinnamon, myself, and Derrell Sadiq Davis.

Thanks to Acting Warden Smith at San Quentin, Acting Warden Hill, and Lt. Newborg at the California Institution for Women for their support of the show. Thanks also to this woman here.

Lt. Berry: I am Lt. Guim'Mara Berry, the public information officer at San Quentin Rehabilitation Center, and I approve this episode.

Rhashiyd: This episode was made possible by The Just Trust, working to amplify the voices, vision and power of communities that are transforming the justice system. For more information about this episode, check out the show notes on Ear Hustle's website, earhustlesq.com. You can also find out more about the show on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram [@earhustlesq](https://www.instagram.com/earhustlesq). Back to you, Earlonne and Nyge.

Earlonne: Please don't forget to leave us a review on Apple Podcasts.

Nigel: And while you're at it, sign up for our newsletter, The Low Down. Subscribe at earhustlesq.com/newsletter.

Earlonne: Music for this episode comes from Antwan Williams, David Jassy, Fernando Aruda, Rhashiyd Zinnamon, Greg Sayers, Derell Sadiq Davis, and Matthew Jasparr.

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

Earlonne: Discover audio with vision at Radiotopia.fm.

Nigel: I'm Nigel Poor.

Earlonne: I'm Earlonne Woods.

In Unison: Thanks for listening.

I grab it with my gummy part of my mouth, and then I switch the kernels around and then I make them a little bit soft and then I crunch them on both sides. That way, I get that buttery flavor all the way out when I do it like that.

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

End of Episode