

Ear Hustle
Episode 98: That World
November 15, 2023

Mary Dahlke: My name is Mary Dahlke. My daughter Ellen is a really good friend of Nigel and Earlonne's, and therefore they have become friends of mine also. The following episode of Ear Hustle contains language that may not be appropriate for all listeners. Discretion is advised.

[Ear Hustle theme]

Woman: *It's not live, baby just--*

Woman: *Okay. wait, wait.*

Woman: *We got to go with old faithful, our tried-and-true. We sung this a thousand times in church, so we won't forget the words. Okay.*

Nigel: Earlonne, do you know what's one of the things I've learned about prison?

Earlonne: Nah, tell me.

Nigel: [laughs] Okay, so I've noticed that a lot of people really love to perform.

Unison: ♪*Amazing grace, how great how sweet*♪

Nigel: So, I always think it's kind of fun as an icebreaker to kind of stick a microphone in someone's face and ask them to sing. But maybe it's actually stressful. I don't know.

[laughter]

Woman: *Ok, you lead, I'll follow.*

Woman: *Okay, we're going to do a-- [crosstalk]*

Earlonne: Maybe to some people, but you're going to get those that soon as that mic come in front of their face, they get to perform.

Nigel: They got to take the chance, right?

Unison: ♪*Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wrench like me--* ♪

Earlonne: This our first official visit to the Central California Women's Facility, or CCWF. Some people call it Chowchilla, which is the name of the town it's in.

Nigel: CCWF has the only level four yard for women in California. And, Earlonne, did you know it's actually the largest women's prison in the world?

Earlonne: That's crazy, in the world?

Nigel: Yes.

Earlonne: And this one has a certain reputation.

Nigel: Yeah. I don't know if it's deserved, but I've always heard that CCWF is a pretty tough place.

Earlone: Well, I mean, level 4's are high security prisons. If you're a woman and you commit a serious crime, this is where they going to put you first.

Nigel: Right, so for the lot of reasons, I was really curious to see this place.

So, we drove out early that morning and met our escort, who took us through security.

Earlone: Then we jumped into a golf cart and we drove through this big, wide, open area where they had some industrial buildings, it was a real desolate area. There was no one around.

Earlone: *Hey, Nyge, do you want a bag of coal?*

Nigel: *I think I'm going to fall out.*

Nigel: Yeah. I have to say, first of all, the guy driving the cart was going pretty fast, and I was like, we don't fall out of this thing. But the other thing was, I'd never seen a prison like that. You know what I thought about? You know when you're driving in the middle of nowhere and you see those big storage buildings? You don't know what the hell is inside of them.

Earlone: Right, right.

Nigel: That's what it was like. Just picture like we're sitting in this golf cart, I was almost grabbing onto your legs, I didn't want to fall out. So, eventually we arrived at this big old warehouse building.

Earlone: We walked in and that's where we met these five incarcerated women who had agreed to speak with us.

Nigel: *Could you each introduce yourselves?*

Unique: *Oh, my name is Unique.*

Good: *My name's good.*

Charity: *My name is Charity.*

Grace: *My name is Grace.*

Ponce: *My name is Ponce. I'll go by my last name.*

Nigel: *My name is Nigel, by the way. Nice to meet you all. I don't know if any of you have heard Ear Hustle, the podcast that we do about life inside prison. So, we want to hear the small, curious things. We like to tell stories that nobody else hears. How do you see things? Maybe stuff you've never told anybody because you might have thought it was weird. But we're here to listen to all of it. So, we're super happy to be here. And yeah, we hope that we'll be coming back more often, but we really feel strongly about getting women's voices because like in everything in the world, women seem to get the second part of every meal, and we want to make it the first part of the meal. [laughs]*

Woman: *Okay.*

Woman: Okay.

Woman: Sounds great.

Woman: Women empowerment.

Nigel: Exactly, exactly.

We were starting from scratch with these women, weren't we?

Earlonne: Yeah. I mean, they didn't know about us and we didn't know about them. So basically, it was "come sit down and tell us about yourself."

Nigel: Pretty much. So, today, we're going to meet five residents of the Central California Women's Facility, or CCWF. I'm Nigel Poor.

Earlonne: I'm Earlonne Woods, and this is Ear Hustle from PRX's Radiotopia.

Ponce: My name is Trancita Ponce. I have been in custody for 23 years, four months, since the age of 18. I am 42 years old now.

Earlonne: And your sentence is?

Ponce: 24 years, eight months.

Nigel: Ponce has a very solid, commanding presence. And, Earlonne, when I first saw her, I've got to be honest, I was a little intimidated.

Earlonne: Really?

Nigel: Yeah.

Earlonne: So, damn, you had to do the--

Ponce: The whole time. I was a problematic inmate when I first came in.

Nigel: Could you tell us a story from that time when you were problematic.

Earlonne: When you were hood?

Ponce: Oh, when I was hood, I have a lot of problematic stories from that time. I was very angry if you didn't look like me or if you didn't talk like me. I just had this standard in my brain that if you weren't a southerner, you weren't looking like me, that we had no conversations.

Earlonne: Break down southerner, because that might get people, they might think of the south.

Ponce: Southerner meaning used to be involved in gangs. Gangs represent South Side in Riverside County, LA County, San Diego County. So, I was a southerner. And at that time, when I first came to prison, I stood by that.

Earlonne: When you're involved in a gang in prison, you got to follow a lot of rules, including who you can and can't share cell with. And the big no-no's are sex offenders, people who hurt children, and in some cases, homosexuals.

Nigel: The prison is going to assign you whoever they assign you. So, if you end up with someone you have a problem with, according to gang rules, you got to get out of that situation as quickly as possible.

Ponce: *I had a roommate, I found out she was a child case. She drowned her own son. When I found out she did that, of course, me being me at that time, I got up, I assaulted her, I hit her, I took her off her bunk, I spit on her, and I threw her belongings outside of my room. No child cases was allowed to live with me. No child cases. Nobody who told, nobody who was involved with the officers. Nobody. You had to have something for me. Drugs, alcohol, sexy woman, that's how I lived my life at that time. These are my rules. You're going to follow them. You can't wear your shoes in my room. You have to be out the room by 09:00. Be out. Be up in the morning, shower, make sure your bed's made. I don't want to hear the cops looking for you. Don't bring no officers here. And that's how I would have greeted you.*

I was an addict. I became a heroin addict in here. If I needed to get my drugs and if you have some canteen or something and I didn't have it, I was taking it. That's what I did. For many years, I did that.

Nigel: *Would you have classified yourself as a bully?*

Ponce: *Yes, I would have.*

Nigel: *I really appreciate you talking about being a bully because I swear, out of all the stories we've done, nobody ever talks about. Somehow, they were never the bully, even though they probably were. This is something I've always wanted to ask a bully. When you see somebody getting-*

Earlonne: *Ask a former bully.*

Ponce: *Former bully. [laughs]*

Nigel: *Okay, sorry. [crosstalk] Back then, when you were a bully and you saw somebody being hurt and they were crying or asking for mercy or help, and you would just watch, what was the feeling you had inside watching?*

Ponce: *Power. Control. That's exactly what I felt. Even in my crime, I was the bully. I led four other people into hurting an innocent girl. She cried and she begged, and I laughed, and I felt so empowered. I felt so much of control. I felt like a leader. Just to have another human being fearful of you, that was powerful to me.*

Nigel: *And there's nothing that person could have said-*

Ponce: *Nothing*

Nigel: *-to stop that.*

Ponce: *Absolutely. There is nothing nobody could have said to me. I look back in all the people that I harmed and hurt, and I feel bad about it. I heard a story once a few years back, somebody went to SAP building here. It's where they do victims impact, parenting. A girl came in there and was like, "I just came back to prison. And there's this girl here, and I'm so scared of her. She was my roommate, and she stole my fan, and she went and sold it. And I'm just so scared if I see her, what she'll do to me." And the person at the time was like, "Who are you talking about?" And my aka was Loca. And she said, Loca. That hurts me that I caused so much pain to people. It hurts me a lot.*

Nigel: Did you remember her?

Ponce: I did not remember her. There were so many things I did to people. I mean, I've fought people, I've cut almost a lady's ear off just to get her jewelry because she had a diamond earring, and the connection or somebody wanted it, that's what I did. For many years I did that, a lot of years.

Nigel: And how did it feel when you heard that story that a woman was afraid of you?

Ponce: It made me sad. It made me think about it. It made me not want to have no more stories like that. Even talking about it now, it's like, I don't like that person. It's the truth. It's who I was. And it's hurtful to hear that.

Grace: My name is Grace Coleman. I've been here one year as of a couple weeks ago, and I've been down for almost three years. I'm here on a DUI case. I got second degree murder, 21 years to life.

Nigel: And how old are you?

Grace: I'm 24. I was in school at Santa Barbara, and the pandemic hit, so then I moved home, and I was doing everything online. And all of a sudden, we had all this free time to just still be living in our college towns with the drinking and the drugs and whatever, but having no, really, sense of responsibility. And for me, just completely lost my way. So, yeah, life was normal until it wasn't. [chuckles]

Earlone: Got you.

Nigel: Is this your first time in prison?

Grace: This is my first time in prison, yes. When I first got here, people would see me and they would automatically assume, "Oh DUI case?" And I'm like, "Yep."

Earlone: They didn't hit you with credit card fraud, EDD?

Grace: They make bets, right? So, I was working in the kitchen, and I guess all of them started being like, "Okay, she's either one of those pretty bitches that killed her boyfriend, or she's here on a DUI case," and they're making bets on it. I come out one day, and they're like, "So what are you here for?" There's a certain stereotype around DUI cases that maybe we think that we shouldn't be here, that you just have to break the barriers with. We're all here for something that we did. Whether I took a knife and stabbed someone or I got behind the wheel of a vehicle while severely intoxicated. I went through a pretty gnarly experience when I first got here. I think it's your typical what people get scared about.

Nigel: Can you tell us about it?

Grace: Yeah, yeah. So, I got here. And when you first get here, and especially not coming to prison before, you don't really know what to expect. You don't know what rights you have.

Nigel: When Grace walked into the room, she was carrying this little notebook, and turns out, it was a journal.

Earlone: Yep. And in it was a story that Grace wrote about the very first bunker she had when she arrived at CCWF.

Nigel: So, we asked Grace to read the story to us. Actually, it's really a journal entry about something that happened to Grace when she was in reception, which is the first place you go to when you arrive here for the first time. And she was assigned to share a cell with another new arrival, who was, of course, a total stranger.

Grace: *Her episode started in the happy heights of a good high, but soon led down the pathway of paranoia into the dumps of depression. In those moments, I was the enemy. She would grab me, punch the bunks, bombard me with schizophrenic uncertainty, moaning and masturbating all afternoon long, she would go through the motions of her mental illness controlling her. The vicious cycle continued for hours on end. The happy heights would include moments of mysterious communications with the ghosts of my past. She would write letters to my great aunts, my grandmother, my great grandmother. I'd catch her laying happily in giggly conversation with one of the voices in her head. When I was curious enough to ask her who she was speaking to, she would smile and say, "Your mother."*

She convinced herself at some point, even me, that my ancestors were looking after me inside this cell and wanted me to know I was going to be okay. Talking to my ancestors was her way of making peace from the moaning miseries of the nights before. It was like waking up hungover, attempting to find your phone and bra on the aftermath of last night's madness. I reached up to God, asking him, "Why this test?"

This whole prison situation has definitely been full of fear for me.

Nigel: *What are the things that you're most fearful of?*

Grace: *I mean, sometimes I get fearful of just the way that I talk. I definitely have that valley girl, whatever. So, I think that I almost feel like, better putting on a front or being someone else in order to protect myself from that vulnerability of having that. Because sometimes it's like, I'll just start talking in a group and people are like, "Oh," [laughs] so, I've definitely put on different masks and different fronts of trying to be someone I'm not in jail and in here and just keeping to myself and things like that in order to prevent myself from being bullied or from being vulnerable and just a way of protecting myself.*

Nigel: *You said prison you thought would be terrifying, you couldn't do it. Is it terrifying?*

Grace: *It's not. It's not because I'm around so many amazing women who my dad was reminding me of this, right now, prison is my career. Right now, prison is my life. And just like, no matter where you are in life, it's what you make it.*

Nigel: *Do you think part of thinking about it being terrifying was physical fear or the fear of all of a sudden, your life being not at all what you expected and looking at time stretching out ahead of you and trying to figure out, how do I make my life now?*

Grace: *Definitely a little bit of both. It was the physical fear. I mean, I think when people picture prison, they picture fights, drugs, and people getting stabbed and all of these scary things. I mean, coming here on a life sentence, that entails the possibility of this being the rest of my life. So, any dreams or goals or anything that you had for yourself established out there, you feel like are taken away from you. You definitely grieve the life that you thought you were meant to have.*

Charity: *My name is Charity Williams, and I have been incarcerated since 2014, but I've been in Chowchilla since 2017.*

Nigel: Earlonne, what was your reaction to Charity when you first saw her?

Earlonne: Ah, I would say maybe a midwife.

Nigel: Well, okay, I get why you're saying that, because there was something about her, that there was a lot of inner light or something. She seemed like someone who was into taking care of other people.

Earlonne: Right.

Nigel: I mean, she seemed physically strong and very capable.

So, what is your personality as a bunkie.

Charity: *In the room, I'm actually much more soft spoken than I am in public because when I go to my house or my housing unit, because people get offended when you call it home or house, but I don't. That's my quiet time. That's my quiet space. And for the majority of the people that you talk to that have been here for a while or they have lengthy sentences, that's what we describe is that's our quiet place. So, when I go in there, I just get my head right, and I can just be cool and I can be calm, and I don't have to talk, and I just do my college homework or I watch church on TV or whatever, but that's my quiet time. That's my peace.*

Nigel: Can you talk a little bit about people getting offended when you call it home?

Charity: *Some people, they view home as their family. So, when you refer to this place as, "Oh, this is my home," or, "I'm going back to the house," or, "I'm going back home after work," they look at as it triggers them, because they're like, "That's not where my family is. That's not my home," and I understand that. But as someone who was professionally homeless before I came to Chowchilla, I understand that home for me is where my heart is.*

Nigel: Professionally homeless.

Charity: *I hopped freight trains for almost a decade before I came to Chowchilla. I've been back and forth across the United States more times than I can even count.*

Nigel: And do you think living that way prepared you in some way to be in prison? Were there helpful things that you learned that you could adapt to life in prison, or was it more detrimental?

Charity: *Well, I learned how to budget money really well. I learned how to survive with just myself and my dog on \$20 a week. So, living here, living off of canteen, well, now it's a little bit more expensive, but you learn how to budget, and you do learn how to live small. My backpack was generally 25 to 30 pounds, but that's just because my life was in there. And if you're hopping freight trains, you now have to run with all of those things or throw it or catch it or whatever. It's not worth it.*

Earlonne: How do the lifestyle change from being a hobo to being a prisoner?

Charity: *The biggest change was the walls. I mean, I can say this, this has kept me sane, is that right outside of Chowchilla or outside the CCWF, we have the freight lines that run by, so I still hear the trains. I can hear a train engine coming from a mile away. So, even when it's silent and the horn's not going off, I can still hear the engines because it's really close. I can hear the horns. We have the beautiful scenery out on the main yard with the mountains and when it snows, it's just breathtaking. And then when it rains too, like the smell of the wet earth and especially the smell of rust will just take me right back to it.*

So, that kind of keeps me from just being locked into this space, having all of those memories and those stories that even when I get depressed, even when I'm feeling stuck and I'm getting claustrophobic, I can just go back in my mind and think about those times when I was out and I was free. So, even though my body may be incarcerated, my mind and my spirit really aren't.

Nigel: *So, you really do seem to have grasped this idea that home is where you are.*

Charity: *Absolutely.*

Nigel: *Yeah.*

Charity: *A lot of times I'll sit there in the morning, I'll watch the sun come up, and it's really just seeing anything other than someone in blue, seeing anything other than someone in green, seeing anything other than these buildings. So, I'll sit and I'll face away from the prison and I'll just watch the sun come up over the road and with the geese and the little grass eating or whatever. And it's nice, and it brings me comfort.*

My biggest habit that I had when I first got locked up is when I would lay down to go to sleep at night, I would rock myself back and forth, and to me, it would mimic the feeling of being on a train and it would help me fall asleep. I still do it.

Nigel: *Just like that.*

Charity: *It's more jerky. It's not comforting and swaying at all. It's just a jerky motion. Yeah.*

Nigel: *And you still do that?*

Charity: *Yes, I still do it. And it mimics the same feeling that I got when I would lay down on train.*

Earlone: *We're going to take a short break. When we come back, we'll hear more about what life is like at CCWF.*

Nigel: *And the number one thing, everybody talks about in here.*

Earlone: *At every prison, Nyge.*

Nigel: *That's right. Hygiene.*

Earlone: *I thought you was going to say Ear Hustle. [Nigel laughs]*

Good: *[rapping] I hear these cells. I hear these cells are calling. They holler in. We really want your body. I'm waiting on Ken Burns to come and doc this. My work ethic is so impressive from the shoe to wear boots Don't bet against me. I'm a beast. I'm unleashed.*

Earlone: *Good is a rapper, and she's pretty good.*

Nigel: *Yeah. And you get a sense of her energy from listening to her. She's very wound up and you feel like she's just this spring that's going to go ba.ba, ba bab ba.*

Carmela Mose: *My name is Carmela Mose. I've been incarcerated in the California justice system since 18. I started off at this prison, got kicked out, went to VSP. When VSP shut down, I went to CIW, got kicked out, and came back here.*

Earlonne: So, how long you been locked up?

Carmela Mose: 20 years.

Earlonne: Why is your name Good and you getting kicked out of all these prisons?

Carmela Mose: Because I aspire to be good. [laughs] I aspire-- I have my defects of course, as does everybody else, but I aspire to be good.

Earlonne: I was interested in the fact that Good has spent time both at CCWF and the other place that you and I go to on a regular, which is CIW near LA.

Nigel: Yeah. I mean, they're such different places.

Earlonne: Night and day.

Nigel: I mean, CIW is smaller. There's grass and trees around. It's closer to the town where it's situated, and I think it's fair to say that it's more integrated into society.

Earlonne: True. I can agree with that.

Nigel: So, a lot of the people that we met at CIW had been here, and they talked about how grateful they were to be at CIW versus here. If you could, would you go back to CIW?

Carmela Mose: I think at the time I was there, it's so close to the city, and it feels so free that I wasn't ready in my rehabilitation to accept the street being so close to me. On the main yard, you can look out and the city's right there, you see the street lights, you see the cars going by, and here you don't see none of that. It's the almond field, we don't see out. It surprised me that how much it disturbed me to be so close to somebody's community, and I wasn't ready to be.

Nigel: What sorts of feelings did it bring up?

Carmela Mose: Just how safe am I really? What kind of problems would I experience in the community that could lead me back to prison?

Nigel: Interesting. I thought you were going to say it made you long to be out there.

Carmela Mose: It made me concerned.

Nigel: Do you still feel that way?

Carmela Mose: Yes.

Nigel: So, does it feel emotionally better to be in a place where you can't see the community?

Carmela Mose: To avoid life, yes. To accept life, no. I need more life experience. That's going to give me the ultimate answers to my question. Am I safe enough to return back into society?

Earlonne: Are you safe enough far as have you changed your life, or has society itself changed? If you're asking for society, hell no.

Carmela Mose: *Good question. Because that's what I'm hearing all the time. Like, people are super disrespectful out there, and I have a problem with my space, and I say please and thank you and excuse me, and it doesn't get me anywhere.*

Nigel: It was really interesting to hear Good's voice change here. Her whole body got really tense, and she started talking so fast. It's hard to follow her.

Earlone: Yeah, I mean, I think she's talking about getting triggered, and that's what we're hearing in her voice. I think a lot of people in prison have that concern that when they get out, are they going to face the same type of challenges that got them in prison in the first place? Because people change, but a lot of that shit is still in them.

Nigel: Right, right. And I think it's actually a really honest and brave thing to talk about.

Earlone: Definitely.

Carmela Mose: *I don't want to be the person who psyched out fighting in the thrifty line, because I want a triple scoop of whatever they have out there now. And somebody cuts me and is like, "Well, fuck you. I don't give a fuck about how you feel or what you got going on." Like how am I going to handle that situation? I'm very violent. I can be very violent.*

Nigel: *Mm. Still?*

Carmela Mose: *[sighs] I think now I'm interested in defending myself. So, what I'm learning is when I do have a threat and I do feel like I need to protect myself to not engage, because from my trauma, I'm already the first one to hit, because I want to get it done as fast as possible. So, I'm working on, instead of engaging, retreating, stepping back, making sure that I could just defend myself to where I feel safe, that I'm not going to get fucked up too bad and remove myself when the appropriate time manifests itself.*

*♪My work ethic is so impressive
From the shoe to work boots, don't bet against me
I'm a beast, I'm unleashed
Y'all can't chain me
Spend my vacation, EOP
No shame could stand and take me because they still slide right off me♪*

[Good's song playing]

Earlone: Whaat?

Nigel: Cool, right?

Earlone: Man, she did her shit.

Nigel: She did. So Good recently won a contest in the hip hop artist Lecrae. Earlone, who actually does a lot to support prisons. He's been into San Quentin and stuff, and he came in and produced that song with her, and it's been stuck in my ears all week, yes.

Earlone: Nyge, I took you for a Tupac fan.

Nigel: [Laughs]

[Good's song playing]

Unique: *My name is Unique Bishop. I've been locked up for 16 years. I mean, I've been through the storm in here. Where everybody goes down for one fight and the police don't know who did it. So, we all going to jail. I didn't been to the hole for things that didn't even have anything to do with me.*

Earlonne: Unique is the one who was given the Beyonce treatment to *Amazing Grace* at the top of the episode.

Nigel: Yes, she was. And I think that says everything you need to know about her. She's lively, bouncy, but at the same time, she's been in prison for quite a while, and she's seen it all.

Unique: *I had had a roommate that got butt naked before, basically banging on the door just so she can go to EOP, which is the crazy place, because she wanted to be with her girlfriend. I'm like, "Wait, wait, wait, what's going on? You can't do that. You about to get all of us in problem."*

Nigel: Yeah.

Unique: *They don't care. A lot of these women are just broken. They feel like, "This is what the judge said, so this is where I'm going to be, and this is what I'm going to do. I don't care."*

Earlonne: One of the things that sets CCWF apart from other prisons we've been to is the way people are housed.

Nigel: Yes. So, at San Quentin and CIW, the women's prison near LA, most people are housed in a two-person cell. So, there's one bunk bed, one sink, one toilet.

Earlonne: Yeah, but here at CCWF, people live in eight-man rooms or eight person cells. So, each room has four bunk beds and a shared bathroom and shower.

Nigel: *Would you say that the four other women that you live with, do you consider them friends or acquaintances, or are they people you would go to with a problem, or do you keep your distance?*

Unique: *I don't keep my distance because I'm actually a people's person. I laugh a lot, I play a lot, and I don't hold grudges for too long. I have been in a room with them for some time now, and we have a good relationship.*

Earlonne: We said earlier that hygiene is a big deal at CCWF.

Nigel: Really, it seems like it is at every prison.

Earlonne: Yep. So, it's no surprise that pretty much everyone had a story about something that had happened in one of the showers that they all share.

Unique: *I lived with a lady who didn't like to take showers, didn't like to shave, brush her teeth, and I kept telling myself, I'm not trying to be controlling, but something has to give because days have passed and this cannot be happening. It got the whole room smelling. I'm like, "When was the last time you took a shower?" And she was like, "I took one two days ago." And I said, "No, you didn't take one two days ago." And she was like, "Well, I'm going back to sleep." I looked at her, and then I looked at my other roommates, I was like, "Something got to give. I don't know what it is, but something has to give."*

I was going back into my old negative thoughts because I was like, "Do I got to throw a bucket of water with bleach in it on her or what?" But then I'm like, "I could think of a different way to do it." So, when she woke up or whatever, I talked to her. "I said, is it possible you need help to shower?" Because she's a big lady. I said, "I'll help you." And my roommates was like, "You will help her?" I'm like, "We either going to help her or you all want to smell this." [laughs] So, she said, "You can help me, but you ain't going to like what you see." [laughs] So, I was like, "Wait, what?" She was like, "I'm going to shower. I'm going to do it myself because I don't want nobody to see what I got." So, I'm like, "All right."

The lady was like, "Okay, but I still need a little bit of your assistance." So, I washed her back off and whatever, and she said, "This is what I didn't want to show you." And she turned around and literally her stomach was past her knees. She had a tumor. And I was telling her, "You're still supposed to shower, whether you have that or not." And she was just like, "I'm trying, but as of right now, I'm just going to lay in my bed, and if you want to continue to wash me, then you can continue to watch me. But this is what I'm going to do." So that's one.

Nigel: So, she couldn't lift up her--

Unique: No, she couldn't lift it up. And I did it though. I helped her that day.

Nigel: Earlonne, I was really moved by Unique in the way she offered to be a caretaker to this woman.

Earlonne: Right.

Nigel: I think a lot of people wouldn't do it. So, to me, there's a tenderness to her.

Earlonne: Yeah. I think with another group of women or another group of bunkies, they would have just gotten rid of her. They'd have moved her somewhere because hygiene is very serious in prison.

Nigel: Yes.

Earlonne: If you want somebody to snap on you, be smelly.

Nigel: Yep. And whenever something is contentious, that usually means that there are a ton of unwritten rules that you just have to know.

Earlonne: That woman, Grace, we talked to earlier, she's the one who came in on the DUI and has only been down a short time. She had to learn all these rules fast.

Grace: *Sometimes it feels like if there's a hair on the floor, it's like the end of the world kind of thing.*

Nigel: *And you've got long hair.*

Grace: *Yeah, I have naturally frizzy, curly hair, so it's not always the easiest to tame. Some of the rules are having to wake up at a certain time. Everyone in the room gets up anywhere between like 4:00 AM, 5:00 AM. Even if you say you're new here and you have a schedule that doesn't start till later in the day, you have people that have that expectation on you that you still have to get up and shower and-*

Nigel: Why?

Grace: -have all of-- At least get up and take a shower before 7:00 AM.

Nigel: What's the reasoning behind that?

Grace: I almost couldn't tell you, but I mean, it's really easy for people to see you as dirty. Being a white girl in prison, there's all of these stereotypes that are thrown on you almost immediately of being like that, like dirty white girl and which was--

Nigel: What do you mean?

Grace: I think it's just like a term that people just throw around. It's basically just like if you don't wake up and shower at a certain time, then you're looked at as dirty or irresponsible.

Nigel: So, literally that you're like a lazy dirty white girl?

Grace: Yeah. Every time you go outside, depending on what room you're in. But every time you go outside, you're expected to shower right when you come back in from the outside because of the worry of bugs or germs or anything like that. When you think about life at home, it's like maybe you go out to walk the dog or you come back and you're not always jumping in the shower right away like it's the end of the world if you're not. So those are expectations that are definitely set on us very early on.

Nigel: Where do you think that comes from, this real focus on hygiene and cleanliness?

Grace: I think definitely in prison we feel like we don't have control over many, many things. So, having the control, at least over the space in the room, what people do, I think it has something to do with wanting to have that control over something when so much else feels out of our control. I think it just has to do with being in such a confined space that you try to have these rules to balance that out as much as you can.

Charity: We had this person named Shane who lived in our room.

Earlonne: This is Charity, the former train hopper. She had a shower story for us too.

Nigel: Earlonne, everyone's got one. We got to write a book about these.

Earlonne: I don't know. Can I write a book about women's showers? No, I'm just messing with you.

Nigel: We can.

[laughter]

Charity: And Shane was a dope fiend and did not last very long anywhere because they were very disorganized, is the nice way to put it. He was a mess. He's a trans man. There was one time Shane took a shower, and the next person went to go in behind him, and there were shit in the shower. They were like, "What the fuck is this shit in the shower?"

We go through the whole room, like, "Did you shit in the shower? Did you shit in the shower?" We knew who's shit in the shower. We know it's Shane. So, he like, "No, I wouldn't do that. What the fuck?" And we're like, "Well, Shane, you're the last person in the shower, first and foremost." And second of all, "None of us would do that." My roommate Lili, she's like, "Shane, I'm serious. Get the fuck off your bed right now and go clean the shower, or I'm going to beat your ass." And he's like, "Fine fucking bitches, I hate you." He's cussing us out, having a whole mental breakdown. But he gets down off his bunk and he cleans the shower.

He comes back out, and coming from someone who is professionally homeless, I have really decent standards of cleanliness.

So, I'm watching Shane, he finishes cleaning, comes out the shower, takes his shower shoes, puts him up, gets right back on his bed. He's wearing the exact same outfit and the exact same socks. He didn't even take his socks off to clean the shitty shower before he got back on his bed. And I'm just sitting here, and I'm just, all I can see is the socks, I have blinders on. It's all I could see is these shit socks on the bed. I very calmly just say, "Shane, did you wear those socks in the shower when you cleaned the shower?" He's like, "Yeah. What the fuck is the problem? I'm just like, "Shane, if you don't take those fucking socks off your feet right now, off your bed, I'm going to beat you."

He sits up, he's all huffy, he takes the socks off, he throws them on the floor. And so now the socks are in the middle of the one area which is technically the middle of the kitchen. And my friend Lili is looking at him, and she's like, "Shane, did you just take those shitty socks off of your feet and throw them on the floor? Like, you couldn't even pick them up and put in the laundry basket?" The next unlock, my roommate, she goes to the cop shop, and there was this officer working. His name's Ramirez. He's no longer with us, but he was a special kind of individual and not the cool kind. And she goes up to him, she's like, "I need a bed move." He's like, "What?" She's like, "He shit in my shower. I need a bed move." He's like, "What's his name?" [laughs] Seriously, he was out the room that night. Because it was like, at that point, I was like, literally, I'm going to beat you if you don't-- the socks.

Earlone: Nyge, I know this is a funny story, but it does point out the fact that in prison life there is a code of conduct, and people, I guess, got to know their place.

Nigel: Right. And what's expected of them.

Earlone: Yeah, pretty much.

Nigel: And I know that could sound really oppressive, and I'm sure it is. But over time, it seems for some people, that code of conduct actually becomes reassuring.

Earlone: Yeah, I think that's the real danger of prison. It's a tightly controlled environment, and if you're in it too long, for some people, it gets hard to leave.

Ponce: *I've been incarcerated so long, the fear of getting out, I don't know that world. So, I'm so fearful what that looks like. You know what? I feel safe in here.*

Nigel: This is Ponce, the former bully that we heard at the top of the show. And out of all these women that we met, she's the one who's actually getting out, like, really soon.

Nigel: *So, you're saying you're actually nervous about getting out, that you feel safer in here? Do you still feel that way? Do you still feel safer in here?*

Ponce: *I am really trying to grasp my mind out about parole now. I'm excited. I am very fearful, if I could be honest. It's like the same thing I could describe and mean being a little 18-year-old scare girl coming to prison. I didn't know this world. But now it's the same thing. I'm going to get out a 43-year-old woman, and it's a world I don't know.*

Nigel: *You just said this was your home for 25 years, and we were talking to some other women about how people get offended sometimes if you call prison home, how do you think about that?*

Ponce: *Well, you know what? For some people here, we do make it our home. We have a canteen, I would call it my store. We have a room, I'd call it my home. You go to the library, you go to the park, the yard, you just get invented with it. And if you have a sentence, it's going to be your home for a long time. And then you get comfortable. Like the room I was in, I made it beautiful. I don't get offended. It was my home for a lot of years.*

Nigel: Earlonne, I got to say, going to CCWF was an amazing experience.

Earlonne: Yes, it was. Meeting a lot of new individuals, adding a lot of voices to the show.

Nigel: I know.

Earlonne: Just giving them the platform to do them.

Nigel: Well, it's just so cool. Like, you show up at a place you don't know anyone, they don't know you, you have no idea what to expect. And we were really able to connect in a meaningful way.

Earlonne: And we had a Motley Crew.

Nigel: We had a Motley Crew all around. But they were so poetic and insightful. I think in some ways some of the most honest stories we've heard about prison life.

Earlonne: We definitely met a few different people with very different perspectives.

Nigel: We got to get back there soon.

Earlonne: Indeed, we do.

[rap song playing]

Earlonne: Ear Hustle is produced by me, Earlonne Woods, Nigel Poor, Amy Standen, Bruce Wallace, and Rahsaan "Ran a Marathon" Thomas. Shabnam Sigman is the managing producer. The producing team inside San Quentin includes Steve Brooks, Derrell Sadiq Davis, Tony de Trinidad, and Tam Nguyen. The inside managing producer is Tony Tafoya.

Nigel: Earlonne Woods sound designs and engineers the show with help from Fernando Arruda, Rhashiyd Zinnamon, and Derrell Sadiq Davis.

[rap song playing]

Earlonne: Thanks to acting Warden Smith and Lt. Berry at San Quentin and Warden De La Cruz at CCWF.

Nigel: And also big thanks to this woman here.

Lt. Monique Williams: Hello, my name is Lt. Monique Williams from the Central California Women's Facility. I am the Public Information Officer, the Administrative Assistant to Warden Anissa De La Cruz and I approve this episode.

[rap song playing]

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.

Nigel: For more information about this episode, check out our show notes on Ear Hustle's website, earhustlesq.com.

Earlonne: You can also find out more about the show on all the socials [@earhustlesq](https://twitter.com/earhustlesq).

Nigel: And do you want more Ear Hustle? Subscribe to Ear Hustle Plus.

Earlonne: We've got bonus episodes and live chats where we get to chat it up with the listeners about the show.

Nigel: Earlonne, I've always wanted to do that. I'm super excited about this.

Earlonne: I did it recently. It was fun.

Nigel: Ooh, I can't wait.

Earlonne: Sign up at earhustlesq.com/plus.

Nigel: And please don't forget to sign up for our newsletter, The Low Down, where you can see photos and other extra content about the episode.

Earlonne: Subscribe to that at earhustlesq.com/newsletter and while you're at it, leave us a review on Apple Podcasts, please. This is a big help for the show and we really appreciate your words.

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.

Unison: Thanks for listening.

[rap song playing]

Earlonne: Hey, Nyge.

Nigel: Yes?

Earlonne: Did you like that song?

Nigel: You know I loved it. And I'm so thankful that Lecrae gave us permission to use the version he produced with Good.

Earlonne: Good looking out, Lecrae.

Nigel: Thank you so much. And I know it's late, but can we thank you for that time you came into San Quentin all those years ago. So wonderful to meet you in person. Really appreciate it.

Earlonne: Yeah, thanks again, Lecrae. We definitely appreciate you.

Nigel: Thank you.

Earlonne: And it's crazy. We threw out a Hail Mary. We reached out to him on social and he responded.

Nigel: What a good man.

Earlonne: Ooh. Episode number six,

Nigel: [laughs] Number six, that's not very impressive.

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

End of Episode