



Episode 42: Catch A Kite 5
Air Date: May 14, 2020

[00:00:00] **Earlone Woods:** Hey, Nyge. How you doin'?

Nigel Poor: Hey, E. Well, I guess my closet and I are doing just fine. Thank you.

Earlone: Glad to hear it. As you remember, a while back we did a call out asking folks in prison to send a snail mail updates about what's happening inside prison during this COVID-19 pandemic. And...

Nigel: We finally got some responses.

Earlone: Mail takes its time coming out of prison.

Nigel: Yep. So, let's start with Richard Gross. He's in Pennsylvania at the State Correctional Institute at Phoenix. He writes, "At first the coronavirus didn't mean much here. It dominated the news cycle and fed the jailhouse rumor mills, also known as inmate.com." That's what you call "Prison Twitter."

Earlone: Nah, actually Nyge. That's what your other co-host Rahsaan called "Prison Twitter."

Nigel: That's right.

Earlone: As you know, prison do produce a *ton* of gossip.

Nigel: Richard's letter continues, "It got everyone's attention when they canceled all visits and stopped all our outside volunteers coming in. As a sop, they threw us

some free phone calls and emails. Next, they handed out masks made by Pennsylvania Correctional Industries. The library limited attendance to only ten people at a time, as long as they were wearing their masks.

Earlone: Whew. Ten people. That's not a lot! You know, the library is one of them spots where you hang out at. It'd be like 30 people, 40 people in there, and then it'd be people walking back and forth. People could be on the computers, people could be reading books. So yeah, ten people, that's only the legal beagles. [Nigel laughs]

Nigel: Richard goes on to say that things are changing all of the time, "Last Sunday I woke up to find my cell block locked down." They didn't tell us why. I found out from a local radio station that the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections had a case of coronavirus at Phoenix Prison. They opened up four cells at a time letting eight guys out for about half an hour to an hour to use the phone or take a shower. Commissary has not been delivered. But they do our laundry. They come by a few times a day to take our temperatures. This could last a long time." And a sad postscript to that: since Richard sent his letter, the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections reported that one person incarcerated at that prison where he is, did die from complications related to COVID-19.

Earlone: That is sad. [Nigel affirms] But Richard's right though. This thing could last a long time and prisons need to be prepared for that. [Nigel affirms]

Nigel: Another guy who wrote is worried about how his prison is preparing. Tyrone Baker is locked up in Nash Correctional Institution in Nashville, North Carolina.

Earlone: Tyrone says, "the most disturbing administrative action I'm seeing pertains to social distancing. The prison staff's primary concern seems to be separating us from each other. Staff members are making no efforts to distance themselves from us. Quite the contrary, the staff is actually interacting with us more intensively and more extensively than they were prior to COVID-19. They don't seem to realize that no prisoner would get sick with COVID-19 unless a staff member first brings in the disease.

Nigel: And that's a really good point. One of the reasons I stopped going in before it became a rule was just that I had no idea if I might be bringing the virus in.

Earlone: Right. I mean, prisons are basically sequestered from society, [Nigel] but they do need outside people to function, so it's tricky. Okay. We got one more letter here. This one's from Antrawn Price, who's currently at Tomoka Correctional Institution in Daytona Beach, Florida.

Nigel: Back when he sent this letter, things in his prison were pretty quiet on the COVID front; although they've reported more cases since then. In any case, Earlone, what I love about this guy is that he clearly respects his lady, so can I please read this one?

Earlonne: Go for it.

Nigel: Okay, "I'm writing to you because my lady is a super fan of your podcast and she suggested to me *strongly* to write you guys. I'm not going to write a book, but I can say a few things concerning how it's going. The institution is corona-free and the staff are doing a good job trying to keep it that way. The vibe is mellow. No one is going crazy. There are people who have loved ones who have contracted the virus and we pray it and console them as much as needed."

Earlonne: He wraps up, "this letter isn't as informative as I wanted it to be, but it's a start and my girl will be happy and that's what counts."

Nigel: Can we give her a shout out?

Earlonne: Hell yeah, we can.

Nigel: Alright. Haleigh thanks for tuning in, spreading the word about Ear Hustle and for strongly encouraging Antrawn to write to us.

Earlonne: We just got him some cool points.

Nigel: Unfortunately, there are prisons where things are a lot harder with COVID-19 and we'll be hearing about some of those places too in later episodes.

Earlonne: In the meantime, those of you on inside, keep in touch. We want to know how you're doing in there.

Nigel: Now, let's get to this week's episode. But first...

Earlonne: The following episode contains language that may not be suitable for all listeners. Discretion is advised. [abstract industrial transition]

Nigel: There's one more letter we wanted to talk about.

Earlonne: And [00:05:00] this one really touched me.

Nigel: We get a lot of great mail from listeners, but yup, this one was really something special.

Earlonne: It was from a group of incarcerated young folks who listen to Ear Hustle.

Nigel: They're at the Mendota Juvenile Center in Madison, Wisconsin. And they actually have a weekly Ear Hustle listening group.

Earlonne: That's deep. [Nigel affirms] The group has about 20 kids, mostly in her late teens. They've even found a way to keep meeting, virtually, while everyone is quarantined in their rooms.

Nigel: That is dedication. [soft piano music comes in]

Earlonne: Indeed. And that letter they sent us, is part kite, part art book.

Nigel: Okay. I've got to say more here. It was a gorgeous handmade book, you know, it was hand-bound. It had illustrations. The text was written out by hand. It was a ton of work to put together and it was gorgeous.

Earlonne: One page said, "your mistakes don't define you." It was illustrated with flowers and butterflies.

Nigel: And one riff on that "Keep Calm" meme, that's everywhere. It said, "Keep Calm and Ear Hustle On." [Earlonne laughs] Don't you love that?

Earlonne: Man, that's dope.

Nigel: I love it. Love it.

Earlonne: In a note they included, they say they really like our Catch A Kite episodes.

Nigel: That's where we answer questions that listeners send us.

Earlonne: Right. And so for this season's Catch A Kite episode, we're doing something a little different. We didn't put a call out for questions from our listeners. Instead, we're gonna tackle these kids' questions.

Nigel: We got a kite. And we're sending one back.

Earlonne: I'm Earlonne Woods

Nigel: And I'm Nigel Poor. This is Ear Hustle from PRX's Radiotopia. [music fades out] We were just starting to work on this episode when the coronavirus pandemic hit. Because of that, we had to stop going into San Quentin for a while. So, we got creative.

Earlonne: We called up some formerly incarcerated people at their homes while they were sheltering in place. And we asked them to take a shot at these questions. [abstract industrial transition]

When you were incarcerated, what was one thing you looked forward to every day as soon as you woke up?

Amika Moda: The last few years I was inside, I had a routine and I had my morning song.

Nigel: You might remember Amika Moda from the episode we did last season about jobs people do in prison. She worked as a firefighter at Chowchilla, and she is badass.

Earlonne: That she is. Amika served seven years at Central California Women's Facility in Chowchilla during her last three years inside, she did the same thing every morning.

Amika: I will wake up and get ready for my workout and I, you know, have a little, one of those little small CD players. And my morning Anthem was "Drop the World," Little Wayne. It was like this motivational song for me. It was a fuck the world song to me. It was kind of like a warrior song. That's how I felt.

Nigel: You know, we're going to have to ask you to sing some of it. [Amika says "oh no!" playfully in the background]

Earlonne: ...I was just gonna wait til she get it all out...

[sample from Lil Wayne's "Drop the World" come in: *I got ice in my veins, blood in my eyes...* Amika raps along: *hate in my heart, love in my mind.*]

Amika: I mean, that's the version of prison, right? Like hate in my heart. Love on my mind. That's this mode that we get in, right? We have this heart and sense of yourself, and you have to detach from everything. But love in my mind, you know, like I knew there was another version of myself. That's just not what you saw in there, but I still knew it was there.

[Drop the World continues with Eminem verse: *My book of rhymes, got 'em cookin', boy... I stole that fuckin' clock, I took the time...*]

[Amika raps] "I stole that clock. I took the time. I snuck up and I fucked this whole game up." That piece was it. I felt like I was supposed to be broken and destroyed, and that wasn't the case. I flipped the script, you know, and I used every moment of that time to get to this better version of myself. The other lyric that stood out was, "confidence is a stain they can't wipe off." They try so hard in there just to break you down and to get you to a different version of yourself.

Nigel: How did you keep your confidence?

Amika: Um, I just, I did, I took that time like I did things in my life I had never done before in prison. I worked out hard. I read more books than I've ever read in my life. My thinking just got clearer every day. That was it that I started my day like that. That was like my resistance song in there. Like, you cannot take me, [laughs] you can't take my soul. [music fades out]

Romarilyn Ralson: The track was located at the back of the prison and you could see [00:10:00] the roads and the streets and you could hear the cars passing by.

Earlonne: Romarilyn Ralson was locked up in California for 23 years. We reached her at her home and talked to her over a computer.

Nigel: Yup. That's what we did with everyone for this episode. We're not interviewing in person these days. Romarilyn said one thing she looked forward to every day was spending time walking the track out on the yard.

Romarilyn: And I really looked forward to just hearing the sounds of traffic and seeing cars, because then I could envision myself in one of those cars. And see myself free every day. So that really helped me to get through those 23 years that I was inside: walking the track and being able to see what I considered the outside world. [soft jazzy tones come in] I would think about traveling, friendships, of course, food. But mostly I would try to envision myself free, you know, what would I want to be doing right now in this moment if I weren't walking this track. If I could travel, you know, what destination would I be in. If it was maybe Paris or London or Cancun or Montreal. So I would go to different places and be with different people. And it was just a way for me to stay free. And so when I was released and I went to some of those places, it was like a *deja vu*. It was really a wild experience to feel like you've already been there and done that. [music fades out]

Nigel: Did you do that as a kid too? Imagine the future like that? [Romarilyn laughs]

Romarilyn: That's very interesting. I did kind of, I was a stargazer as a kid. I wanted to be an astronaut. I used to look out the window and into the stars at night and try to figure out what was up there and if I could travel to the moon or to the stars or to another planet, what would life be like for me? And so, yes.

Nigel: Yeah, that's so beautiful. I mean, it sounds like from a young age, you had a really creative mind.

Romarilyn: I was alone a lot. I was, you know, somewhat neglected and abused child and my mother had mental illness. And so these were just ways that I coped with life when I was under a tremendous amount of stress. [abstract transition]

Earlonne: Here's the next question from our young incarcerated listeners.

Nigel: What were different ways that you passed the time inside and what were some techniques you use to keep yourself out of fights? [soft tones come in] Okay, let's take this question one piece at a time. First, how did you pass time inside? So E, what did you do? How'd you pass time? [Earlonne says, "hmmm" pensively and laughs]

Earlonne: Anything but think about my life sentence and think about my release date. It was so far down. [Nigel affirms] So usually I just sat in the law library sometime and tried to work on changing the three strikes law.

Nigel: Right. 'Cause that's what got you in prison.

Earlonne: Yeah, that's what put me there, you know, with two life sentences actually. Working on the three strikes, that helped because it gave me hope and he

gave up his hope. So... [Nigel affirms] Oh! And this other little thing I did was work on a podcast.

Nigel: That you did. Okay. [music fades out] One thing I see every time I'm in San Quentin are the guys gardening. There are gardens around the yard back by the media lab where we work and there are gardens right inside the security gate when you walk into San Quentin.

Frankie Smith: The garden that I grew was the gateway to San Quentin.

Earlonne: Frankie Smith served 15 years and three months. He went in at 46 and got out when he was 61.

Nigel: I knew him inside. He was actually a special guy to me because he was one of my students when I taught for the Prison University Project. And Earlonne, he was a straight up "A" student.

Earlonne: Really?

Nigel: Mmhmm.

Frankie: So you had to walk through my area to get into San Quentin. So in such a bland and old and ugly place for so many other reasons and what prison stands for in general, and then to walk into a prison and see beauty. I took a lot of pride in that.

Nigel: Could you just give us a tour around the garden? Just imagine you were there and kind of describe the different areas 'cause it really transformed under your care.

Frankie: So I think when you walk into San Quentin, the first thing you're going to see is the rose garden in front of the Catholic chapel. I've pruned the roses and did some brick work, and where the memorial is right now you would see marigolds and snapdragons and lilies of the Nile, and of course there's a lot of jade to the left, geraniums and some fuchsia. I mean, to watch something grow that you planted is -- there's a lot of self-satisfaction involved in gardening. [soft synth tones come in]

Chayne Hampton: So passing the time, right? So you're doing time, so like I [00:15:00] wouldn't cheat my time so let me explain that.

Nigel: Chayne Hampton

Earlonne: AKA mittens

Nigel: Right, Mittens. He's been on our show a few times before. And E, you have to tell listeners why we call him mittens.

Earlonne: Nah. I got some homework for their ass. [Nigel laughs] If they want to know, they can check out our episode "Life Shows Up" from last season.

Nigel: Okay, Professor Woods. [music fades out] [both laugh]

Chayne: I wouldn't like take naps. Right? 'Cause like how many times a day do you really want to wake up in prison? Like just once in the morning is good for me. And then exercise, and that leads into the second part of your question too, because if you're always working out, you're kind of staying out of the mix while still being out there. So people see what you're doing, they see what you're all about. And if you're just like working out, breaking a sweat, going home, eating, it's probably the best way to stay out of the way, but not be like some fucking weirdo riding your bunk all day long.

Nigel: For more on the second part of the question, how to stay out of fights, we called up our friend Jason Jones.

Earlonne: Jason got into a lot of squabbles while he was inside, but at some point, he says, he started to think about things differently.

Jason Jones: Before I used to think being tough meant not backing down from anything or meeting aggression with aggression or whatever it may be, right? Being tough definitely means going through tough times. And I don't mean just like financial struggles or anything like that, but them internal tough times when you make the decision not to get in some shit. Like one of the times I got into a situation where it could have easily turn into a race riot. Easily. And I had to make the decision that, like, what's the better outcome for myself and everybody else? 'Cause I care about the people that's gonna be involved in this. And I don't want them in trouble either, right? So I decided not to do nothing. Let the game gods or whatever, karma or whatever it is, take its course and ended up being like the best decision I ever made. However, for like least a month, internally, I was conflicted so much and I was beating myself up 'cause I was like telling myself like, man, you went out like a sucker or you did this or you soft or whatever this and that. Like you don't see the results of that decision till later on, right? You only see the results of a bad decision really quick. But when you want to see outcomes to the right decision or a more positive decision, you don't really see them immediately. You see that later on and then later on once things start turning around and things start speeding up for me and like, I don't know, it felt like I started having a lot of good karma come back around my way. I started feeling better about my decision and realized like, oh yeah, this was the better decision.

Nigel: You make such a good point about like you don't see the results of your good choice for a while, and I think a lot of young people or adults too, don't have that patience.

Jason: Yeah, right.

Nigel: They want immediate gratification and maybe that's what comes with a fight. After the fights over for a little bit, you got what you wanted but...

Jason: Yeah. But it's not really fully what you wanted. You just for that moment, you felt tough, right? But then afterwards, when you're dealing with all like the BS afterwards, you feelin' like a sucker. You in trouble, you done lost this, and then I'm like, man, what I look like - a sucker. [soft tones come in]

Nigel: Amika Moda, that badass firefighter says the one thing that kept her out of fights was realizing she didn't always have to get herself into the mix.

Amika: That was part of the technique [laughs] of learning how to not fight is learning you can't insert yourself in every situation, even if you feel like you're doing the right thing.

Earlonne: This started to dawn on her after a fight she got into in the showers. She saw someone talkin' shit to one of the porters, an incarcerated person whose job was cleaning up the bathroom. [music fades out]

Amika: She was this older lady, just a sweet, quiet lady, just doing her job and someone started cussing her out because she took the towel. She took someone's towel from their shower or something like that, but she was just doing her job. Yeah. So it happened in like two seconds of, you know, because cussing somebody else out for cussing out this sweet old lady. And then we were at in the day room in shower shoes and a muumuu.

Nigel: And does it hurt while it's happening, or you don't even realize the physical pain until it's over?

Amika: No. That was a funny one 'cause I'll never forget what that one felt like because she was a really big girl. And she had, her fists were huge, but they were like huge, like marshmallows. So I remember every blow that would land, it felt like a pillow. I felt it, but she was kind of fluffy and soft. So [laughing] while those blows were landing, I was like, *oh, she kind of cushy*. Always afterwards, I was like, *what a damn shame. That was my friend. Why did it have to go like that?* You know, always those types of feelings of like, *damn*. [bright beat comes in]

Nigel: Alright, E. Let's take a break, stretch, drink some water, get out of this closet for a minute, [00:20:00] and then get back to answering a few more questions.

Earlonne: Alright. [beat fades out into transition sound]

Alright. We're back. Answering these questions, we got from the youth at Mendota Juvenile Facility in Wisconsin. Next up, were you limited in the amount of money you could spend weekly on canteen? Was your canteen list any good? Ours is bullshit.

Nigel: E, explain what canteen was. [soft beat comes in]

Earlonne: Canteen is your refuge. Refuge is food. That's where you buy everything that the state does not provide.

Nigel: And how much could you spend?

Earlonne: You could spend, if you were in the top group, 220

Nigel: Oh 220 a month?

Earlonne: \$220 a month. But if you didn't have a job, you can only spend \$110 - half that. And if your privileges have been taken, you can only spend half of 110 which is 55.

Nigel: Okay. Alright, so was it bullshit?

Earlonne: So it was not really bullshit. You know, you need shit outta there. There was some good stuff in there and there was some bad stuff. [music fades out]

Nigel: What was the best and worst thing you ever got out of canteen?

Carlos Flores: The best thing was always ice cream.

Nigel: Carlos Flores was in our episode, "Us and Them" earlier this season. He's the one who helped save a CO who was choking.

Carlos: I'm an ice cream junkie. I try to go never a day without eating it here. [soft atmospheric tones come in]

Nigel: What were the best flavors inside?

Carlos: I'm a butter pecan guy.

Amika: I loved when Rocky Road would pop up, but they would cycle it and make changes. So whenever there was Rocky Road, I was happy. Whenever there was pecan, I was not happy.

Earlonne: Butter pecan?! That was -- butter pecan was the shit! [Amika laughing]

Amika: That's what everybody loved it except me. [laughs] I was like, oh no! Butter pecan.

Speaker 1: Ice cream, ice cream, ice cream.

Speaker 2: Cherry vanilla was my favorite and yeah, I've been known to knock down a pound or two in one sitting, for sure.

Nigel: [laughing] This is what always cracks me up when I see guys eating ice cream in prison, they have to eat the whole thing.

Carlos: Oh man.

Nigel: Right? There's no place to put it. [Carlos affirms] You sit down and you go through a pint.

Carlos: Frickin' bomb.

Nigel: Yeah. So could you still sit down and eat a full on pint of ice cream in one sitting?

Carlos: Absolutely. A pint – *pshaw*. [asking his wife nearby] How much ice cream do I eat at one time? At least a pint and a half, huh. [back to Earlonne and Nigel] Like a pint and a half and I put milk in it to make it like a milkshake. If you had the video on I could show you the butter pecan I got right now in my freezer. [to his wife] [laughs] There's no more? You ate it?

Carlos' wife: You ate most of it.

Earlonne: Oh, shit they finna start arguing.

Carlos: Yeah, she ate my butter pecan

Nigel: Your wife ate the rest of it?

Carlos: Yeah. I didn't know that until right now. Oh, I see the container. [minimal beat comes in]

Romarilyn: We had Häagen-Dazs, so yeah,

Earlonne: Ooh, excuse me! That's Romarilyn Ralson again. She was apparently at some high-class prison. They even got designer burgers. Imagine that.

Romarilyn: I could eat six In-n-Out burgers in one sitting.

Nigel: In-n-Out in prison?

Earlonne: They called "food sales," Nyge. Every now and again, people inside would arrange for a bunch of food from either In-n-Out Burger, Rally Burgers, or a lot of times it was pizza and some of that money would go to charities. Like Survivors of Crime or victim support groups.

Romarilyn: I can barely get through one now. It's just crazy. Your adrenaline, your emotions, your metabolism because of the amount of stress that you're under when you're in prison, it's moving so fast. You can just eat and eat and eat and eat. [soft beat comes in]

Chayne: Snickers bars and honey buns are the best, but if you want to get out of prison like a fat slob, that's what you're going to get. Okay?

Earlonne: Whatchu sayin' bruh?

Chayne: You're sitting down, I don't know what your weight's like right now. [laughing]

Kenyatta Leal: Worst thing in the canteen? Oh man.

Earlonne: Kenyatta Leal served 19 years in prison on a 25 to life sentence.

Kenyatta: I'll probably say that hair grease, man, that hair grease they used to give us in there. Man, that was just a straight garbage man. It was like motor oil or something, you know what I mean? [Kenyatta and Earlonne laugh] Remember that the deodorant they used to give us, [Earlonne laughs] that would just leave a black streak on your whole armpit? Oh man, it's stuff like that, it was just wasn't cool.

Earlonne: You go to rub it and it's just your skin comin' off.

Kenyatta: Just like that stuff is no joke. How your whole armpit is burnt up. Five minutes after you put it on, you musty all over again.

Jason: The worst item I would have to say is like any hygiene you get off of there. The hygiene is usually overpriced and doesn't really like, [00:25:00] especially like deodorant that they have....

Nigel: What is the advice that you gave Earlonne when he got out of prison?

Earlonne: He ain't gonna remember. [Nigel says, You're not gonna remember? Aww] He was in the middle of target. He ain't gonna remember. The best advice you gave me, I give this advice to everybody getting out of prison, you don't remember?

Jason: What, check your hygiene.

Earlonne: No

Jason: What? I can't remember. I can't remember. I gave him a lot of advice out.

Earlonne: So you gave me advice like, "Hey bruh, bruh, don't wrap too much toilet paper around your hand, bruh."

Jason: Oh! Toilet paper is a lot more thicker outside than it is inside.

Nigel: Remember when we ran into Jason Jones your first day out? [Earlonne laughs] It seemed random to me. We were just shopping at target and all of a sudden there he was!

Earlonne: Right? [Nigel laughs] And Jason has three things that he tells everyone who gets out: water is hot, the meat is real, and the toilet paper is a lot thicker. [transition sound]

Nigel: E, one of the questions we got in the kite from this group of incarcerated kids took us back to early Ear Hustle history, all the way back to our second episode ever: "Misguided Loyalty."

Earlonne: Right. They asked about something that Tommy Shakur Ross said at the end of that episode. [soft jazzy beat comes in]

Tommy Shakur Ross: I was too busy living in the moment. I was too busy being impulsive, and that's pretty much what is going on today. The youngsters are caught up in the image. They caught up in pop culture. They caught up in what it means to be a thug. Everybody wanna to be a thug. You have Beyonce on TV talking about, *I want a soldier. I want a soldier*, right? And so these are the images that these guys are trying to live up to and when you are trying to live a particular image in order to be true to that, you're going to have to represent that at some point, even if that's not who you really are. If you're put in a place where you feel like a person disrespected you, yet you call yourself a gangster, how you gonna respond to somebody disrespecting you?

Nigel: The kids in Mendota wrote, "we all thought the advice Shakur gave at the end of 'Misguided Loyalty' was so powerful. Can we please hear more advice on how to change our perspectives or illegal tendencies? How do we break the cycle?"

Earlonne: We got Shakur on the line from San Quentin to answer this question.

Tommy: In order to break the cycle, [over the phone] it's important to be able to know what it is that you're feeling and to be able to express the way you feel to someone. Oftentimes, you know, being locked inside, what we call "the man box," we tell ourselves that, "okay, it's not cool to cry. It's not cool to show emotions. It's not cool to be soft or be weak," right? That's just the way that we've been raised traditionally. So there was a lot of things that was going on with me as a juvenile. I was really angry and I didn't really understand why I was angry. And I didn't even have anyone that I could talk to share my vulnerability with. I wasn't even open to being vulnerable with anyone if I experienced anything that was really, like, fucked up. That was traumatic -- something that was really harmful, like, the loss of a loved one, or if you were physically abused as a child or if you were sexually abused as a child. And you never had an opportunity to share these things with somebody. I think that it's important to understand that if you don't acknowledge the way that you feel or what's going on inside of you, then you start to act those things out, not even knowing that you're acting those things out. You still have to act that anger out in ways that can keep you inside the cycle. [transition sound]

Earlonne: Hey, Nyge. This is the question that got me right here. What is the most influential lesson you learned during your incarceration?

Sam Lewis: The most influential lesson that I learned while incarcerated, what was to be me.

Nigel: Sam Lewis spent 24 years in prison.

Sam: So as a youngster, I shied away from letting all my friends and homeboys know that I like to read and could really geek out on studying. And when I went to prison, continued to get in trouble, when I was in the security housing unit, my mom would send me books. And so during a two year period in the SHU, all I did was

read. Like, I just read and when I came out I continue to do that. I'd be on the yard after working out with weights, reading and people would crack jokes, call me a nerd and things like that. And initially I would get pissed. I would get real upset about it and then after a while I just said, "only reason why you cracking jokes is 'cause you're afraid to pick up a book." And then eventually I just became comfortable with just being me. The things that I really like to do, like studying and reading and pursuing my education. I just did them. And come to find out what happened was many people that were doing time with me respected it so much that they started asking how could they get involved with doing some of the same things, like going to college.

Nigel: What was one book you read that [00:30:00] influenced you the most inside?

Sam: The Autobiography of Malcolm X.

Earlonne: And why?

Sam: So in that book, one of the things that Malcolm says is that prison is a place you can create it and make it your university. And so that made me look at prison as a university. It was a place that, yeah, I was held against my will. I didn't want to be there. But using my imagination, I said, okay, let me take a look at prison in another way. I can access books, I can access college. I learned how to do those things. So the yard was my gymnasium. [laughing] The cell was my dorm room that had to share with someone else. And so I just like looked at it that way in the sense that I have a goal and the goal is to improve me as an individual so that I can be able to do more and give more. [low tones come in]

Carlos: I always felt inferior as a Mexican because you know, they're very, very tough dudes in prison. You know, I always felt very intimidated by their bravery and stuff. I never felt like I was adequately measured up to them. And there was a point where I realized a lot of the guys that were with me, they were just like me and I could see they were just like me -- they were scared. They were just trying to survive. These aren't like psychotic, sociopaths. These are people that were brothers, fathers, sons, uncles, kids, and they just had a hard frickin' life. Basically, what it boils down to.

Nigel: Right. So I think what you're saying is you realized everyone was as scared as you were. Is that what you're saying?

Carlos: Yeah. And I don't want to just say scared. They were just as vulnerable trying to survive. [tones fade out into transition sound]

Earlonne: Okay. Here's another question we got from one of the kids.

Nigel: Yep. This is a big one.

Earlonne: Is it too late to turn my life around?

Chayne: No! No! Absolutely not, man! You have like, no, no, for fuck's sake, no. Now, no. This could be something you look back on, like, "yo, I went to juvenile hall when I was a kid. And I learned my lesson and now I'm not doing that anymore." Like you could almost like hear yourself saying that 10 years from now, 20 years from now, like telling your kids like, "dude, check it out man. You don't need to learn the hard way. I want to juvie as a kid. I fucked up and now I'm not. I took it as a lesson learned." And like that's just how it is.

Kenyatta: I would say it's never too late. You know, everything that happens in our life is meant to happen to teach us something valuable. And while I know that sometimes these situations and circumstances we might find ourselves in and the consequences that we face might be harsh and they might hurt, on the other side of that pain and the emotion and confusion that goes along with that is a really valuable lesson. And, you know, um, don't be afraid to ask for help until I reach out to people. You know, if you see somebody that's where you want to be, tell them! Reach out to them, ask them, you know, how they got there, the things that they went through. And I can guarantee you, they'll tell you something that might blow your mind.
[transition]

Earlonne: This is the last question from my partners in juvie. If you could write a letter to your younger self, what would it say?

Nigel: We got Kenyatta to answer this one.

Kenyatta: It would say, "Yatta, stay patient." You know, I had a problem with being impatient and one of the things really fast, wanting to skip straight from A to Z, right? And I was my own worst enemy in that regard. So if I had one word of wisdom for a young Kenyatta, it would be patience. Patience. Just slow down and be patient and it'll all work out.

Michael Nelson: What I've said to him before and what I still say to my younger self today, is that you are made from love.

Nigel: Michael Nelson was a juvenile lifer. He spent over 20 years in prison.

Michael: And your life experiences along the way have influenced you in different ways to lose sight of who you really are. And the opportunity here is to reconnect with that truth of who you really are and not what others tell you, not what the media portrays you to be. Not anything else, but who you really are. And so, you know, I would tell him to don't lose sight of that truth, even when times are really hard and fucked up and you can't see past whatever experience you're in now, that eventually you will reconnect to the truth of who you are and that's awesome. You're awesome.

Nigel: We have one more answer to that question about advice for your younger self. This one's from some long time Ear Hustlers.

Earlonne: Right. Our boy, Maserati E, and Ear Hustle's co-founder, Antwan Banks Williams. They both got out in the last year and very quickly started touring around schools. [ambient sounds]

Nigel: They do a performance, that's part testimonial...

[Eric and Antwan speaking during tour presentation: "Growing up, I got picked on a lot. I've always had a pretty expansive vocabulary. Always been weird. Always been different and comfortable in that to a certain degree."]

Nigel: [00:35:00] Part audience participation. [call and response participation from audience during Maserati E and Antwan presentation]

Now, obviously Maserati and Antwan aren't visiting these schools right now, but they're still recording music and a lot of these songs, they're kind of like letters to their younger selves.

Earlonne: This one is called, "Dreamers."

["Dreamers" begins, performed by Maserati E and Antwan Williams]

*Yeah. Alright. Look.
Growing up, I was never told
I could actually be a doctor or a lawyer
or just happy being me
so I grew into a current
that had more pull than the sea
not knowing what passing moments
I'm looking more like the streets.
What are dreams if you don't have a place to sleep?
No thirst for knowledge,
tryna figure what to eat
and it seems like we are in a place that will last forever.
The ghetto, the broke in my life
I'm tryna piece together.
Poor me or is it poor we.
We rich in hard times,
but get managed poorly.
Lordy, Lordy. Can you listen closely?
I'mma do something for you that no one did for me,
so pay me attention and then buy into your dreams.
Life's a game of chess, push pawns then some queens.
You can be what you want to be.
Reality belongs you
You choose what you grow into
Who wanna be a doctor?
Who wanna practice medicine?
Who wanna change the world?
Who wanna be the president?
Who wanna see the stars?*

*Who wanna be a genius?
Dreams last forever.
They can never be defeated.*

I cannot help it, I'm a dreamer. (6x)

*I just wanna change the world forever.
No lie, I wanna bring the world together.
And I admit I'm kind of selfish
'cause I wanna be the reason,
not for the recognition
I recognize what we need
and I don't wanna fall tryna spring change,
like the seasons
Consequences, disrupting the system
But I ain't retreatin'
I'm optimistic, thinking it's a fight worth leading.
I bleed the blood of the leader.
I die for what I believe in,
And I'm just saying it's real
I encourage you to do more than just say what you feel
Let's take a stand as a man,
Not former slaves in the field
And let's build each other up
instead of stuck and just destroyin' everything that we build.
Why people gotta get killed before we recognize their greatness?
Why we got to get locked in cages to start exercising patience.
No lie, let's start making changes
Let's start making rearrangements
So I list the priorities because majority on different pages
Don't fall into the trap
Let your mind rise up above that
Look for the signs and adapt
Take the time to master your craft.*

I cannot help it, I'm a dreamer.... (7x)

Nigel: There's a lot of people that thank in this episode.

Earlonne: Yep. We've been talking a lot, so let's give it back to those young whippersnappers. Banks and Maserati E.

Antwan “Banks” Williams: Ear Hustle would like to thank the youth at Mendota Juvenile Facility in Wisconsin. Thank y'all, man.

Eric “Maserati E”: And everyone who answered questions. Amika Moda, she's now a policy director for the Young Woman's Freedom Center.

Antwan: Romarilyn Ralson who is the program director at Project Rebound at Cal State Fullerton.

Eric: Frankie Smith has a landscaping business, so he still spends plenty of his time in the garden.

Antwan: Chayne "Mitten" Hampton works for Santa Cruz plumbing and he's now engaged to be married. My partner.

Eric: Jason Jones is Remote Instructor Manager at The Last Mile.

Antwan: Tommy Shakur Ross is one of the producers of Uncuffed, a great new podcast out of San Quentin Solano State Prison, that people should definitely check out.

Eric: Kenyatta Leal, Ranchery Director at a Next Chapter Program.

Antwan: Michael Nelson, the Executive Director of Kit Kat, a program for youth offenders.

Eric: Sam Lewis is [00:40:00] Executive Director for Anti-Recidivism Coalition - the ARC.

Antwan: Ear Hustle was produced on the inside by Nigel Poor, Rahsaan "New York" Thomas and John "Yahya" Johnson.

John "Yahya" Johnson: Whoa, whoa, Banks and Maserati E. Don't you think our Ear Hustle listeners are in need of an important update? That update being as of April 28th, 2020, me – John "Yahya" Johnson, walked out of the gates of San Quentin and joined the ranks of the formerly incarcerated. Yeah. Your boy is finally free. [beat comes in]

Antwan: This episode was scored sound designed and engineered by me, Antwan Williams.

Nigel: Okay, that's right, E. We have some exciting news to share.

Earlonne: Indeed, we do. Last episode we said goodbye to a couple of peeps. Now, we're saying hell. Antwan Williams, who co-founded this show is now mister sound designer.

Nigel: Also, we are thrilled to introduce our new editor, Amy Standen. Let's just call her miss word designer. So good news all around. Okay, dudes, back to you all.

Eric: Also special thanks to Andrew, Tim, Luke, Sophia, and Carl from the podcast club at Saint Ignacious in San Francisco.

Antwan: Erin Wade is the digital producer.

Eric: Julie Shapiro is the executive producer for Radiotopia.

Antwan: And Ear Hustle would like to thank acting warden and Ron Broomfield. And as you know, every episode of Ear Hustle passed to be approved by this guy here.

Lieutenant Sam Robinson: This is Lieutenant Sam Robinson, the public information officer at San Quentin State Prison. I hope all of you are continuing to shelter in place where it's necessary and that you and your loved ones are doing well and listening to Ear Hustle. And if you are listening to Ear Hustle, I believe one of the most profound statements that have ever been stated in the entire series of Ear Hustle episodes was a statement in this episode by Jason Jones, where he spoke about what a positive decision looks like, and that you may not see the fruition of it immediately, but you see it at a later date. And I thought that, I think that's one of most profound things that I think I've heard in an episode and all of its seasons. So with that, I will say that I approve this episode. [bright tones come in]

Earlone: This podcast was made possible with support from the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, working to redesign the justice system by building power and opportunity for communities impacted by incarceration.

Nigel: Ear Hustle is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX, a collection of the best podcasts around. Hear more at radiotopia.fm. I'm Nigel Poor.

Earlone: And I'm Earlone Woods.

[Nigel and Earlone speaking together] Thanks for listening.

Nigel: If you could write a letter to your younger self, what would it say?

Chayne: Don't do heroin. Ever. [laughing]

[00:43:12] **END OF EPISODE.**