

Ear Hustle Season 1 Episode 10: Getting a Date

Listener Alert [00:00:00.19]: The following podcast contains language that may not be appropriate for all listeners.

Earlonne [00:00:09.13]: You're now tuned into San Quentin's 'Ear Hustle' from PRX's Radiotopia.

Nigel [00:00:15.11]: Hey, E, tell everyone how you heard about this story. You really ear hustled this one.

Earlonne [00:00:19.22]: I think it was back like in January. I was in the chow hall, and I'm waiting in line for dinner and there was a couple of dudes behind me and one was telling the other guy about this 115 he got.

Nigel [00:00:29.26]: A 115 is a rule violation.

Earlonne [00:00:31.20]: Right. Except, this wasn't about contraband or a fight. This was about an actual escape. So, you know it got a little interesting. Right? I'm, I'm, I'm hustling this one.

Nigel [00:00:42.24]: I'm sure you are.

Earlonne [00:00:43.18]: So, I did one of those, "I'm not listening to what you're saying" things, and turned around just so I can really identify the guy, and later, I saw him on the yard, and he was in front of the area where the white guys kick it.

Nigel [00:00:56.08]: Mmhmm.

Earlonne [00:00:56.10]: And, he's a older guy, but he was busting down, doing burpees, getting his money. Right?

Nigel [00:01:00.15]: Yeah. Nice.

Earlonne [00:01:01.08]: So, I waited for him to finish his set, and then I walked over to him, and I'm like, "Excuse me, sir. My name is Earlonne. Can I holler at you for a second?" And, we started talking and I told him about the podcast, and I was like, "Look, man, I was in line the other day, and it was you and another guy, and you was telling him about a 115 you had, and it was a very interesting story, and I would hope that you can come down to the studio so we can talk about it." And, he was like, "No." [intro music] I'm Earlonne Woods, a prisoner at San Quentin State Prison in California.

Nigel [00:01:35.09]: I'm Nigel Poor, a visual artist who works with incarcerated men at San Quentin.

Earlone [00:01:39.25]: And, together, we're gonna take you inside. [catchy beat] What's up, listeners?

Antwan [00:01:54.14]: What's happenin'?

Nigel [00:01:55.18]: Well, before we get started with today's episode, we want you to know that the annual Radiotopia fundraiser has begun.

Earlone [00:02:03.05]: It is the one time of the year where we ask all of our loyal listeners, like you...

Nigel [00:02:06.28]: Like you.

Antwan [00:02:07.15]: Like y'all.

Earlone [00:02:07.30]: To support 'Ear Hustle' and the network that helps make it possible.

Antwan [00:02:11.07]: And what network is that?

Earlone [00:02:12.20]: Radiotopia. And you know we have big love for them because Radiotopia is who gave us our start.

Antwan [00:02:18.18]: Shouts out Radiotopia!

Nigel [00:02:20.20]: And, big thanks to our friends at RadioPublic for supporting our campaign right out of the gate.

Antwan [00:02:25.28]: Wait, wait. What? RadioPublic? What the pinochle is RadioPublic, Nigel?

Nigel [00:02:30.09]: [laughs] Well, Antwan, RadioPublic is a podcast app that helps you discover new shows and also helps you keep up with your favorites. RadioPublic has its very own podcast librarian who creates podcast playlists across all kinds of topics.

Antwan [00:02:43.10]: Even stories from inside prison.

Nigel [00:02:45.09]: Yep, and playlists that include all of Radiotopia's best episodes.

Antwan [00:02:49.18]: Wait, wait, wait. This RadioPublic is, is, it's free, right?

Nigel [00:02:52.20]: Totally free.

Earlone [00:02:53.20]: No hidden costs. Nothin'. And, available for Android and iPhone.

Antwan [00:02:58.10]: So, listen to your favorite Radiotopia shows.

Nigel [00:03:00.26]: And, you can even donate to Radiotopia right there in the app.

Earlone [00:03:03.26]: You can donate now at radiotopia.fm.

Nigel [00:03:06.20]: That's radiotopia.fm.

Earlone [00:03:09.10]: R-A-D-I-O-T-O-P-I-A dot fm.

Nigel [00:03:14.11]: Nice spelling.

Earlone [00:03:15.18]: Indeed. Thanks for joining the Radiotopia community. We need each other.

Nigel [00:03:21.16]: Absolutely.

Earlone [00:03:22.17]: For sure.

Female [00:03:28.27]: [pleasant melody] Support for 'Ear Hustle' comes from MailChimp. MailChimp is the world's largest marketing automation platform, serving 15 million customers, from small e-commerce shops to big online retailers. Whether you need to sell your products, share some big news, or tell a story, our Campaign Builder makes it easy to create email campaigns that best suit your message. And, with MailChimp reports, you'll know how well you're connecting with your audience and how much money you're bringing in. Get started free at MailChimp.com. MailChimp: build your brand, sell more stuff.

If you're looking for some real talk about race and class that doesn't feel like homework, check out 'We Live Here' from St. Louis Public Radio and PRX. It's a podcast for people somewhere on the woke spectrum. Sometimes they do investigations. Sometimes they tell the story of an ordinary person. A good episode to start with is one that reveals when Missouri's youngest white students get in trouble, they get kicked out of class, but black students get kicked out of school. You can listen to 'We Live Here' anywhere you get your podcasts.

Steve [00:04:39.10]: I've been denied 3 times. This is my fourth parole hearing coming up now.

Earlone [00:04:43.09]: Steve Wilson has in been in prison, on and off, for about 30 years.

Nigel [00:04:48.05]: He didn't want to talk to us at first because he had that parole hearing coming up. He didn't want to say something that might be used against him.

Earlone [00:04:56.12]: Which is smart, because if your parole hearing is successful, you get a date. It's what everyone wants: a date to get out of prison. And that's what we're talking about on this episode: what it takes to get out of prison. [bumping melody]

Nigel [00:05:16.02]: So, Earlone, Steve Wilson didn't want to talk to us.

Earlone [00:05:18.28]: Uh-uh.

Nigel [00:05:19.03]: This was way back, before we even did our first episode, so maybe he didn't know what we were talking about, and, honestly, we didn't even know what we were doing. [both laugh]

Earlone [00:05:29.26]: Maybe. I mean, I explained it to him. You know, I'm like, "Hey, man. Uh, we'll hold this story off until after your parole hearing." And, after talking to him like that, he agreed to holler at us.

Steve [00:05:48.00]: I thought I had a good chance at parole the last time. I had a low risk of recidivism. I had over 20 years of clean time with no write-ups. I had no violence in my, my history except my commitment offense in 1979. [dropping beat]

Nigel [00:06:05.00]: Commitment offense. That's the crime that put him in prison in the first place.

Earlone [00:06:09.23]: In 1979, Steve Wilson murdered his father-in-law on a ranch in California. It was a complicated domestic dispute that we're not gonna get into here. But, basically, Steve's wife left him and he went to her father's ranch to get her back. But, his father-in-law wouldn't allow him on the ranch. So, long story short, Steve kidnapped his father-in-law and ended up killing him, shooting him twice, I believe.

Nigel [00:06:34.16]: It's been almost 40 years since that murder and Steve's now 73 years old. But, it's not just his crime that's keeping him in prison.

Steve [00:06:43.05]: Every time I go to the board, uh, there's always just one rule violation, a 115 that I got about, um, 30 years ago. And, um, every time I go to the board, they bring it up.

Earlone [00:06:56.08]: I bet they do. We're going to hear more about that rule violation, but first, here's what's waiting for Steve when he goes to the board. This is Danny Plunkett, who has been incarcerated for 27 years for murder and robbery. [resounding note]

Danny [00:07:11.15]: You have to go in there. You have to be accountable for your actions prior to the commitment offense, the commitment offense, and after the commitment offense. And you're sit down in front of the commissioner, deputy commissioner, who hold your life in their hands.

Nigel [00:07:25.12]: [haunting music] Danny just went to the board, so the memory is fresh.

Danny [00:07:28.24]: You go to your first parole hearing here at San Quentin. You go in the same direction that you would go to a visit. You've gone that way many times but this is a whole new experience. You- Emotions, nerves are just raw. And, you've got your packet under your arm. All your stuff. Support letters, parole plans, relapse prevention plan, maybe a couple book reports, uh, an essay that you've written, uh, and, as you're headed to where the visiting is, you'd make a left, and you have to stand there and wait for an officer to come get you. He takes you through a gate. You go up a short flight of stairs and there's a holding cell. Uh, there's a wooden bench and you sit on that bench.

Phillip [00:08:12.22]: I can honestly remember sittin' in the, in the holding cell waiting for them to call me to go to the board.

Earlone [00:08:19.23]: Phil Melendez was on a recent episode about unwritten rules of race. He's been incarcerated for 20 years for a double murder. He also just went to the board.

Phillip: And, you know, they call you. They say, "Hey, Mr. Melendez, they're ready for you." And, I remember my heart sinkin', the butterflies times a million. I felt like there was a maybe a billion butterflies in my stomach. Um, I felt like electric like my whole body was like flowing with energy, but nervous energy, nothing, not such a good energy.

Nigel [00:08:53.25]: If you're lucky and you get a date at the hearing, those butterflies don't necessarily go away. Ron Self was on our first episode talking about the cellie from hell. He's served 23 years for attempted murder. He actually got a date recently, and he's scheduled to be released soon, but...

Ron [00:09:11.20]: They have up to 120 days to review it and, yes, it's cockroach motel: easy to get in, hard to get out. [laughs] That's kind of how I look at it. It's a slow process getting out.

Earlone [00:09:23.10]: It's slow because your date goes through a review process and, as Ron knows, they can take your date away from you at any time.

Ron [00:09:30.15]: So, there's this euphoric feeling. I mean, it's like, "Wow. I'm really found suitable. This is not my reality, what's about to come happen." And so, then another type of stress starts to set in. It's like, "Am I gonna somehow get the date taken away like other people have?" I think it's worse stress.

Nigel [00:09:48.12]: Why? Why, why?

Ron [00:09:49.12]: Because you just, you, you, you don't know. You think you're- You're literally walking on rice paper. If you're walking on eggshells before, you're walking on rice paper now. It's just, it's anything can cause it to go sideways. [guitar strums]

Earlone [00:10:04.09]: Waitin'. Prison is all about waiting. And then, when something finally happens, goes your way, you get a date, you still gotta wait.

Steve [00:10:17.12]: S-T-E-P-H-E-N is the correct spelling. Stephen. Steve. Steve for short.

Nigel [00:10:23.06]: Steve's been waiting a long time, and you can see why he's anxious about his parole hearing.

Earlone [00:10:28.19]: Yep. It's that rule violation. The parole board is gonna know all about it. And it's a big one. We're going to hear about that right now, and we're also gonna check back in with the other guys to see how they fared with the board. [deep tones]

Nigel [00:10:43.11]: After he murdered his father-in-law, Steve Wilson was sentenced to 25 years to life and he started serving his time at California's second most famous prison.

Steve [00:10:53.26]: I arrived at the Old Folsom in October of 1982 and, after I established myself and felt comfortable, I began making plans to escape.

Earlone [00:11:05.10]: He started with research. In the prison library, Steve found some books about escape attempts from Old Folsom.

Steve [00:11:12.05]: There had been dozens and dozens of attempts to escape out of Old Folsom that had never been successful.

Nigel [00:11:19.26]: Steve said that he thought these books were in the library to show guys how impossible it was to escape.

Earlone [00:11:26.00]: But Steve learned something very important from these failed attempts.

Steve [00:11:30.00]: They failed because somebody told. Whenever there was more than 1 person, somebody chickened out, and I had those same emotions at the end myself. Am I going to do this or am I not? And the one way to chicken out is you drop a kite on yourself and say, "There's an escape attempt," and everybody gets busted. And that's, that's what I read in the books. My fail-safe method was don't tell anyone. [buzzing warehouse noises]

Earlone [00:11:57.16]: Steve was working in an industrial warehouse in the prison and that's where he saw his opportunity.

Nigel [00:12:03.15]: They received a gigantic exhaust fan, the type that goes on top of the building.

Steve [00:12:08.03]: Weighed about, uh, 1,400 pounds.

Nigel [00:12:10.14]: The fan was there for repairs which meant that, eventually, it was going to get shipped out.

Steve [00:12:15.15]: And the more I looked at this fan, the more I realize this was gonna be the way to go.

Earlone [00:12:21.00]: There was an 18-inch opening underneath the fan. With practice, Steve found that he could squeeze inside it and not be seen.

Steve [00:12:28.21]: From that point on, I just focused on getting, uh, enough money, uh, uh, hidden away and, um, waiting my opportunity. [electronic tones] Over this period of time, I had accumulated \$2000. My dad would visit me. He had hundred dollar bills rolled up inside of balloons so tight they were about the size of pills. Uh, my dad would just drop them out of his hand and into the soda can and I would drink 'em, swallow 'em, wait until the next day and, and fish 'em.

Nigel [00:13:02.11]: Ugh. [laughs]

Earlone [00:13:05.15]: [laughs] Yep. But now, he had money and a plan. Then, one day, his boss told him the fan was gettin' ready to ship. So, when no one was looking, Steve crawled inside. [creepy music]

Steve [00:13:20.07]: I can remember very distinctly, uh, August 2nd, 1984. It was already hot and I'm in this fan. I'm sat down in the middle of the floor and there's 2 or 3 officers and free staff out walking around and one of them, my boss, comes over and he's standing next to the fan and he tells the guys. He says, "Ok. Load the fan now." And so, my heart's, you know, beating so loud I'm thinking that they've got to hear it because this is a scary situation and I'm sweating profusely. Drops of sweat are falling off my head and hitting the cardboard. And to me, it sounds like somebody's *thump thump thump*. And, so, I'm thinking I'm sure they can hear that out there.

Nigel [00:14:06.09]: But they didn't hear him and the fan was loaded into the trailer of the truck. The truck left the prison and Steve was out. But, this was just the beginning of his escape.

Earlone [00:14:15.07]: Yeah. We interviewed him for about 2 hours, and he remembers everything that happened that day. Like, when he realized he was locked inside the trailer.

Steve [00:14:23.17]: This is, uh, where I made my mistake in my planning.

Earlone [00:14:26.00]: It took him a while to find a way out.

Steve [00:14:28.01]: I'm sitting there and there's these little pinpricks of light coming down from the roof in the, uh, in the trailer and little dust motes floatin' around and I'm thinking, "Where in the world is that coming from?" And, I look up at the ceiling and there's all this duct tape.

Earlone [00:14:42.21]: He pulled the duct tape down and popped out. [music turns adventurous]

Nigel [00:14:46.18]: Then he hitched a ride and the trucker who gave him a ride was pulled over by the highway patrol because he had skipped a weigh station.

Earlone [00:14:52.18]: But Steve kept his cool and he made it to San Jose where he bought food and clothing.

Steve [00:14:56.12]: I would imagine it was, be about 12 o'clock by now, and I was starting to feel paranoia and thinking that every, every little airplane that flew over, every car was looking for me. And so, I found a big clump of bushes and I curled up in the bushes and took a little nap.

Nigel [00:15:18.06]: He got up into the mountains and, it took him weeks, but he walked, and I mean he walked, almost 500 miles, all the way to the town of Ramona, just north of San Diego.

Earlone [00:15:28.20]: Steve's originally from Florida, but he'd lived in the San Diego area when he was in the service. He hadn't told anyone in the prison about his plans, but he had told his mom and dad.

Steve [00:15:38.18]: They came and visited me and, uh, they said they hadn't been notified that I had escaped, other than the fact that, you know, I told them I was going to. So, mom gave me some more money. We said our goodbyes. I said, "I don't know when the next time I'll see you." They left. I'm kind of afraid to be moving around because this is, you know, considered my hometown and, obviously, the cops should have been, uh, notified.

Nigel [00:16:04.21]: Steve bought a car and he started driving. He made it to El Paso on the first day and then kept going.

Steve [00:16:11.07]: When I got to Austin, I saw builder's cranes for high-rise construction, and when I saw those, I knew that I'd get a job, and I knew I wasn't gonna go any further.

Earlone [00:16:24.15]: Steve Wilson became one of few men to successfully escape from Old Folsom State Prison. He was out of prison, but, he wasn't really free. The authorities were after him and he knew they weren't gonna stop looking for him. Ever.

Nigel [00:16:37.23]: Yeah, you know, and he wouldn't be able to see his mom and dad again. He couldn't hang out with old friends. And he was definitely gonna have to assume other names along the way and he'd always be looking over his shoulder. I mean, E, he wasn't gonna have a normal life.

Earlone [00:16:51.13]: Nah. That's just it. If you escape, and you don't get killed trying to do so, you're not going to get what all of us want: a chance at a normal life. And that's something that a lot of us behind bars fantasize about: getting out and leading a normal life.

Nigel [00:17:05.28]: What are some of the things you think about when you fantasize about your life when you're out?

Earlone [00:17:10.13]: Uh, off the top of my head, it's unrealistic, but I think about just getting out of San Quentin, jumping in the water, and swimming to my yacht, and going around the world.

Nigel [00:17:19.11]: Nice. [both laugh] We asked some other guys in our story what they fantasize about and they're not quite as ambitious as you, E. Here's Phillip. [gentle guitar music]

Philip [00:17:32.19]: My idea of freedom, in its most simplest and most beautiful form, is me sitting on the couch with the wife on one side, the kids on the other side, and we're all just sitting there, probably having come back just from getting ice cream and watching 'The NeverEnding Story'.

Nigel [00:17:48.22]: I kind of like that movie, too. Here's what Ron's been fantasizing about.

Ron [00:17:55.00]: I look forward to falling in love and just holding that person. And I, I don't even mean it in a sexual way, just to feel that person, the warmth of that person. Um, I look forward to that. And on the lighter side, I want to get a dog. [small laugh]

Earlone [00:18:21.18]: We're gonna take a break here and when we get back, we're gonna hear what kind of life Steve led as an escaped felon.

Female [00:18:29.20]: [pleasant music] Thanks for supporting 'Ear Hustle' by listening. If you or your company would like to take this a step further and sponsor the show, just drop a line to sponsor@radiotopia.fm and thanks.

Steve [00:18:47.19]: Being on escape, um, probably the first thing you wake up with and go to bed with every night is, "Wow. I made it through another day." But, there becomes a point in time and, um, where you start to feel comfortable.

Nigel [00:19:02.09]: [comfortable beat] After his escape from Old Folsom, Steve made his way to Austin. He found work there and he met his future wife.

Steve [00:19:09.22]: This really nice lady. We got along really well. And after a year or so, we moved from Texas back down to my home in Florida, and I told her who I was, and, um, we bought a piece of ground. We want an acre in a gated community on a lake and I built a house. I had built a, a new family with her and, uh, her son, who I was with and raised from the time he was 2 until he was almost 11, and her family that adopted me as one of them.

Earlone [00:19:43.06]: Sounds kind of like a normal life. Not really...

Steve [00:19:46.29]: I realized, I always realized when I escaped that, you know, it's only going to last so long. There will be an end. And so, I kind of burnt my candle at both ends.

Nigel [00:19:57.04]: It lasted for years. Steve ran a small maintenance and construction company, he traveled, and he fit in with his community. Now, it sounds kind of normal, right?

Steve [00:20:06.16]: And every week, we went shopping in town.

Earlone [00:20:10.14]: Not really...

Steve [00:20:11.20]: I picked up the 'TV Guide' one time as we were in the checkout lane and I looked for America's Most Wanted. I think it was playing on Sunday nights then and the first thing I saw was my name. Steve Wilson. Will be featured. My heart stopped. [anxious music]

Earlone [00:20:37.14]: So, 'TV Guide' and 'America's Most Wanted' tipped off the fugitive, Steve Wilson.

Nigel [00:20:42.06]: Steve immediately went on the run again. He moved to Australia, then to England, where he convinced his wife to join him.

Steve [00:20:47.45]: "I've got my British citizenship. I've got my Australian citizenship, and I figure out how to bring you over here and make you a citizen too." And she says, "Ok." I said, "The next thing I need you to do is to empty out my account." Which she had her name on, and I said, "Bring me my money." I said, "Just make sure you don't take more than \$10,000 at a time. Take less."

Nigel [00:21:10.00]: Either she didn't listen to him or she didn't think it was important.

Earlone [00:21:13.10]: Uh-uh.

Nigel [00:21:13.29]: Because she ended up taking out more than \$10,000.

Earlone [00:21:16.10]: In one withdrawal.

Nigel [00:21:17.20]: And that was the problem.

Earlone [00:21:19.03]: The FBI was monitoring that account. They tipped off Scotland Yard and she was followed from the moment she got off that plane.

Nigel [00:21:25.00]: Yep.

Earlone [00:21:25.21]: When she met up with Steve at the hotel in London, he got arrested.

Nigel [00:21:29.25]: Immediately.

Steve [00:21:31.13]: Well, I escaped in August 2nd, 1984. Eight years later, in 1992, uh, I was returned to New Folsom and put in the hole. [melancholy music]

Earlone [00:21:48.17]: So, that's Steve's 115. That's the rule violation that will come up at his parole hearing, and he'll have to answer for that yet again.

Nigel [00:21:55.24]: Yep and he's also going to have to talk about his life before he murdered his father-in-law, he'll have to talk about the murder itself, and he'll also have to talk about what he's been doing since he's been back in prison after his escape.

Earlone [00:22:07.26]: Yeah. Guys have to explain what sort of work they've been doing to understand themselves, to change. There's a whole bunch of vocabulary for this inside of prison.

Nigel [00:22:15.23]: Yeah. You guys talk about like insight and accountability all the time.

Earlone [00:22:19.04]: And some guys really do take it on, but some guys don't. And the board is going to be listening and looking hard to determine what's really going on inside.

Steve [00:22:31.05]: What do I think my chances are at parole? Um, I think that I've prepared myself. I, I, I've done some deep study and some research into my, myself, and I understand what it was and the way my belief system was that allowed me to, to take such a, a drastic step. Um, I do courses over and over again. I do AA, NA, and been doing it for over 10 years, even though I have gotten everything from it that I can get. I mean, I, I live it every day. I, I ask myself every day. Uh, a question. I question myself and I say, you know, uh, have I, have I addressed my defects? Am I trying to control anybody? Am I trying to take advantage? And, and then I also ask myself, "Have I done anything positive today?"

Danny [00:23:28.04]: For myself, I would say I did a lot of writing.

Earlone [00:23:30.25]: This is Danny Plunkett again. He's been involved with restorative justice programs, which is about dialog between victims and offenders. Here's how he prepared to face the board.

Danny [00:23:40.23]: I would just write. I would write about the crime. I would write about who I was leading up to the crime. Um, and also a lot of victim empathy exercises, just trying to write on what it must have been like for them and trying to imagine maybe what it's been like for them since the crime, since the trial, that kind of stuff.

Nigel [00:24:03.29]: At Danny's parole hearing, he faced a commissioner and a deputy commissioner.

Danny [00:24:08.22]: So, we walk into the room and there is, directly in front of me, there's 2 seats. The farthest one, my lawyer is sitting in and then the one that I'm going to sit in, and there's 2 tables, and, on the left, and that's where the commissioner and the deputy commissioner, and then the back of the room is just a line of people, and I can't look. I can't look at them.

Earlone [00:24:35.03]: That row of people behind Danny, they're called VNOCs: victim's next of kin, and Danny was not allowed to look at 'em. He couldn't acknowledge their presence in any way.

Nigel [00:24:44.21]: Danny can't address anyone except the commissioners.

Earlone [00:24:48.02]: At Danny's hearing, the victim's representatives got a chance to speak.

Danny [00:24:52.19]: And I got to hear a little of the young man that I murdered's life before. And then, I got to hear from the victims, uh, two victims who were at the crime and hear their experiences. And, I got it. I got it all. I got to hear the family's history, you know, hear my victim's life growing up in great detail, and, you know, that's really restorative justice, except for the fact that I couldn't look at them. They had family pictures. I couldn't look, and it was really tough not to look. Uh, but I got to hear the pain and the heartache and the loss, you know, the empty stocking at Christmas. The empty chair at Thanksgiving. Um, it's, it was, it was a very powerful experience, and I'm very grateful for that.

Earlone [00:26:09.08]: [guitar strums] Guys find out pretty quick if they're getting a date, often within minutes after the hearing. Danny did not get a date.

Danny [00:26:20.28]: Uh, I, I struggle with whether or not I deserve to get out of prison because of the harm that I've caused and the life I took that can't be returned and relived. I want out. There's a lot of things I want to do, uh, you know, but on the other hand, I have a pretty good life in here at San Quentin. I've been able to, uh, find me for the first time in my life, somebody that I'm proud of. Um, I have a rewarding, rich, rewarding life with so many programs and

relationships, you know, with people, and even some people locally who, you know, I've met since I've been here that come to visit. And outside volunteers. There's so many outside volunteers. So, I have a rich life in here. I really look forward to having a rich life out of here.

Nigel [00:27:17.15]: Danny will have another chance before the board in 3 years. Here's what happened at Phillip's hearing. And, just a reminder, Phillip has been in prison for 20 years for a double murder he committed when he was 19 years old.

Phillip [00:27:31.21]: One of the things that they said, they said, you know, "Mr. Melendez..." Well, they said that, you know, there's no getting around the crime. It's a horrendous crime, and it is, and I agreed wholeheartedly when he said that, and I agree with it now to this day, but when they talked about suitability factors, you know, they said that, "You have done a lot of work. You've, you've done a lot of work on yourself. You have insight." And one of the things that I did well, they said, was, "He didn't minimize anything." Which means that, when it came to every part of my negative behavior, I owned it and was able to trace it back to my childhood. And that's the insight too.

Nigel [00:28:05.13]: Phillip's hearing lasted about 3 and a half hours.

Phillip [00:28:08.16]: And, you know, you're done talked about all your traumas and it's painful. It's sad. It's, it's, it hurts. And then you have to wait. And those 15 or 20 minutes just seem like forever and then they come and get you and they say, "All right. Let's reconvene." Sure enough. They walked me in there. They said, "Mr. Melendez, we find you suitable for parole." [uplifting guitar music] And, you know, you feel the weight of the world come off your chest.

Nigel [00:28:38.10]: Do you think you deserve to get out?

Phillip [00:28:40.08]: [sighs] I don't know. I don't know about deserving. Deserving, that's a hard word to really, to stomach just based on my accountability, just based on my understanding of my, my victim's impact or the impact I had on my victim's lives. I don't- I couldn't really say I ever deserve anything. Right? Um, do I want to get out? Absolutely. Do I have a family? Do I have a community that I want to fix, that I want to restore? Yes, absolutely. And for them and for the community, I would like to see myself out. I would like to see myself out. But I don't think I'll, I don't think I can ever say that I deserve to be out.

Earlone [00:29:26.07]: [dark, pensive music] The reaction inside of San Quentin to Phillip getting his date has been mixed. He says most of his fellow prisoners have been supportive, but he's heard complaints...

Phillip [00:29:35.26]: One of the worst ones I've heard was like, "Aw, I can't believe that MF-er got a date. You know he killed 2 people." Um, and then, the only comfort that guy could get is just keep thinking out loud. This is what somebody told me. He kept thinking about it, he was like, "Well, at least the governor will take his date."

Earlone [00:29:56.02]: But that didn't happen. In September, Phil Melendez got out of prison and he's living in northern California.

Nigel [00:30:03.05]: Maybe he's already had a chance to watch 'The NeverEnding Story' on the couch with his wife and kids.

Earlone [00:30:08.01]: Yeah. I'm a have to catch that movie on my yacht.

Ron [00:30:12.20]: I used to tell myself, you know, "I can't wait to get away from these frickin' turds."

Nigel [00:30:16.22]: Ron Self is still waiting for his date to arrive.

Ron [00:30:19.26]: And now it's looking like that's gonna happen, I'm finding myself realizing I'm going to miss a lot of these people, especially the veterans.

Earlone [00:30:27.08]: Before he came to prison for attempted murder, Ron was in the military.

Ron [00:30:31.16]: I feel like I'm a little emotional. I feel like I'm leaving them behind. And I don't like that. That bothers me, and it surprises me because I didn't think that would bother me.

Nigel [00:30:46.17]: Here's the latest on Ron. After he got his date, he had to wait months to see if it would pass review. Just last Friday, he was called to go see his counselor.

Ron [00:30:56.24]: I almost threw up. I mean, I could feel it in my throat. It was just like, "Holy shit." But, I get there, and the counselor comes running out, and he's like, "Yeah, the governor reviewed your case today and he took no action." And I'm like, "Cool, so when am I getting out?" "I don't know," he says. [laughs] "I don't know, but you gotta sign these papers."

Earlone [00:31:17.07]: On October 19th, 2017, after 23 years in prison, Ron Self walked free, but I think he's coming back to prison though,

Nigel [00:31:27.06]: What? [both laugh] You think he's coming back for sure?

Earlone [00:31:30.22]: I do.

Nigel [00:31:31.15]: Well, you actually are right, because he founded a program, Veterans Healing Veterans, and he's going to be visiting veterans in prisons around the state.

Earlone [00:31:41.09]: Ok, uh, how you doing today?

Steve [00:31:43.14]: Oh, I'm a little tired, but I'm healthy.

Nigel [00:31:47.29]: Back to Steve Wilson and his board hearing. We interviewed him before the hearing and after. It didn't go well for him.

Steve [00:31:56.19]: My feelings on that, um, I was hurt. Uh, I really expected to get a date.
[dripping, deep music]

Earlone [00:32:04.22]: He was philosophical about it, though...

Steve [00:32:06.18]: It seems that the older that I get, uh, the more I'm kind of living in my memories. I can go any place I want. I can do anything I want. I can relive, uh, all my experiences as long [laughs] as long as I don't lose my memory, and that is a freedom. They can lock the body up until it dies, but they can't lock the mind up. [outro music]

Earlone [00:32:51.10]: Thanks to Steve Wilson for sharing his story with us.

Nigel [00:32:54.01]: And also, a big thanks to Danny Plunket, Phillip Melendez, and Ron Self for telling us about their experience with the parole board.

Earlone [00:33:01.03]: Sound design on this episode was a group effort with music contributed by Antwan Williams, David Jassy, E. 'Phil' Phillips, and Earlone Woods, myself. Pat Mesiti-Miller is our outside production adviser. Our story editor is Curtis Fox and our executive producer for Radiotopia is Julie Shapiro.

Nigel [00:33:19.12]: We also want to thank Warden Ron Davis and Larry Schneider who runs the media lab we work in. And, as you know, every episode has to be approved by this guy here.

Sam Robinson [00:33:30.06]: I am Lieutenant Sam Robinson, the public information officer at San Quentin State Prison, and I approve this story, the final episode of season 1. I'm really looking forward to hearing, well, maybe I am, I'm not really sure, because it's been a lot of work this season, but given that we move forward with season 2, I'm really looking forward to seeing what, uh, what new stories develop out of here.

Nigel [00:33:52.02]: It feels so weird to not say next time on 'Ear Hustle'. E, I'm not ready for this.

Earlone [00:33:57.25]: Me either, but don't get too down, Nig, because we got plans to drop a few surprises in the feed leading up to next season.

Nigel [00:34:06.13]: And we've heard from so many listeners about the original music we use in our episodes, and we're gonna dig into that and share some of those songs in full.

Earlone [00:34:14.08]: And, maybe, we might do a Q&A episode or something.

Nigel [00:34:20.17]: Right. You know, we've been getting so many kites. I've got so many to go through, and I want to give a shout out to Jefferson County Public Schools and the Moore Traditional School, specifically, because they have a teacher there that did a project with her class, and we got like 62 kites in 1 day.

Earlone [00:34:35.10]: So keep those kites coming and let us know what you want to hear.

Nigel [00:34:39.10]: Ok, E, I know we can't get specific about what we're working on for next season, but what's one story you want to do?

Earlone [00:34:45.17]: Ministering on death row.

Nigel [00:34:47.09]: Oh. That's a heavy one.

Earlone [00:34:49.15]: Yeah. That's a deep one. Do you think we could get on death row this year?

Nigel [00:34:53.10]: That's the big question, is if we're gonna get up there.

Earlone [00:34:56.05]: What about you, Nig?

Nigel [00:34:57.00]: For sure, I want to do a story about L7s, nerds, and fantasy games inside.

Earlone [00:35:02.11]: Let's just say we got a shit load of work to do over the break, so please stayed tuned. Nig will still be posting on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, and you might find her out there talking about 'Ear Hustle'.

Nigel [00:35:14.02]: Over the break, I'll continue updating the website, EarHustleSQ.com. Check out the gallery for new images and, also, we get so many questions about writing to guys inside. Please go to the FAQ section on the website to find out how to do that.

Earlone [00:35:29.00]: People love mail and not just the guys at San Quentin.

Nigel [00:35:32.27]: Thanks to everyone who's listened over the season and supported us in so many ways. You know what I always say to Lieutenant Robinson when I talk about 'Ear Hustle'?

Earlone [00:35:40.27]: Nah. What?

Nigel [00:35:42.15]: The reality of 'Ear Hustle' is bigger than the dream [sniffles] we had when we started.

Earlone [00:35:51.25]: Damn.

Nigel [00:35:52.24]: Yeah.

Earlone [00:35:53.13]: That's deep.

Nigel [00:35:54.03]: It is, and we've been supported by so many people.

Earlone [00:35:57.12]: Yeah. We had over 5 million, uh, downloads this season.

Nigel [00:36:01.27]: It's amazing. It's really amazing.

Earlone [00:36:05.10]: She got all emotional and shit.

Nigel [00:36:06.28]: Ok.

Earlone [00:36:06.30]: That's what's up.

Nigel [00:36:08.07]: Ok. Um.

Earlone [00:36:09.18]: Can't be seen crying in prison, woman.

Nigel [00:36:11.01]: Absolutely not. So, again, thanks to everyone who cared enough to listen. I'm Nigel Poor.

Earlone [00:36:16.26]: And thanks to the entire San Quentin community. I'm Earlone Woods. Thanks for listening.

Nigel [00:36:36.00]: Before we sign off for the season, just one last reminder that Radiotopia is in the middle of its annual fundraiser where we ask our listeners to support the network that brings them their favorite shows, like 'Ear Hustle'. Just go to radiotopia.fm to join the Radiotopia community and donate today. Thank you.

Radiotopia outro [00:36:56.29]: Radiotopia from PRX.

Female [00:37:04.12]: Thanks for listening and thanks to Adzerk for providing their ad serving platform to Radiotopia.