Male [00:00:03.02]: [phone dial tone and ringing] You have reached the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation at San Quentin State Prison. [metallic noises]

Male [00:00:10.02]: This podcast contain language that may not be appropriate for all listeners. Listener's discretion is advised. [echoing sounds of door locking]

Father George [00:00:21.09]: The thing that sticks to mind the most that still makes me laugh when I think about it, and this is dark, because, I mean, people who don't work in prison may not find this funny, but one of the serial killers over there was very notorious and killed a lot of people, and he goes to my services. And, one day, I was walking away from his cell. We were talking and he said, "I'll see you later, Father. Don't do anything I wouldn't do." And I thought to myself, "Well, you've really set the bar pretty low for me. Didn't you?" [laughs] [intro music]

Earlonne [00:00:51.07]: You're now tuned into San Quentin's 'Ear Hustle' from PRX's Radiotopia. I'm Earlonne Woods. I'm incarcerated here at San Quentin State Prison in California.
Nigel [00:01:00.26]: I'm Nigel Poor, a visual artist who volunteers at the prison.

Earlonne [00:01:04.07]: And together, we're gonna take you inside. This time, we're taking you into a prison within the prison. [rhythmic music]

Nigel [00:01:24.00]: I come here to San Quentin almost every day, and I always walk the same path. Once I get through the inner checkpoint, I step into the garden chapel area, and it's weird to say, but it's actually kind of lovely.

Earlonne [00:01:35.05]: It's cool. It's cool.

Nigel [00:01:36.03]: It's nice because, you know, I always see the same guys tending the rose bushes and the other kind of cheerful plantings that are in there, and on the right is the chapel.

Earlonne [00:01:44.15]: Right.

Nigel [00:01:45.06]: In front of me is the hospital.

Earlonne [00:01:46.12]: Right.

Nigel [00:01:46.29]: And to the left is this building with really large, kind of gothic writing that says adjustment center.

Earlonne [00:01:53.03]: The AC. That's what we call it. The adjustment center is where guys go when they're being received to death row, and it's also kind of like the hole.

Nigel [00:02:00.16]: The hole?

Earlonne [00:02:00.29]: Administrative segregation. It's where they isolate
Nigel [00:02:03.19]: Oh. Ok.

Earlonne [00:02:04.14]: Where you won't have no contact with nobody.

Nigel [00:02:06.06]: Ok. Like the SHU kind of.

Earlonne [00:02:07.14]: Pretty much.

Nigel [00:02:07.22]: Ok. And behind and above the adjustment center is death row. And, Earlonne, I don't know much about it. I just know it's there, and it's kind of weird. It's not something that I really ever hear guys on the mainline talk about.

Earlonne [00:02:19.28]: Right. Guys like me on the main line, we don't ever have any real contact with guys on death row.

Nigel [00:02:25.16]: Yeah. You know. And the only time I see the guys on death row is when they're being escorted somewhere, and I know it's them because, I mean, I say it's shackles, but they have like-

Earlonne [00:02:33.22]: Oh. They have these waist chains.

Nigel [00:02:35.03]: Waist chains.

Earlonne [00:02:35.19]: Or, they're handcuffed behind their back.

Nigel [00:02:37.19]: Yeah, and they walk kind of slowly, and I just don't know where I'm supposed to look.

Earlonne [00:02:42.24]: Right. For us, if we see 'em, we're not supposed to look. We're supposed to stop and turn around, but-
Nigel [00:02:47.17]: Do you actually do that?

Earlonne [00:02:48.16]: I'm a looker. I'm gonna look.

Nigel [00:02:49.20]: Yeah. I feel the same way. But the way they have it set up, it's like there's this incredible disconnect between the two populations that occupy this prison.

Earlonne [00:02:58.12]: Right.

Nigel [00:02:58.25]: You know, it's like, for the guys on the main line, and really, for me too, death row is like a mystery.

Earlonne [00:03:04.00]: It really is.

[outdoor noises] Uh, what do you think when you see a guy being escorted on death row?

Male [00:03:10.21]: I think that's fucked up. That's what I think.

Male [00:03:14.19]: You know, but I have to think God that they're not escorting me and I'm not the one on death row.

Male [00:03:19.29]: Yeah, I also think how crazy it is how like regular they look. You know? I'm just kind of reminds me of this thing I see in prison. It's like I'm seein', I find myself surrounded by a bunch of regular people but their narratives don't really reflect that.

Earlonne [00:03:34.16]: Do you have any thoughts on death row?

Male [00:03:37.06]: Not really. You know? Not one way or the other. You know?
Male [00:03:40.16]: Lonely. Very lonely.

Male [00:03:44.27]: Oh. Man.

Male [00:03:45.11]: We're, as humans, man, we adapt to wherever we're at. You know what I'm sayin'? 

Male [00:03:49.05]: I don't know. I've never really thought about them people up in there because, you know, we all have to carry our own hammers or bury our own crosses, however you look at it.

Male [00:03:56.23]: It's bad. I mean, waking up knowin' you gonna die.

Male [00:04:01.28]: If you have to live the rest of your life in prison, that would be the spot.

Male [00:04:04.29]: Yeah.

Male [00:04:05.16]: Because they're not killin' nobody on death row. And, out on the line you have to deal with thousands and thousands and thousands of personalities that clash. You know? At least up there, you know, you get solitude because you're single-celled.

Earlonne [00:04:20.02]: I appreciate it, man. I appreciate it.

Nigel [00:04:21.08]: Ok. Earlonne, that is the last thing I expected to hear about death row.

Earlonne [00:04:26.01]: Yeah. That's too much solitude.

Nigel [00:04:27.15]: Yeah. I mean, to say, in some ways, they have it better than the mainline?
Earlonne [00:04:32.04]: Yeah. I don't know about that one. But, like he said, they haven't been killin' people up there.

Nigel [00:04:36.23]: Yeah, but my god.

Earlonne [00:04:38.00]: The last execution was 2006.

Nigel [00:04:40.03]: Ok. That's true, but in 2016, there were actually two death penalty propositions on the California ballot.

Earlonne [00:04:46.09]: Right.

Nigel [00:04:46.22]: And one was to abolish it and the other was to speed up the appeals process so that executions would actually happen faster.

Earlonne [00:04:54.17]: And California voted to speed up the process.

Nigel [00:04:57.15]: Yep. That's right. And nobody knows how that's gonna play out, but in the meantime, we do know there's about 700 guys up there in a building that's not too far from where we're sitting right now, and they're all there waiting in limbo for the state to decide when the next execution is gonna take place.

Earlonne [00:05:13.02]: Yeah. It's a trip, because San Quentin is the only facility in California where executions happen, and if you've been here on this main line for a long time, you remember what it's like.

Kevin [00:05:25.16]: Believe it was in February of '99, a guy by the name of Jaturun Siripongs. He was a foreign national, was executed, I believe, for a robbery/murder in Southern California.

Earlonne [00:05:40.01]: This is Kevin Sawyer. He's been incarcerated for
about 20 years.

Kevin [00:05:44.17]: So, the prison placed us on lockdown a few hours before the execution, but toward the end of the evening, someone yelled out, "Do you think we should have a moment of silence for the guy that's about to get executed?" And somebody responded with "F him. He shouldn't of did what he did." I was kind of outraged because that could of been anybody in prison who has a case of, say, manslaughter to first-degree murder. [dripping music]

Nigel [00:06:26.28]: Ok. Kevin makes a really good point. Some of the guys are here on the main line for committing the same kinds of crimes that put other guys on death row.

Earlonne [00:06:33.17]: Yeah. A lot of it depends on how the police report got written, how a prosecutor moves forward, or how the jury rules.

Nigel [00:06:39.29]: Right.

Earlonne [00:06:39.29]: It's not like everybody up there is a serial killer. It's true they've all been convicted of murder, but so have a lot of people down here on the main line.

Nigel [00:06:48.05]: That's right, and we've been able to interview a number of those guys, but we're not allowed to have contact with the death row inmates. We can't invite them down to the media lab, and we're not allowed to visit them up there.

Earlonne [00:06:59.27]: But, like a lot of things in prison, there's always a workaround and we tried to find one.

Nigel [00:07:05.26]: Yes.
Earlonne [00:07:07.07]: The first thing we did was we talked to a few people who do spend time on death row. [rapid, blinking sounds and locking sound]

Rabbi Paul Shleffar [00:07:16.23]: Well, the first visual is the big iron door that says condemned row, and it looks like it was-

Nigel [00:07:23.28]: That's Rabbi Paul Shleffar. He works for the prison and he visits death row on a weekly basis.

Rabbi Paul Shleffar [00:07:29.09]: And, you know, you ring the bell and the guard comes and kind of looks and asks for your id and, uh, it's old. It just looks old. It feels old. It feels like it's been that way forever. [droning beat] There's five tiers, five stories, right, and, you know, it's basically a hundred cells long and, you know, people are just having conversations sort of weaving in between and over each other and up and down and sideways. And it's loud. It's crazy. It's chaos.

Father George [00:08:08.23]: It's like walking into a giant hold of a ship. Imagine a giant, five-story-tall Costco, only with nothing to buy.

Nigel [00:08:18.13]: We also spoke with Father George Williams, a Jesuit priest who's part of the prison ministry.

Father George [00:08:24.01]: It's just sort of metal, black metal cell doors and gray concrete walls and really dirty windows. So, the light is, uh, it's kind of dim, even in the daytime. It's just kind of a dark place. Um. And there's not a lot of color in it aside from black and gray. There's nothing growing in there. You don't get a sense of there being life, of course, I suppose, death row. Why would you? It's almost as though someone went in there and took the color out of it. You know, it's like, sucked the life out of the place. [blinking, rising sound rushes into noise of talking and glass breaking, construction vehicle beeping]
Earlonne [00:09:08.28]: For those of you who've listened before, you know that we're not in this media center alone. We have the San Quentin Newspaper right next door.

Nigel [00:09:16.14]: The paper's actually written and published inside the prison but printed on the outside. So, when it's getting ready to be delivered, a truck brings all the issues down to the media lab.

Earlonne [00:09:26.03]: The newspaper ships our to all the prisons in California, including San Quentin.

Nigel [00:09:31.06]: And that means for us, luckily, it also goes to the death row.

Ok, so we're putting these letters inside the San Quentin Newspaper.

Earlonne [00:09:39.27]: Basically, we threw a line out to see if anyone would bite and it came in the form of a letter. [electronic notes]

Nigel [00:09:47.29]: To whom it may concern: My name is Nigel Poor, and I'm one member of the team that produces the podcast 'Ear Hustle' from within inside San Quentin State Prison. You may have heard our podcast as it airs on channel 19 on the Prison Closed Circuit Station. The purpose of the podcast is to debunk some of the stereotypes and assumptions that people hold about that who are incarcerated. We are contacting you because we want to include the entire San Quentin community, and although death row is isolated from the rest of the prison, it is still part of the community. To be clear, we do not do stories about anyone's particular case or crime. We do not do stories that talk about how unfair the system is. We do stories about the everyday experience that show life inside in a realistic and three-dimensional way. [crackling noise]
Earlonne, I don't know about you, but I had no idea how I was gonna react to these letters.

Earlonne [00:10:45.17]: What do you mean?

Nigel [00:10:45.17]: Well, I spend a lot of time on the main line here and I'm totally comfortable.

Earlonne [00:10:49.16]: Right.

Nigel [00:10:50.18]: But, most of what I know about death row comes from the movies, and they may not be realistic, but the movies have a way of filling your imagination with really frightful thoughts. And, on top of that, there are people up there who have done really awful things, heinous things.

Earlonne [00:11:04.19]: Yeah. You, you, you have people that's up there that have done things to the extreme, and that's why they up there. But, every day both you and I interact with guys who are in for murder and we don't even think about it.

Nigel [00:11:16.17]: No! It's true. I totally understand that. I'm not saying that my reaction was the right reaction. I'm just saying that it was there and it's difficult, and it's something I really had to work through. Plus, I also have to admit I had concerns about offending the families of their victims.

Earlonne [00:11:33.07]: That's understandable.

Nigel [00:11:33.21]: Yeah. So, it was really helpful to hear what Father George had to say about this.

Father George [00:11:38.12]: When I first got there, I started.... I was curious, so I would read the files of like what people were in for, and that's
what gave me nightmares. I stopped reading, because some of the crimes, they were pretty horrible. But, when I'm with the guys there, I don't think about their crime, because they're not their crime. They're, it's the man in front of me, whatever he did, that's something that he did in the past. And that's not my job. He's already been judged. So, I don't need to be doing that. [ringing melody] I think it's, in some ways, the darkest place in California, because it's where we've put the people that people fear the most and just have so much hatred and anger toward. We've thrown them away in this building. And there's no hope. At least.... The thing about San Quentin that's different from a lot of places is there are programs. There's hope. Guys have an incentive, and we believe that people can change. I mean, most of us that work here do believe that. There, it's like, they're not allowed to change. They're stuck in being the worst thing they ever did. And the best that they could hope for would be life without parole, which, I think that's even worse than the death penalty. The worst thing about death row is just the fact that it exists.

Nigel [00:12:55.07]: Let's open 'em. [letters being opened]

Earlonne [00:13:01.21]: Right. In here.

We didn't get a lot of letters back from death row in response, but we got a few.

Nigel [00:13:06.10]: And we thought maybe we'd get a correspondence going and then get guys down here on the main line to read the letters and we would record that.

Earlonne [00:13:13.21]: Like Ken Burns. [Nigel laughs] We'd put some soulful fiddle music behind it, but a few of the guys who responded to our letter agreed to call us and let us record them, which is allowed under California law.
Nigel [00:13:24.22]: We can't interview them in person and we can't request to interview a specific inmate.

Earlonne [00:13:29.22]: But, they can call us if they want to, so at the appointed hour, we brought our recording equipment to the tiny office of Larry Snyder. He runs the media lab for the prison. [8-bit game noises, door locking noise]

Larry [00:13:44.23]: Uh, this is Larry Snyder. I'm gonna open you up to speakerphone so you can speak with Nigel Poor and Earlonne Woods who are the, uh, 'Ear Hustle' folks. [static, overlapping conversation]

Steve [00:13:58.06]: Ok. I'm right here.

Earlonne [00:13:59.14]: All right. Hey. Hold on one second. Let us get this, make sure these volumes are together.

Nigel [00:14:02.27]: The first man we spoke to was Steve Champion. He was 18 when he was first incarcerated and he came to San Quentin when he was 20. He's been here on death row for 36 years.

Could you, um, could you describe your cell to us?

Steve [00:14:17.14]: Well, let me, let me say this. It's not that big. You have a stainless steel toilet and a sink. You have, uh, two lockers that's, uh, attached to the wall. You have a bunk. For me, I don't sleep on the steel slab where you place the mattress at. But, what I have did for the last 36 years is that I sleep on the floor. And I use my bunk, the slab, as my desk.

Joseph [00:14:42.26]: Yeah. My name is Joseph Manuel Montes. I was, uh, 20 years old when I caught this case in '94, and I've been on death row ever since.
Earlonne [00:14:56.19]: We asked Joseph about his cell too.

Joseph [00:14:58.19]: You know, I have, uh, a TV. You know, I have, uh, a cd player. I have a typewriter. You know, I usually use my bed as a desk. You know, all my family pictures up. I call it the wall of fame. Um, I have a map on my wall. You know, I like looking at certain continents, certain places in the world when I'm looking at a PBS program.

Earlonne [00:15:22.04]: Do you enjoy not having a cellmate?

Joseph [00:15:25.01]: [laughs] You know, hearing your episode on having cellmates, yes. I like it the way it is right now. [Nigel and Earlonne laugh] [striking, metallic noises]

Earlonne [00:15:36.06]: So it sounds like all the cells on condemned row are pretty much the same as the cells on the main line, but they don't have cellies.

Nigel [00:15:43.16]: And almost everyone on the main line has a cellie. But you guys get to walk around outside pretty much all day.

Earlonne [00:15:49.20]: Yeah. I could be out my cell from six in the morning to nine at night. And we can do all kind of stuff on the main line, like participate in programs, go jogging on the yard, chop it up with the homies, but on death row, there are some serious restrictions.

Nigel [00:16:03.20]: But that depends on which block you're in. We said that death row is a prison within a prison, but it turns out that that inner prison is also divided.

Earlonne [00:16:13.22]: You have east block, with guys that are in their cells for 20 hours a day. And, whenever they come out and go to the yard, for example, they've got to be shackled and escorted. But, if you go without
write-ups for, let's say, several years, and there's room, you might get to go to north seg, which is the block where Joseph's housed.

Joseph [00:16:30.28]: You know, the only time that you have cuffs is when you leave the unit, when you go to a medical escort, or you go to visit. When you go to the yard, you're not handcuffed. You just basically go to the back of the unit because the officer, you know, he's able to open up the yard manually, and all we do is basically walk straight up to the yard.

Nigel [00:16:52.10]: Wait, so guys just walk around freely and do-

Joseph [00:16:55.29]: Yeah. They, they can walk around freely. They can, you know, play card games, use the phone, or stay in their cells, or walk up and down the tier as a means to exercise.

Nigel [00:17:07.10]: So, when you say yard, do you actually go outside?

Joseph [00:17:10.01]: Yeah. Yeah, I go outside on the roof.

Nigel [00:17:12.11]: On the roof. Oh, ok.

Earlonne [00:17:14.07]: On the roof. So that mean that you can look over the whole bay?

Joseph [00:17:16.28]: No. No, we're not, we're, everything is, they covered everything. Our view is very limited.

Earlonne [00:17:24.04]: Oh, man. [Joseph and Earlonne laugh]

Joseph [00:17:29.14]: Yeah, they changed that a long time ago. I mean, when I first got up here, you know, we didn't have a covering. So, I was able to get a good look, you know, at the ocean and at the Richman Bridge, but they changed that.
Nigel [00:17:40.16]: So, what do you see when you look out?

Earlonne [00:17:42.12]: Probably the sky now.

Joseph [00:17:43.15]: Yeah. The sky. [laughs] Birds flying above us.

Nigel [00:17:48.03]: Oh. I guess you need to explain this to me better, because I just assume that you have to sit in your cell all day. So, tell me what your typical day is like.

Joseph [00:17:54.14]: Uh, everything begins at 7:30 for everybody. Uh, and it ends at 1:30. But, basically, what I do, because I'm a yard worker, right, I, I go out to the yard and I clean up, but they let the workers out earlier so we can, you know, pass the milk out, pass lunches out, clean the tables, get the shower buckets ready. We clean the phones down. We wipe the tables down. We just make sure everything is clean for everybody so when they get started with their days they don't have to deal with a messy tier. [rising, clanking noises]

Earlonne [00:18:29.01]: Smells. Do you remember any smells?

Father George and Joseph Manuel Montes [00:18:31.18]: Smells. Well, sure. [laughs] Every kind of smell. You have the smells of the bathroom. You name it. It's like a locker room. It's like a bathroom. It's like a cafeteria. And you have the smells of people cooking. You know, meals. People cooking in their hotpots and, you know, they figure out ways to cook for each other and share with each other. Definitely, uh, an attack on the senses in some ways. You walk by the shower and get the shower smell. You know, it's just, they're kind of the smells of daily life, but kind of concentrated. [melodic notes, clanking noises]

Daniel [00:19:12.02]: Uh, my name is Daniel Wozniak. Uh, from Orange
County. I've been here in San Quentin a very short time, about, uh, just under two years. I got arrested when I was 26 and got convicted and been here since.

Nigel [00:19:28.07]: Daniel was the third and final death row inmate we were able to speak with. He's housed in east block where, like we said, they're confined to their cells 20 hours a day. We asked him and Joseph what it's like to spend that much time in a place with so little natural light.

Daniel [00:19:43.25]: Well, each cell has, uh, two different lights. There's one on the top, one on the bottom that can illuminate the cell. Uh, there's a high setting and a low setting. Uh, typically I leave my lights on all the time just to give, you know, create a little bit of brightness.

Joseph [00:19:59.19]: Your sight gets taken away somewhat. And when you enter into a place like this, into prison, you're, you know, you have to make a lot of adjustments because you're limited to what you're able to see. So, that definitely gets weakened and what gets strengthened is your sense of hearing. Um, you know, I've, I learned, and I wasn't doing purposely, but it just happens naturally, but I've learned how to train my ears to just identify all the different sounds that happen outside of my cell. [keys jingling] I mean, I've gotten so good with my sense of hearing I can actually tell when certain officers are walking down the tier just by the jingling of the keys. [soft, swooping music]

Nigel [00:20:48.24]: About a year ago, Joseph had to leave the prison for a medical appointment. It was his first time away from death row in 20 years.

Earlonne [00:20:55.15]: After a long time in prison, a medical appointment on the outside can be like a holiday. It's something you look forward to and think back on after it's over.

Joseph [00:21:05.22]: I remember looking at some of the houses that we
were driving by and [laughs], again, it's been so long since I've seen a house that close, uh, they didn't look real to me. You know, my perception of size was just way off. And then, you know, when we arrived to the clinic, you know, I was able to smell, uh, roses for the first time. And when I smelled those roses and when I smelled those trees, it took everything in me not to break down. It just seemed like all my senses, you know, just became alive. You know, when you do so many years in prison, you, you get used to the all we see is green, blue, gray, black. You know, we don't, we don't get to see much color at all other than what we see on the television, but it's nothing like experiencing it personally. And you kind of forget how the free world smells like, the smell of gas, you know, coming from the cars or just the, I mean, it's freedom. That's the word that I always use when I'm talking to my mom about that experience. You know, I smelled freedom. [chains and metallic noises]

Steve [00:22:16.17]: It hovers. You know, the mantle of death is there. There's nothing you can do to escape that.

Nigel [00:22:23.03]: In our conversation with Joseph, Daniel, and Steve, it took a while, but we eventually got around to what it's like living as a condemned man. This is Steve again.

Steve [00:22:32.09]: Well, you don't wake up consciously thinking about, "Ok. I'm gonna be executed." It's easy to be melancholy in a place like this. You know, that's easy. That's not hard to do. You know, my sentence was sentenced to death. I wasn't sentenced to be reformed. So, any acts of redemption or self-transformation that anybody makes on death row, it has to come from themselves. Who am I? Why did I come here? And what is my purpose? So, if you can find out what your central purpose is in life, then that not only becomes your anchor, but that becomes your own confidence that inspires you each and every day to get up and want to do something to pursue that mission.
Earlonne [00:23:16.02]: This is Daniel again.

Daniel [00:23:17.19]: There are some guys I know in here who basically they just wake up each morning, turn on the tv, zone out, and go to sleep, and that's their entire life and existence. You can't help but feel sorry for them, and I guess they give me the motivation to not ever want to get there. So, I make it a point to just always stay busy.

Joseph [00:23:38.23]: When you study the great spiritual literature and you study the spiritual teachers from Akhenaten, from Moses, from Buddha, from Jesus, from Prophet Muhammed, from Gandhi, if you look at each and every one of their lives, they always left the masses of their people and they went off into the wilderness, and that is where they had their quiet time. That is where they mediated at. And so, for me, that becomes my force. You know, early in the morning, you know, three o'clock and four o'clock in the morning where most of the people are asleep, where I can just really have that quiet time to myself and spend about a half an hour just doing that mediation, and then that sets the tone for me for the rest of the day.

Daniel [00:24:20.14]: It starts in the morning. Yeah, it's the most important decision each and every single one of us make that we take for granted. You choose to wake up happy or choose to wake up sad. Make that decision. Hopefully it's happy. And then, from that point on, you know, I just continue trying to figure it out. Why am I still alive? Why am I still breathing? Why do I still exist? And I think it's not a matter of knowing what that purpose is. It's about the journey and the discovery and understanding what that is. And it constantly changes.

Steve [00:24:54.27]: I know that my situation is, um, dire. I mean, after all, I am on death row. But, I can also look out into the outside of the world, and I can also look out into history. I simply say to myself, if my ancestors can come over here packed in boats like sardines, come into a world that they
had no idea on, and if they can come here with everything in terms of their language, their history and culture and customs destroyed and still make something out of nothing, then I don't have anything to complain about.

[organic notes]

Father George [00:25:42.04]: I think the thing that really I notice the most is how firmly guys will grasp my hand in a handshake. It's like they're really reaching out to, to connect with the outside world. Um, because there's so little touch that goes on in prison in death row. They're not allowed to really be around other people in a way that we would consider human.

Rabbi Paul Shleffar [00:26:06.06]: I once came to a cell of an individual. He had a broken tooth and he had a black eyes, and he was beat up, right. And I said, "What happened?" And he, he said, "Well, I had a cell extraction." Right, where they come in and drag them out, right. And I said, "Why did you do that?" And he said, "I just needed to feel human contact." [shifting electric notes]

Nigel [00:26:41.24]: Ok. E, there's something that occurs to me listening to Rabbi Paul and Father George talk about what life is like on death row.

Earlonne [00:26:47.15]: What's that?

Nigel [00:26:48.18]: Well, I'm not gonna say that it contradicts what they guys themselves are saying, but there is this kind of disconnect.

Earlonne [00:26:54.22]: Well, they don't live up there.

Nigel [00:26:56.09]: That's true, but that's not exactly what I'm getting at.

Earlonne [00:26:58.18]: Well, lay it on me.

Nigel [00:26:59.15]: Ok. Rabbi Paul and Father George are so full of
empathy, right?

Earlonne [00:27:03.23]: Ok.

Nigel [00:27:04.08]: But what strikes me is that, at least the guys we talked to, don't seem to need empathy or sympathy. They have some kind of curious control over their lives that really surprised me, and it's kind of hard to articulate exactly what I mean, but what I walk away with is thinking these guys are incredibly self-sufficient.

Earlonne [00:27:26.03]: Yeah.

Nigel [00:27:26.10]: You know, maybe they aren't. Maybe that's what they showed us, but that's what really come across.

Earlonne [00:27:31.08]: Yeah, but remember, this is a select few. I mean, we sent 700 letters up there and only got a handful back.

Nigel [00:27:38.08]: Yeah, yeah.

Earlonne [00:27:38.12]: The guys we ended up talking to, they're determined. They're disciplined. I mean, look at Steve. He has written three entire books in the decades he's been on death row.

Nigel [00:27:47.29]: That's true, and I remember he said sometimes when he has the time to go to the yard, he actually chooses to stay in his cell and write.

Earlonne [00:27:55.08]: Right. He's focused. He's been up in that cell 36 years.

Nigel [00:27:57.15]: Oh. It's so hard to get my mind around that. But, I also want to remember that there's a lot of guys up there who aren't like that.
There's guys who struggle with suicide, with serious depression, and also, I'm sure a lot of guys who just watch TV all day like Daniel said.

Earlonne [00:28:13.22]: Right. Yeah. It's tough. I mean, to keep it together in a place like that, you've got to be disciplined. You've got to have things to do, and you've got to have meaning. [rising voices and lock noise]

What, what type of programs do you take?

Daniel [00:28:31.28]: So, I'm in an existentialism group. I'm in a critical thinking group and a lot of church services. You know, I make it a point to keep as actively busy as possible, so if there's an opportunity to do something, I'm gonna take advantage of it.

Nigel [00:28:47.26]: What do you mean an existential group?

Daniel [00:28:50.01]: [laughs] It's a group of, there's about eight of us. It's just a group of guys finding meaning to still continue on while on death row, knowing that we have the fate of death upon us.

Nigel [00:29:03.10]: So, it's an informal group? It's not a, a official program?

Daniel [00:29:08.16]: You could call it that, yes.

Nigel [00:29:10.04]: Can you talk about how you meet and discuss?

Daniel [00:29:12.07]: Uh, that I cannot.

Nigel [00:29:13.16]: Ok. Got it.

Earlonne [00:29:15.08]: I have a question. Bein' up there, what give your life meaning?
Daniel [00:29:20.21]: What gives me life meaning?

Earlonne [00:29:21.25]: Yeah.

Daniel [00:29:23.01]: I know the conditions aren't, you know, the best, but it's noticing the little things along the way that I guess I'm more in tune to seeing now than I was prior to getting in here.

Nigel [00:29:36.03]: Well, can you give the example of like what would be a good thing that would happen during the day?

Daniel [00:29:40.26]: I mean, it could be something as small as walking outside and feeling the sun on my face. And that's just one small, little example that, again, people walk through it each and every day without reflecting upon, that one single instance that many just take for granted, and I guess now because my life is so slowed down, I can focus on those, and it's those little things that make life beautiful.

Nigel [00:30:08.22]: Do you think that your circumstances being on death row has made you learn and know yourself better than most people have the opportunity to do?

Steve [00:30:17.28]: Absolutely and I'll tell you why. It's because I have time to think. I have time to reflect. If you have children and if you have a job, if you're married, well, when you come home, you have to deal with the household. You have responsibilities of bills. You have job. You have a family. The demands of people on the outside world are different than the demands that I have because they don't have time because all of their time is filled up.

Earlonne [00:30:49.18]: Now, how will you leave a record of your life? Like, what will be left behind to say that Daniel was here and he mattered?
Daniel [00:30:56.13]: I like to think that who I was prior to coming here, that man, you know, growing up, I made a lot of mistakes in my life, and um, that person, I guess, I've accepted as that guy being dead. Like, that's the guy that got the death penalty. That's the guy who's gotten the lethal injection. Who I am now and who I wake up to to be each and every day, you know, who can I be remembered as? If I can change two people's lives for the better, where no one else could, that would give my life more meaning than I have any right to deserve.

Nigel [00:31:34.06]: Do you think that opportunity exists where you are now, to do that?

Daniel [00:31:37.28]: Absolutely. Without a doubt. You got a lot of lost souls who have nobody and they're facing the impending doom of death.

Nigel [00:31:49.00]: Um, are you a lost soul?

Daniel [00:31:51.00]: Um, I was. I was. I'll put it that way. I was, but, um, luckily, enough people have shaped me throughout the years I've been down and continue shaping me to this day. I can only hope I can return the favor.

Steve [00:32:08.27]: As long as you are alive, there is hope. When you are dead, that struggle is over. You can't look in terms of the future, because the future is not yet here. So, what do you have left? You have right now, and so that is where you have to live at, right here, right now. That's eternity. [droning music]

Rabbi Paul Shleffar [00:32:48.08]: When I have the inmates come to me and basically say, "I'm gonna kill myself." Right, and um, "There's just no point. What's the point in me getting up another day and keep going?" You know. And, that happens a lot. It happens a lot. You know, people lose hope I think, and I, you know, I really, I think what they're really asking is,
you know, help me find a way to keep going, right, help me find some hope in this kind of dark and hopeless situation.

Father George [00:33:34.13]: I think the only way I can describe what it's like as a minister going in there, as a priest, is it's like going into this dark, dark cave with a flashlight, and, and my work there is to remind the men in there that it's not all dark. Despite where they are, that there's still light, and there's still God. There's still mercy. There's still purpose in life and that they, um, that they're not beyond redemption. It's like the building itself and everything about it is meant to reinforce this oppressive darkness and hopelessness, and my job is to go in there with this little flashlight and remind them that there is hope. [trilling notes]

Nigel [00:34:20.27]: What do you think, E? Do you think you could keep it together up on the row?

Earlonne [00:34:24.16]: From my experience of like 27 years in prison altogether, I believe I can keep it together, yeah. It's like you adjust to it, like it's going to AC and goin' to the SHU, or you know, your program will change, and then, after a while, you'll get acclimated to whatever that program is, and I would, I would assume it's like having a disease or cancer or something like that. You know it's there, but it's not something that you think about all the time I wouldn't-

Nigel [00:34:54.17]: Right. You just have to learn to live with it, because if you spend too much time in it-

Earlonne [00:34:58.10]: Dwelling in it and that's all your life is.

Nigel [00:35:00.04]: Yeah. And, you know, it's not just about the guys on death row. We didn't even get into how survivors or family members of the victims feel about death row and the guys up there.
Earlonne [00:35:11.08]: I'm sure they're going through a whole lot.

Nigel [00:35:13.08]: Yeah. Absolutely.

Earlonne [00:35:14.22]: There's so much more to learn, so, if you're listening to this and you're on death row, send us a letter.

Nigel [00:35:20.16]: And tell us more about your experiences on death row.

Earlonne [00:35:24.16]: See, we can't guarantee anything, but we'd sure love to hear from you. [tinkling music]

Nigel [00:35:31.21]: When we come back, it's count time. That's when we put in a little extra something.

Earlonne [00:35:36.09]: Today, we're gonna go back to the main line and hear a familiar voice. [breakdown beat]

Male [00:37:06.08]: [bell rining] Count time! Count time!

Mesro [00:37:13.02]: I wanted to shine like magnesium, but my entropy was too low, so I tried to convert to helium, but my hydrogen was too slow. I weighed like ten kilograms per mole. Blast! I need to drop a few pounds, but my structure's like a noble gas with no electrons to pass around. I wanted to change my name and symbol to fit in the Periodic Table. Potassium and Tungsten giggled when Iron said I wasn't able. Gold and silver and copper were on my side with mercury to lend a hand, but those metals don't react or collide. Results aren't in the plans. Sodium was salty I dated Chlorine. I was just trying to be nice. Iodine red on the scene. Conversion won't come out right. I want to balance my equation. Limited reagents cause precipitation instead of combustion. Now I hang with the sun who is patient, showing light from my spectrum in state functions. One, two. [tinking music]
Earlonne [00:38:23.01]: That was Mesro performing his piece 'Human Element'. [drum beat]

Nigel [00:38:34.16]: We want to think everyone who was involved in this episode.

Earlonne [00:38:38.01]: Thanks to Kevin Sawyer for recounting his memory of the execution he was here for in 1999, and thanks to Father George Williams and Rabbi Paul Shleffar for sitting down with us in the media lab.

Nigel [00:38:48.07]: And thanks to Steve Champion, Joseph Manuel Montes, and Daniel Wozniak for speaking to us from death row, and thanks to everyone who responded, and we're really sorry we couldn't speak with all of you.

Earlonne [00:39:05.13]: 'Ear Hustle' is produced by myself, Earlonne Woods, and Nigel Poor with help from outside producer Pat Mesiti-Miller who also works with the sound design team. This episode was scored with music by Antwan Williams with contributions from David Jassy.

Nigel [00:39:18.21]: Curtis Fox is our story editor and Julie Shapiro is our executive producer for Radiotopia. We also want to thank Warden Ron Davis and, as you know, every episode has to be approved by this guy here.

Lt. Sam Robinson [00:39:31.21]: I want to be a little more extensive with my words today. Uh, in that, you know, it's amazing to see the response that 'Ear Hustle' has generated. It was originally designed for just really the listeners here at San Quentin, uh, about 2,000 guys. Today, uh, there are millions of people who listen to it and it resonates with people, so I'd like to say thank you. Thank you to all those people who are taking the time and are listening episode by episode and that kind of leads me to a request I
got not very long ago from one of my cousins. And so, I'll give out a shout to her, I'm not gonna say her name, uh, but she says, she said, "Sam," she say. "Please, please, please." She said, "The episodes are too short." She said, "They got to be longer." And so, in that, I will close, and I will say my part, which is: This is Lt. Sam Robinson at San Quentin State Prison, and I approve this story.

Earlonne [00:40:33.26]: You worked up there for a while, didn't you?

Lt. Sam Robinson [00:40:35.03]: Yeah, yeah. I worked on death row myself for ten years.

Earlonne [00:40:39.13]: Indeed. How was that experience?

Lt. Sam Robinson [00:40:42.10]: Man, uh, I think it definitely shapes who I am today and how I engage with people inside this environment. Um, there's many days on there that were very, very difficult. Uh, then, there are more days that are more complex and, um, much more different than your imagination could even, even lead you to. I think our episode would be triple the amount of time if I took the time to kind of just dive in and talk about what death row is like for a staff member.

Earlonne [00:41:14.03]: I think your cousin'd appreciate that.

Lt. Sam Robinson [00:41:16.16]: Right on.

Earlonne [00:41:18.01]: [laughs] She'd appreciate that extra time.

Nigel [00:41:19.09]: Oh. Sounds like he's got a lot to say.

Earlonne [00:41:22.08]: Sounds like season three.

Nigel [00:41:23.19]: Absolutely.
Earlonne [00:41:24.21]: Indeed. [deep beat] Check our website earhustlesq.com where you can sign up for our newsletter and download transcripts of our stories.

Nigel [00:41:39.09]: Ok, E. I'm really glad that you brought up transcripts, because I have this cool thing happen.

Earlonne [00:41:42.29]: What?

Nigel [00:41:43.14]: Ok. A few weeks ago, I was giving a talk about 'Ear Hustle' at the Starline Social Club in Oakland.

Earlonne [00:41:48.06]: Right.

Nigel [00:41:48.21]: And this couple came up to me and told me that their son was incarcerated at Avenal State Prison and they can't hear 'Ear Hustle' there in Avenal, so the parents send him the transcripts of the show, and after he reads it, the transcripts get passed around the prison.

Earlonne [00:42:03.07]: Oh, that's what's up.

Nigel [00:42:03.27]: Isn't that cool?

Earlonne [00:42:04.18]: That's, that is cool. So, hey, here's a shoutout to all you guys out in Avenal for reading those transcripts, and know we're trying to get 'Ear Hustle' into your prison.

Nigel [00:42:14.20]: Actually, not just into Avenal. We'd love to get it into all of the prisons in the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, and actually, why stop there?

Earlonne [00:42:22.12]: All over the country.
Nigel [00:42:23.18]: All over the country. So, if you're interested, if you have that power to get it into your institution, contact us through our website: earhustlesq.com. Next time on 'Ear Hustle'....

Earlonne [00:42:36.08]: People love Lady Jae and they asked for more.

Nigel [00:42:39.03]: And this time, she's talking about what life is like for transgender people inside.

Lady Jae [00:42:43.16]: Everyday [laughs] every day it's like I have to educate someone. Um, and it just might be a slip of the tongue, literally, a slip of the tongue, calling me he instead of she, and when you call me that, it's like, "Ok. Hold up." [outro music]

Earlonne [00:43:00.14]: 'Ear Hustle' is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX, a collection of the best podcasts around. Hear more at radiotopia.fm. I'm Earlonne Woods.

Nigel [00:43:10.04]: And I'm Nigel Poor.

Earlonne [00:43:11.23]: Thanks for listening.

Steve [00:43:14.17]: My favorite group from the sixties is, without question, The Temptations. My favorite group from the seventies is, without question, The Delfonics. My favorite, uh, solo singer of all-time is Aretha Franklin. So, you know, if I get the time, that's what I do just in terms of relaxing and just listen and hear the music.

Radiotopia outro [00:45:17.13]: Radiotopia from PRX.