



**Episode 32: Snack Money**  
**Air Date: August 14, 2019**

**Juan Haines:** [00:00] I'm Juan Haines, senior editor for *San Quentin News*. The following podcast contains language and descriptions of graphic violence that may not be appropriate for all listeners. Discretion is advised.

[Chatter, sharp percussive sound]

**Billy “Cowboy” Terry:** [00:17] So I have a big jar of coffee I'm selling. I have a big jar of coffee, anybody interested? Are you sick and tired of your cellies just laying around the house next to you? Won't give you any cell time? Well I believe if you bought this jar of coffee and shared it with your cellie, give him a big strong shot, I guarantee you he'll get up, he'll jump down, he'll brush his teeth, wash his hair, and he'll get out and give you cell time. That's what this big jar of coffee would do. So you guys continue to be difficult if you want to, but if you wanna get up and exercise, you're tired of laying up in your bunk, I got you. This big jar of coffee right here is gonna get you up and out of that cell in a heartbeat.

[Opening theme]

**Rahsaan “New York” Thomas:** [00:54] You are now listening to San Quentin's *Ear Hustle* from PRX's Radiotopia. I am Rahsaan “New York” Thomas, a resident of San Quentin serving a life sentence.

**Nigel Poor:** [01:03] I'm Nigel Poor. I've been working with the guys at San Quentin State Prison in California for about eight years.

**New York:** [01:09] And together, we're gonna take you inside...

**Nigel:** [01:12] And back out, post-incarceration.

**New York:** [01:21] On this episode, we're talking about jobs, and we're talking about way more than just making license plates. [Nigel laughs]

**Nigel:** [01:27] Do they still do that in prison?

**New York:** [01:28] They still do that in prison.

**Nigel:** [01:30] Oh my god. Well, there's a lot of work that needs to happen in prison. And some jobs are official...

**New York:** [01:34] ...And some are not.

[Plucky, joyful synth]

**Nigel:** [01:50] So New York, you've actually had a lot of jobs since you've been in prison. In fact, I would even say you've had a career working behind bars. So... [Sound of paper being handled] Let's just go over your resume here.

**New York:** [02:02] Aw yeah, a lot of different jobs. [Nigel laughs]

**Nigel:** [02:04] I see your first job was a prison law clerk. What do you mean "law clerk"?

**New York:** [02:09] Basically, a law clerk hands out the books in the law library, and they help guys make copies of their legal petitions to go to the courts.

**Nigel:** [02:15] So wait, how did you get that job? And, like, how does anybody get a job in prison?

**New York:** [02:20] So, I got that job being a pest. I signed up for the law library so much just to use that they got tired of me bothering them, and they said, "You might as well just work here."

**Nigel:** [02:29] Interesting. [New York laughs] Okay, is that how most people get a job in prison?

**New York:** [02:23] Nah, most people get assigned a job.

**Nigel:** [02:35] And what if you get assigned a job you don't like?

**New York:** [02:37] You can't just quit. You can try to get a job change, or you can try to get unassigned and not work at all.

**Nigel:** [02:44] Okay, so you ended up a law clerk, and I've got a few questions for you.

**New York:** [02:47] Okay, shoot.

**Nigel:** [02:48] First of all, was it a 9 to 5? And what was your commute like?

**New York:** [02:52] It was eight hours, wasn't exactly 9 to 5, they're on a different schedule, everything's around a count. But my commute was to get handcuffed and take a walk with an officer to A yard from B yard.

**Nigel:** [03:03] Oh my god, every day?

**New York:** [03:04] Yup, every day I went to work. [Laughs]

**Nigel:** [03:06] God, that is not what I was expecting you...

**New York:** [03:08] [Overlapping] There was no effing radio on the way.

**Nigel:** [03:11] Okay, we're gonna get back to your resume in a bit, but first, let's bring in some of the other voices of San Quentin's workforce.

[Sound collage: voices, light percussion, whooshing synths]

**Voice 1:** [03:22] I cook food for the main population. Whatever they ask me to cook; pancakes, waffles...

**Voice 2:** [03:26] I'm working concurrently in the bakery...

**Voice 1:** [03:30] ...Eggs, scrambled eggs...

**Voice 2:** [03:31] ...Biscuits, makes the cakes.

**Voice 1:** [03:33] Collectively, we cook about 15,000—at least—pancakes once every weekend.

**Voice 3:** [03:39] I am the head groundkeeper in front of Garden Chapel. I take care of the plants, I prune, I cut, I edge it. I prune the trees.

**Voice 4:** [03:47] I do a lot! I rebuild the toilets, flush valves in the toilets, and I fix the sinks.

**Voice 5:** [03:51] We do a lot of repairs around here, unclog the drains.

**Voice 6:** [03:55] Anything having to do with wood, sometimes metal.

**Voice 5:** [03:57] Anything to do with the plumbing.

**Voice 7:** [03:58] I clean toilets for a living. They're real shiny, everybody likes when I clean 'em.

**Voice 8:** [04:03] I work as a teacher assistant. Grading students' work, help them around with math.

**Voice 9:** [04:08] I work in the library. I really help to educate people.

**Voice 10:** [04:11] I'm a material handling supervisor, I take all the truckloads that come in, inventory that comes in, and then when we get our shop orders, I distribute the shop orders out to the shop.

**Voice 11:** [04:21] Well I build chairs, and I make sure that the quality of the chair is sufficient enough where a customer's not gonna complain or send it back.

**Voice 12:** [04:28] I do all the cleaning, from the toilets to the ground to the ceiling.

**Voice 13:** [04:33] I'm a coder in The Last Mile's Code 7370 coding program.

[Transition sound collage, then faint airy synth music]

**Nigel:** [04:48] So, a lot of different jobs inside San Quentin. Some of them sound really hard and tedious, like working in the kitchen. That has gotta be rough.

**New York:** [04:56] Yeah, I would not work in there. Never. But they actually have a few plush jobs around here.

**Nigel:** [05:02] Like what?

**New York:** [05:03] Like that guy that does computer coding? That's a sweet gig, but jobs like that are rare.

**Nigel:** [05:08] You know what? You have one of those rare jobs. What about podcasting?

**New York:** [05:11] This is not no plush job, Nige, this is hard work. I'm interviewing and editing.

**Nigel:** [05:17] Okay okay, but it *is* rewarding.

**New York:** [05:19] Oh, it's awesome. Awesome. [Both laugh] But you know something? There's another job around here that you would love, Nige.

**Nigel:** [05:26] Oh yeah, what's that?

**New York:** [05:27] Well I know in your other life, you're a photographer.

**Nigel:** [05:30] Yes, true.

**New York:** [05:31] Well this guy is too.

**David Jarrell:** [05:33] So I walk around every 30 minutes and announce I'm taking pictures.

**New York:** [05:37] Officially, David Jarrell is what we call a porter, and in prison, porters do pretty much everything: clean up, move stuff around

**Nigel:** [05:46] And because he works in visiting, he is the one who takes pictures of people on their visits.

**New York:** [05:51] But those pictures are not free. You pay for a picture with a ducket.

**Nigel:** [05:55] Which is like a ticket.

**New York:** [05:57] And each ducket costs two dollars.

**David:** [05:59] After I take the picture, two minutes later I got the pictures printed and I hand it back to you. It's a little 4x6. [Sound of photo paper flopping] For the most part, it takes each person about four or five different tries to like the pictures, especially the ladies. [Chuckle] I'm like, I'm just taking the picture lady, it's not my fault. I just gotta keep my mouth shut in there, "Okay, I'll retake it, I'll retake it."

**Nigel:** [06:23] [Laughs] Spoken like a real photographer. You gotta figure out how to get those people to relax for the camera.

**David:** [06:30] I'm a very social person. I don't take things personally, I understand people have bad days sometimes. You know, I've almost gotten in fights with a couple people just 'cause they felt I disrespected their visitor or something like that, I've had to pull them aside and just talk to them about it. We shake hands afterwards, it's all good.

[Echoing sounds, door shutting, light chatter]

Honestly though, visiting is the one thing that's kept me sane. I get to see people smile and see their families and tears when people get to hug their families, hug their kids, play with them. I don't know this guy's name, but he came in a few months ago, first time he saw his baby. He got locked up while his wife was pregnant, but you know, he's just got tears going down his face, just looking this baby sleeping, so. [Voice thick] That's where I get my peace at.

**New York:** [07:34] So do you see this: one day, a guy's in the visiting room with his wife, and the next day he's in the visiting room with his girlfriend?

**David:** [07:42] No comment. [Laughs]

**Nigel:** [07:43] That's exactly what I wanted to know. Come on, dish the dirt.

**David:** [07:45] I've almost got somebody caught before. So it was a Saturday, and there's a lot of men in there that're bald, but from behind, he kinda looks the same as the other guy that I'm talking to, you know? So he's like, "Hey, can I get a picture?" I was like, "Oh, we're out of duckets, I'll get you next time you're in here." Well I see him the next day and I'm like, "Hey bro, I can get your picture from yesterday." His wife looks at him and goes, "Yesterday? I didn't come yesterday." So I had to look at him and go, "Oh, sorry, wrong guy." [Laughs]

**Nigel:** [08:17] Oops. [Chuckles] I guess no good deed goes unpunished.

**New York:** [08:20] What do you mean, Nige? It all got worked out. It was the wrong guy, the wife understood.

**Nigel:** [08:25] [Laughs] Mmmm yeah, you really do live in a fairytale world. Okay, but more importantly, listeners might be wondering: How much does Dave earn? I mean, he doesn't pocket the money families pay to get their pictures taken.

**New York:** [08:36] He doesn't get a dime out of that money, it all goes to the prison system. And Dave's take home is something different.

**David:** [08:42] I make 15 cents an hour.

**New York:** [08:45] 15 cents an hour.

**Nigel:** [08:48] We asked other guys what they make.

**Voice 1:** [08:54] How much I make an hour? 60 cents an hour.

**Voice 2:** [08:56] I'm a cook, and I make 24 cents an hour.

**Voice 3:** [08:58] 18 cents an hour.

**Voice 4:** [08:59] 80 cents an hour.

**Voice 5:** [09:00] I make 13 cents an hour.

**Voice 6:** [09:03] Aw man, I get 24 cents an hour.

**Voice 7:** [09:05] My timely wage I get is, uh...

**Voice 8:** [09:07] 60 cents an hour.

**Voice 9:** [09:08] ...11 to 18 cents an hour, somewhere in there. I gotta double check.

**Voice 10:** [09:13] 11 cents an hour? Maybe 10 cents.

**Voice 11:** [09:15] I make 65 cents an hour, I work as a quality control officer.

**Voice 12:** [09:17] 13 cents an hour.

**Voice 13:** [09:18] I work in the main kitchen, I only make six cents an hour.

[Transition sounds]

**Nigel:** [09:26] So guys earn very little in prison, but there is an entirely different category of wage earner here at San Quentin.

**John Levin:** [09:34] My name is John Levin, I am a software engineer in The Last Mile's joint venture coding program, and I make \$17.88 an hour.

**Nigel:** [09:48] Whoa! \$17.88? That's basically 18 bucks an hour.

**New York:** [09:54] Right, but there are not many coders. They're like rarer than freakin' unicorns or something. [Both laugh]

**Nigel:** [10:00] Well, that could change, because The Last Mile is trying to expand to other prisons, and basically what they're trying to do is get people inside up to date with technology so that when they get out they have more marketable skills.

**New York:** [10:14] And man, is that really needed. But in any other case, guys only make between about five cents and a dollar an hour.

**Nigel:** [10:18] And that doesn't sound like much at all, so we asked Dave the photographer how many hours he would have to work to buy a \$6 case of soups.

**New York:** [10:27] And by "soups," we mean top ramen noodles. Standard prison fare. 24 per case.

**David:** [10:34] Um... 100 hours.

**Nigel:** [10:38] 100 hours for a case of ramen soups.

**New York:** [10:40] That's like two and a half weeks of full-time work.

**Nigel:** [10:47] So how much did you get paid for your legal library job, New York?

**New York:** [10:51] It wasn't 18 dollars an hour, I think it was something more like 32 cents.

**Nigel:** [10:56] Alright, well let's have a look at that resume again. Your second prison job was as a teacher's assistant. Did you get fired from the law library?

**New York:** [11:07] Nah, so after two years, they rotate you out that job because they don't want you to be overfamiliar with the free staff.

**Nigel:** [11:14] Okay, we've explained this in other episodes, but let's do it again for new listeners. Free staff are people like me who come to work in the prison, and overfamiliarity, well that's just getting too close with people and developing friendships that might compromise security.

[Transition montage, door slamming, keys jangling]

**New York:** [11:35] Is your job dangerous?

**Jaime Acosta:** [11:37] It could be. It could be dangerous, 'cause if you say the wrong thing to a certain person, we don't know how they're gonna react, and they might pick a fight on us. We have to watch out for that.

**New York:** [11:50] Jaime Acosta works in R&R.

**Nigel:** [11:53] R&R is Receiving & Release. New York, I guess it could be your happy place or your sad place.

**New York:** [12:00] I mean it's all smiles, all happiness when you're going through there to get home. But when you first arrive at San Quentin, it's heavy.

**Nigel:** [12:09] You go there to get processed out.

**New York:** [12:11] And you go there to get processed in.

**Nigel:** [12:14] So I'm coming in for the first time. What would you do for me? And what exactly do I get? Give me the list.

**Jaime:** [12:17] Okay, so you get your blue shirt, your blue pants, your white shirt, your white boxers, socks, and for bed you get your sheets, your blankets, and for hygiene you get your toothbrush, toothpaste, soap bar, comb, toilet paper.

**Nigel:** [12:36] And one of each? Just like one pair of shorts...

**Jaime:** [12:39] One set of each.



**New York:** [12:41] So that's officially what Jaime does, but there's a whole other layer to Jaime's job.

**Jaime:** [12:45] My unofficial job is a word to the transgender community. Meaning that I'll, whenever someone transgender enters the prison, I'll be the first one to see 'em, 'cause they are comfortable with me because I'm also transgender. So when I see 'em, I will introduce myself, explain how they get their materials, what they need for being transgender here at San Quentin. Getting their own clothes because we wear different clothes than the male general population, and their rights as a transgender female in a male prison. Try and calm them down so they know that there's people here that they can connect with.

**New York:** [13:32] So what's that like? How are you perceived?

**Jaime:** [13:34] It gets me more attention, 'cause a lot of the LGBTQ community knows where I'm at and they're comfortable talking with me, 'cause I introduce them and they see how I am. It makes me feel good that at least our community knows they have someone to talk to without worrying about anything else.

**Nigel:** [13:53] Do you think they're surprised when they get here and they're like, "Oh, I see people that I recognize."

**Jaime:** [14:00] To some people, there's a surprise when they see me when they first come into R&R because they don't expect to see a transgender working at R&R and being the first inmate they see coming in off the bus. When people are from the community, it's so easy to spot them because as soon as they see me, their attitudes change.

**Nigel:** [14:21] What about the opposite? Do you have people that see you and are like, "ugh."

**Jaime:** [14:24] Um, surprisingly I don't experience them that much. Some of 'em flip out, going crazy, "What the heck? What type of yard is this? What type of prison is this" 'cause some people don't understand the transgender life.

[Transition sounds]

My name is Jaime Acosta, and I work at receiving and release. And there, it'll take me 40 hours to make enough money to buy a case of soups.

[Music]

**Nigel:** [14:54] So New York, from what I understand, you're supposed to have a job here. But I can't help but notice there seem to be guys who don't work.

**New York:** [15:01] Yeah, you got your yard bums. Just hang out on the yard all day, working out, playing dominos and pinocle. And it's also guys that are just, like, too old to work.

**Nigel:** [15:12] And then there are some guys like Les. He's not a yard bum, he just doesn't work.

**New York:** [15:16] Have you worked while you were in prison?

**Leslie "Les" Nelson:** [15:18] Not here. I did all kind of jobs in my last term.

**New York:** [15:22] So how do you take care of yourself here? Like if you need a case of soups or some deodorant, some toothpaste.

**Les:** [15:27] I got a hustle. [Laughs] If you've come into prison and you don't have a hustle, you're broke.

**Nigel:** [15:34] Really? Can you talk about that?

**Les:** [15:38] I draw. I'm an artist. Sometimes.

**Nigel:** [15:42] Ah. Like what do you draw?

**Les:** [15:45] Whatever feels...

**New York:** [15:48] So at this point in our conversation, Les pulled up his sleeve and showed us a drawing.

**Nigel:** [15:56] That's cool. How many people have a hustle in here?

**Les:** [16:00] I would have to say anybody that's done more than one term.

**Nigel:** [16:04] And how do you figure out what to do?

**New York:** [16:07] You observe or look for a talent. Like, I knew I wanted to cut hair. So I took to cutting hair right away.

[Vintage hip-hop drums, tinkling electric piano]

**Nigel:** [16:20] Do you still cut hair New York, or is *Ear Hustle* a full-time gig?

**New York:** [16:22 ] *Ear Hustle* is all I do. I do not cut hair anymore, I am out of the barber business.

**Nigel:** [16:28] But name some of the side hustles guys have going on.

**New York:** [16:31] There's sewing and typing and cooking and fixing things and drawing. We even got a chiropractor, a stylist, a clothes washer, a paralegal...

**Nigel:** [16:40] Oh my god, okay okay, there's tons and tons.

**New York:** [16:43] And those are the only side hustles I know about, Nige.

**Nigel:** [16:46] Right. Okay, so I'm guessing most guys are pretty quiet about their side hustles. At least I don't hear much about them. But there is one guy I notice who appears to be a walking, talking billboard for his side hustle. We heard him at the top of the podcast.

**Cowboy:** [17:01] My name is Billy Terry, AKA Cowboy. Yee-haw.

**New York:** [17:08] Cowboy thinks of himself as a old time neighborhood peddler.

**Cowboy:** [17:13] My job is catering to all your guys' needs. Whatever it is that you're looking for that you don't have, my job is to find it for you.

**Nigel:** [17:21] Okay New York, I have noticed Cowboy out in the yard for years, but I have never spoken to him until now.

**New York:** [17:26] Yep, on the yard he's hard to miss. It must have something to do with his hats.

**Cowboy:** [17:32] I've got many hats. I call 'em Monopoly top hats. I have like three of 'em and I have like a cowboy hat, pretty much like the *Wild Wild West* that James West wear, pretty much like a gambler.

**New York:** [17:44] And I noticed you always have something around your waist. Is that some sort of corset or a back brace? What's going on with that?

**Cowboy:** [17:51] It kind of reminds of me of a vest, where I can store my pocket watch, little trinkets like chopsticks, little silver coins or whatever, but my style is different. I'm my own person and I'm a leader, and because of that, I grow my hair any kind of way I like it, to the left, to the right, wild, ripped up, unique. I'm just cool like that.

**New York:** [18:12] You can hear it in his voice. Cowboy is one persuasive salesman.

**Nigel:** [18:17] Is there anything you can't sell?

**Cowboy:** [18:19] No, there's not. And it's fascinating to me, and I blow my own mind to know that I can actually sell anything.

**New York:** [18:26] One time he tried to sell me Coppertone suntan lotion, but I didn't know it at the time, but they started giving 'em out at the canteen for free.

**Nigel:** [18:38] Did you buy that suntan lotion, New York?

**New York:** [18:40] No, I didn't fall for that. I already had some

**Nigel:** [18:42] Thank God.

**New York:** [18:44] But Cowboy has a gift, for not only selling but for finding stuff someone might wanna buy.

**Cowboy:** [18:50] People throw away all sorts of things. You'll be like, "Unbelievable, did you really throw that radio in the trash can because he pressed play and it didn't come on so he threw it away?" I put some fresh batteries up in there and pressed play, and did you know that thing started having me dance all over the place? I said, "Wow," first thing I saw was dollar bill signs. I said, "somebody's gonna end up with this radio." Now I got it for free, it didn't cost me nothing. Come straight out of the dumpster. So what would be a good price for me to give this radio to somebody who has nothing to listen to? I figure five or six bucks is better than anything right? So why not? I got a TV right now. It's a high-techer flatscreen TV, but sometimes these guys are real difficult when I try to sell my TVs. I like selling stuff in a record breaking time, I've got no time to be keeping TVs for hours. I wanna be able to get rid of this TV in an hour, I challenge myself. So I have a high-tech TV, and that's a 13-inch, and it's got speakers. And sometimes when they ignore me, I sort of throw in that it also picks up late night porn, okay, which it doesn't, it really doesn't, but some people actually believe it. It's shocking, but they believe this, and it makes them buy it much quicker. Okay, and the TV becomes much more expensive than what I really want. So I just usually tease 'em because I know I can get laughs and giggles as I'm walking down the tier. I'm pretty sure they know deep down inside though that that TV don't pick up late night porn.

I'm a kind of strange little character, to most folks I'm weird, I'm unique, and I'm different. Pretty much a loner. So the only way I keep from being alone is by people needing things. I do it because of the simple fact that my conscience and my pride won't allow me to fail. I can't see myself asking anyone for anything, not even a soup. To ask someone for a soup to me, it hurts deeply. Embarrassing because I know my potential level is much greater than that. So when I wake up in the morning, I feel it's time for me to make money.

**Nigel:** [20:49] The last guy we talked to, he had to work 100 hours to make enough money to buy a case of soups.

**Cowboy:** [20:53] Well I have a problem with that. That's unbelievable. I can make a case of soups within 30 minutes or less.

[Guitar music, twinkling percussion]

**New York:** [21:07] After the break, we'll be back with more about jobs in prison.

**Nigel:** [21:10] Including jobs that come with a state pension

**New York:** [21:12] Where they got jobs like that at? Can I get a job like that? [Nigel laughs]

[Music comes up]

**Ralph Diaz:** [21:37] I knew my assignment was a tower, and it was a tower at Wasco. It was an evening shift. I remember approaching that shift thinking man, I gotta be on point. My eyes are gonna be open, gonna be peeled. And when I get up there, I realize what I'm supervising is the backside of some housing units in the staff parking lot.

**New York:** [22:01] That's Ralph Diaz. He's talking about his first day on a job that incarcerated people like me never get hired for: a prison guard. A correctional officer. A CO.

**Nigel:** [22:15] And COs do a lot of different jobs at the prison.

**New York:** [22:17] And Ralph Diaz, he's done a whole bunch of them.

**Nigel:** [22:20] He started as a CO in 1991, guarding that parking lot, and was later moved to the education area where he guarded people, not buildings.

**New York:** [22:28] And in education, he worked side by side with incarcerated people who also worked there.

**Ralph:** [22:34] They worked for me, and you really get to know them real well. And you talk to them and they do their job, and you ask them about the game last night, you talk about a whole lot of stuff and it's real friendly, but then...

**New York:** [22:45] But then when Diaz saw one guy he worked with back in his housing unit, it was another story.

**Ralph:** [22:51] When I get in the building and I'm like, "Hey man, what's going on man, what's the program here tonight?" And it was a different ballgame. I didn't realize that the work life was quite a bit different than his living life in the unit. He wasn't disrespectful, but it wasn't the same, and I had to respect that. I checked myself pretty quick 'cause I recognize, okay, the people around here are not the people that I'm with during the day. This is a different group of cats here. So I had to respect them for that.

**Nigel:** [23:21] After being a CO on the mainline, Ralph Diaz became a counselor.

**New York:** [23:25] And that's not what you think it is. There's no therapy, it's not a self-help type counseling psychology thing. It's the person that pushes your paperwork

around. They make sure you get put up for job assignments, they handle processing or transfers to another prison, stuff like that.

**Nigel:** [23:40] And Diaz told us if he had stayed a CO on the mainline, he doesn't know if he would've made it.

**Ralph:** [23:45] There were days where I thought, "I don't know if I can do this for 30 years." That's why I think, for me, the greatest thing I did was become a counselor.

**Nigel:** [23:55] Was it the violence? Was it the bullying? Was it knowing the worst that people were capable of? What was it that was so...

**Ralph:** [24:05] I think a lot of it was... the average person doesn't have to engage in conflict or verbal tension on a daily basis. You wanna do a basic thing like, "Hey, we're gonna run yard today," and for some reason, the yard is delayed five minutes. Then you get a housing unit full of people hollering at you, calling out your name, and then when the doors open, as they walk by, you're hearing it. As a young person, if you're not equipped, it does take its toll. It does. You start reflecting, "Hey, I'm 27 years old, I've got how many more years of this?" Like wow, I don't know if I wanna do this. Those are the decisions. You think, "Man, maybe I wanna go back to school and be a teacher. Maybe I'll go do something else."

**Nigel:** [24:47] Well, he did do something else, actually. A few something elses, including being a warden.

**New York:** [24:53] And today, Ralph Diaz is the secretary of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, which means he is everybody's boss.

**Nigel:** [25:03] But his experience back when he was a CO of working side by side with incarcerated people is not unusual in a level two prison like San Quentin, and that's what we're gonna get into next: the collaboration between workers on the inside and workers from the outside.

[Transition audio montage]

**Jeff Huff:** [25:25] Yeah, my name is Jeff Huff.

**Nigel:** [25:27] And what's your job?

**Jeff:** [25:28] My job here at San Quentin currently is fire chief of San Quentin Prison Fire Department. Four captains that are paid and myself as fire chief, and then we have the inmate firefighters.

**Sandy "Rashid" Lockheart:** [25:40] So for weeks I kept waiting to catch this ghost called Huff, and I would see him at traffic and I'd say, "There's my window," and I would

freeze up and go, “Nah, nah, not now, not now.” And then one day I finally just walked up and introduced myself.

**Huff:** [25:54] He came and started right off on the right foot, gave a good impression, I felt good about him. But you never know.

**Rashid:** [26:02] As an inmate firefighter, I have to prove myself. I have to show that this guy with the freckles and the tattoos on his face, who probably doesn’t have the best file, is serious about being a firefighter.

**New York:** [26:14] Sandy “Rashid” Lockheart is serving his last months of a 17 year sentence. He works for Chief Huff in very unusual circumstances for the prison.

**Nigel:** [26:22] Right. Chief Huff runs the San Quentin Fire Station, but he’s also a CO, and what might be surprising is that when they’re on the job, they actually live together, like in any other firehouse.

**New York:** [26:34] What’s that change like? Going from locking him in the cell to being next-door neighbors now? Roommates?

**Huff:** [26:39] It’s a very similar camaraderie as working in any other firehouse, except for there’s definitely a lot harder line on a lot of things. We trust these guys on calls. We could be saving us just as we could be saving them.

**Nigel:** [26:58] Rashid’s been at San Quentin for seven years. He got a job at the firehouse two years ago, and the firehouse where Rashid and 10 other firefighters live is just outside the walls of San Quentin.

**New York:** [27:10] Like in the firehouse, I imagine it’s a lot of freedom. You don’t sleep in a cage, right?

**Rashid:** [27:15] Yeah, it’s like a halfway house. We have our own rooms. Like, “Man, I’m in a real room.” I got a cabinet and dressers. I never played with a dresser drawer, opening and closing it. Like wow, this is crazy. [Laughs]

**Nigel:** [27:30] What other stuff like that?

**Rashid:** [27:31] I had a window in my room. I remember sliding the window back and forth for a while like... [Laughs] Yeah, it’s crazy. It’s living.

**Nigel:** [27:37] And you can shut your door?

**Rashid:** [27:38] No, we have curtains that’ll let us outdoors. Almost.

**Nigel:** [27:41] Okay. Now, what about the bathroom situation?

**Rashid:** [27:45] Your own individual shower with a door on it.

**Nigel:** [27:47] You can turn the hot water on and off?

**Rashid:** [27:48] Yep. And it runs all day.

**New York:** [27:49] Can you make the water the temperature you want?

**Rashid:** [27:52] Yep.

**New York:** [27:53] Oh my god.

**Rashid:** [27:53] Yeah, that was a big thing too. I remember sitting in the shower—matter of fact, I still do that. I did that before I came out here.

**New York:** [27:58] Oh wow. [Laughs]

**Rashid:** [28:00] Like man, I really appreciate this.

[Percussive underscoring]

**New York:** [28:03] The work these guys do is no different than what a fire station does; they respond to calls in their area.

**Nigel:** [28:10] And that area includes inside the prison and just outside in San Quentin Village, which is a small neighborhood where some people who work in the prison live.

**New York:** [28:19] And when there's a medical emergency inside the prison, Rashid and his colleagues are on it.

**Nigel:** [28:24] How many calls do you get a day?

**Rashid:** [28:27] Oh man. So, sometimes we may have like four calls in one day, five calls in the middle of the night, and then we won't have anything for a month. It all depends. With this population here, because it is an aging and dying population, we get a lot of calls.

**Nigel:** [28:45] So it's a 24 hour job.

**Rashid:** [28:47] 24 hours, yeah. I've been there almost two years now, and I've seen more dead bodies than I've ever seen in my life.

**Nigel:** [28:54] What do you mean? People are dying here all the time?

**Rashid:** [28:56] It's an aging, dying population, yeah.



**Nigel:** [28:59] How many people have died since you've been on the job?

**Rashid:** [29:01] I've lost count. I really have.

**New York:** [29:03] I remember there was one year where we did an article in the newspaper, it was 21 and then 2 died before the year was over, so 23 people died in one year.

**Rashid:** [29:09] Yeah. I've lost count.

[Dreamy transition music]

**New York:** [29:18] He may have lost count, but Rashid has noticed how different parts of the prison deal with death.

**Rashid:** [29:24] So when somebody dies on the tier in north block, the look on everybody's face is like, "Damn." 'Cause the thought is, "I need to outlive the prison sentence." Whereas when we deal with a dead body on death row, they talk to 'em when they do. Let's say his name is Lunchmeat, right? "Alright Lunchmeat, I'll see you on the other side you stupid motherfucker. I'll see you when I get there." So the realities are different, right?

**Nigel:** [29:52] And the guys in north block, like nobody wants to look?

**Rashid:** [29:55] No, because I think it reminds them of their own mortality. Everybody wants to outlive these sentences, so for the guys on death row, it's like, "He finally made it out." And then for the guys on the main line, it's like, "He didn't make it out."

**New York:** [30:15] Like anybody who does this kind of work, Rashid sees some really hard stuff.

**Nigel:** [30:19] And just heads up here, this gets pretty graphic.

**Rashid:** [30:23] One of the calls that stands out to me the most was we had a guy that jumped off the fourth tier, and he had clipped his head on the way down.

**New York:** [30:30] What was it like when you got to the actual scene?

**Rashid:** [30:33] It was a mess. It was chaotic. They had just started CPR on him and his brains were hanging out. And then walking up and seeing him basically looking up and seeing somebody pumping on his chest, I remember tapping the first, taking over CPR, and feeling him pretty much crushed beneath my hands 'cause he had jumped from the fourth tier. But the sad and unfortunate thing is you could tell he was braindead, but when he left San Quentin, he was a live, we brought him back. He had actually started breathing on his own, but he was for the most part braindead, and that's something I can't ever shake. I still see the brain, I still see him breathing but not alive.

[Droning, drippy music]

**Nigel:** [31:25] So when you're in that kind of high trauma situation, what actually happens to time? Like how do you experience time?

**Rashid:** [31:32] You don't. You lose it. I mean, if there is any sense of time, it's what's happening underneath you.

[Underscore cuts out]

**Amika Mota:** [31:46] I usually can't hear. I can see but I can't hear very well, because of my ears, there's this ringing, 'cause it's such a focus. And I noticed that happening on the serious accidents. So hyper focused that your senses change.

**New York:** [32:04] This is Amika Mota. She was on a fire crew at Central California's Women's Facility in Chowchilla, and she had similar experiences working closely with CO firefighters.

**Nigel:** [32:15] So did you have a different kind of relationship with the fire captain-slash-COs than you did with the COs inside the actual prison?

**Amika:** [32:22] Mhm, the captains did 24 hour shifts. So you know, bedtime comes around, and the captains are in the kitchen at 10 o'clock at night in their slippers and their pajamas. So it's a little different, we're seeing them not all suited up like COs.

**Nigel:** [32:40] And did it make you see correctional officers in a different light?

**Amika:** [32:42] No.

**Nigel:** [32:44] No, it didn't change that?

**Amika:** [32:45] No, they're little cops.

**Nigel:** [32:47] Do you think they treated you differently? Did they see you as a colleague?

**Amika:** [32:51] On the fire ground. [Transition montage] The firefighting was the hardest thing I've ever done, physically. Besides giving birth, but, you know.

**Nigel:** [33:09] So what did that do to your psyche and your self-esteem to constantly be doing things you didn't think you could do?

**Amika:** [33:17] It just builds you up. Especially like in prison, you know? The things I relied on before that were my workouts in the yard or the books I would read. Those were, like, accomplishments. And then this became this thing where we were engaging

with people too, and this feeling where you'd perform CPR and somebody would survive and we had a win, it was like... the family just loved up the firefighters. It was beautiful. It was a good thing.

[Transition montage, slamming door]

**New York:** [34:07] Yeah, I was gonna ask, you keep getting in situations where you bring people back to life.

**Rashid:** [34:11] Yeah.

**New York:** [34:12] What does that feel like?

**Rashid:** [34:13] It's a rush. You talk about purpose? That's it. And it's funny 'cause they all do the same thing. It's like, [Double gasp] that quick breath. You feel it right underneath your hand. And it's a rush.

**Nigel:** [34:29] Have you become more macho since you started this job?

**Rashid:** [34:33] If macho is confident, yeah.

**Nigel:** [34:37] Why?

**Rashid:** [34:39] Just because people depend on me. But then also my interactions with more free people has made a lot more confident. You're always indoctrinated to not make eye contact or get too familiar, out there it's different.

[Sound of large car driving away, seatbelts clicking]

**Nigel:** [35:02] When he gets out in a year, Rashid would love to do on the outside what he does on the inside.

**Rashid:** [35:09] If I could, I'd be a first responder. That's hands down. I've never loved anything more in my life than doing this.

**Nigel:** [35:16] But there's a big barrier that he's up against, and that Amika has already faced. A lot of times having a record can keep a person from getting their EMT license, and without that, it's extremely hard to get a job as a firefighter.

**Amika:** [35:29] Those are things that have to change, and that's what I want the public to hear. I want them to know how difficult it is for us when we come home. We've been in people's homes doing medical... we've been in trusted positions. We've been fighting fires at COs' houses and they relied on us and trusted us. And then we're here and we're not trustworthy. All of these things don't matter anymore when we come home.

[Transition music]

**Nigel:** [36:00] On our next episode, we're gonna hear from men and women about getting jobs when they come home. And it's not always easy.

**New York:** [36:06] Not at all.

**Nigel:** [36:08] New York, most jobs in prison aren't firefighting, they aren't coding. Most of them are just hard work for little money. So why do it? Why do you do it?

**New York:** [36:17] Well for me, I have a life sentence, and so if I just here and don't do anything with my time, I feel like a further waste of life. A further waste of time. I gotta have a reason to get up every day. I need purpose, I need meaning, I need something that's educational and fun to do. And there's one more reason why I do this job.

**Nigel:** [36:34] Oh really? What's that?

**New York:** [36:35] I need the snack money. [Both laugh]

[Sound of page being turned, metallic synths. Then, paper shuffling.]

**Nigel:** [36:47] So New York, one more look at your resume. The final one on here is the new cohost and co-producer of *Ear Hustle*.

**New York:** [36:53] Best job I ever had, Nige. Best job I ever had.

**Nigel:** [36:56] Well, I sure like having you as my professional colleague.

**New York:** [37:00] Right back at you, Nige. I just wanna thank Jerry Brown for sending Earlonne home. [Both laugh]

**Nigel:** [37:07] I was really sweating that, I'm glad it made you happy.

**New York:** [37:10] We gon' be alright, Nige. We gon' be alright. [Plunky synth music] Thanks to everyone who spoke to us about jobs in prison. David Jarrell, Jaime Acosta, Leslie Nelson, Cowboy, and Chief Huff.

**Nigel:** [37:26] And also Sandy "Rashid" Lockheart, Amika Mota, all the guys on the yard, and a special thanks to Secretary Ralph Diaz. *Ear Hustle* is produced on the inside by myself, Nigel Poor, Rahsaan "New York" Thomas, Pat Mesiti-Miller, and John "Yahya" Johnson.

**New York:** [37:46] And on the outside by Earlonne Woods and Bruce Wallace.

**Nigel:** [37:49] This episode was scored with music by Antwan Williams, David Jassy...

**New York:** [37:54] Rhashiyd Zinnaman, E. Phil Phillips, as well as...

**Nigel:** [37:57] Aaron “Showtime” Taylor.

**New York:** [37:58] Great job, guys.

**Nigel:** [38:00] Erin Wade is our digital producer, Curtis Fox our senior producer, Julie Shapiro is our executive producer for Radiotopia.

**New York:** [38:08] We wanna thank Warden Ron Davis, and as you know, every episode has to be approved by this guy here.

**Lt. Sam Robinson:** [38:14] [Via phone] Hello, *Ear Hustle* listeners. If I sound like I’m in the distance, away from the studio, it’s because I am! I’m on vacation, however, the *Ear Hustle* people have hit me up and they’ve hounded me and they’ve said, “Sam, there are millions upon millions, maybe billions of *Ear Hustle* listeners who want their episode on time.” And so I had to listen, and it’s interesting to dive in and see how people work and learn many different things and all of that. But there’s a time to work, and there’s a time to be off, and I’m actually off. So on my vacation from afar, this is Lieutenant Sam Robinson, the public information office at San Quentin State Prison, and I approve this episode.

[Loud church bells, fluttery synths]

**New York:** [39:06] Next time on *Ear Hustle*, like we said, we’re going to hear about jobs post-incarceration. It can be a struggle, and sometimes the struggle dates back a long time.

**Male Voice:** [39:17] After that, my little sister pulled me aside and let me know that I was being let go from the Easter Bunny position.

**Earlonne Woods:** [39:23] How long did you last on the job?

**Male Voice:** [39:24] Like 35 minutes, I think. [Laughs]

**New York:** [39:28] This podcast was made possible with support from the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, working to redesign the justice system by creative power and opportunity for communities impacted by incarceration.

**Nigel:** [39:41] Check out our website [earhustlesq.com](http://earhustlesq.com), where you can sign up for our newsletter, see pictures of people in our stories, and it’s also a place to buy *Ear Hustle* sticker packs, mugs, and t-shirts, so check it out. And also follow us on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook @EarHustleSQ. And remember, we’re asking you listeners to remix our theme song.

**New York:** [40:04] That's right, we want to hear what you come up with, so make your own rendition, put your own twist on it. Make it crack, make it smile, make it pop, make it lock, make it boogie.

**Nigel:** [40:13] Just go to our website, [earhustlesq.com](http://earhustlesq.com), and download the elements from our theme song, and make a version of your own. You can then send it to us, and we might just play it on our next episode. And the deadline is what, New York?

**New York:** [40:26] August 31st. And I heard we already got some great submissions.

**Nigel:** [40:29] Oh yes, I got my harp.

**New York:** [40:31] I want some 808s. [Music swells] *Ear Hustle* is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX, a collection of the best podcasts around. Hear more at [radiotopia.fm](http://radiotopia.fm). I'm Rahsaan "New York" Thomas.

**Nigel:** [40:47] And I'm Nigel Poor.

**Both:** [40:48] Thanks for listening.

[Music Ends]

**Rashid:** [40:52] My name is Sandy "Rashid" Lockheart, I am an inmate firefighter, I have to work 16 hours to buy a case of soups.

**END OF EPISODE.**