Ralph Diaz: [00:00] I’m Ralph Diaz, Secretary of the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. This episode of Ear Hustle contains language that may not be appropriate for all listeners. Discretion is advised.

[00:12] [Hammering on hard surface, drilling, chain hitting ground that fade out in an echo]

Chayne Hampton: [00:16] Right now, I work in the, uh, the sewer plant.

Earlonne Woods: [00:18] What do you do in the sewer? [Chayne laughs]

Chayne: [00:20] It’s, it’s terrible. [Chayne laughs] So…

Earlonne: [00:25] Like what do you see in the sewer?

Chayne: [00:26] Okay so…

Earlonne: [00:27] Like what do you do? What is your job consist of? [Chayne sighs]

Chayne: [00:28] …okay, so, at my stage, I get into my jumpsuit and I put on my rain boots, put on your mask and your gloves, and then you’d go down into the pit and all the sewage through the whole facility goes into these two little rivers. And then there’s these
grates. So my job was, I'm clearing out these grates and I use like a hose I'll spray. Some days I could go down there and not get very dirty. Then other days I'm, like, wringing out my beard, like a wet towel. [laughs]

**Earlonne:** [00:52] So, wait a minute, wait a minute. Wait. So you saying you got shit on your face?

**Chayne:** [00:55] Maybe not literally, like, on my face, but you know, it's a dirty job. It's…

**Earlonne:** [00:59] Your beard is on your face, Chayne. [Chayne laughs]

**Chayne:** [01:00] I guess so… [Laughs]

[01:02] [Opening theme music begins]

**Nigel Poor:** [01:04] You're now tuned in to *Ear Hustle* from PRX's Radiotopia. I'm Nigel Poor. I've been working with the guys in San Quentin State Prison in California for about eight years.

**Earlonne:** [01:14] I'm Earlonne Woods, a podcaster and former resident of San Quentin. One of the last interviews I did when I was still incarcerated was with sewer worker, Chayne Hampton. Like me, he was about to get out and like me, he was thinking about his future.

**Chayne:** [01:28] But I didn't put it on a resume, when I get out, say I worked in a water treatment plant. [Earlonne and Chayne laugh] [Opening theme music quietly in background] 'Cause I'm dying for things to put on a fucking resume, [Laughs] all these stupid tattoos.

**Nigel:** [01:41] Together, we take you inside the prison…

**Earlonne:** [01:43] …And back outside, post incarceration.

[01:47] [Opening theme music continues with beat drop]

**Earlonne:** [01:56] This week, we're staying mostly outside the prison. And we're going to hear from a few formerly incarcerated people about their jobs. The struggle to find a job when you have a record.

Nigel: [02:05] And the anxieties of being back in the workforce after a long time away.

[02:22] [Opening theme music ends]

[2:25] [Abstract industrial sounds, voices, dripping water, chopped sounds of metal hitting hard surface]
Earlonne: Earlonne, before you started working on *Ear Hustle*, what kind of work did you do in prison?

Earlonne: I had all kind of jobs. For some reason, they used to always try to put me in a kitchen.

Nigel: Oh…

Earlonne: Because when it go down that you’ve worked in the kitchen, oh yeah, you the easy pull.

Nigel: …it’s not ‘cause you like to eat? [Earlonne laughs]

Earlonne: No, that's the problem. I eat too much in the kitchen. [Nigel laughs] That's why I had to get out the kitchen.

Nigel: I think you also were working on the yard crew when I first met you.

Earlonne: Yeah, I was working on the yard and, um, which was a kickback job. That's what, that's what allowed me to come down so often cause my job consisted of ten minutes. [Nigel laughs]

Nigel: Okay, did you ever have a job like Chayne's, the guy we heard at the top, the job that you so nicely called shit stirring. [Laughs]

Earlonne: Mm, mm, mm, hell nah. I’d have been quit that job. [Gentle synth ends] But you know Chayne, he’s a positive guy.

Nigel: Yeah, truly.

Earlonne: He said there were actually some good things about his time stirring shit. [Both laugh]

Nigel: Yes. The water treatment plant was located outside the walls of San Quentin. And so he basically got to go out every day to do his job.

Earlonne: Yeah, ‘cause people like him were minimum security.

Nigel: Mm-hmm.

Earlonne: So based on their crime and the time they got left, they get to go outside. They get a gate pass.
**Nigel:** [03:40] And because of that, he had his own, like, shower, his own bathroom and it was really quiet.

**Chayne:** [03:44] And there was, like, wildlife out there too. There's, like, a lot of geese and they just had like a bunch of goslings. So, the dad and the mom, they're like real protective. So I take a bunch of, uh, with, you know, the jumpsuits that we have and I tie them over the railing so that they can't see me. And then I'd, like, crouch down behind the— you know, like, take cover and I throw pieces of bread over and then it attracts them. And then when they get close enough, there's like some water out there and the little baby geese will eat it and I can, like, reach my hand out and, like, pet a baby goose.

**Nigel:** [04:12] Oh my God, that is so cute.

**Earlonne:** [04:15] Truly it is.

**Nigel:** [04:17] That guy can even find the bright side of working literally in shit.

**Earlonne:** [04:21] Ooh. [Both laugh] Chayne told us that up to that point in his life, it was the longest he'd ever held a job.

**Nigel:** [04:29] Like a lot of guys inside, he had a checkered job history before prison. Like the time his sister got him a job as an Easter bunny in a mall.

**Chayne:** (4:37) It's this big pink Easter bunny costume and it's not ventilated or anything like that except for, like, the mouth slit. It's gotta be like one hundred and eighty degrees in this thing, right? And I'm sweating just so profusely, and I go to take pictures and everything's going fine at first. And then I dunno if it was like heat or like the lack of sleep the night before, but I started getting drowsy inside the suit and when this woman handed me her baby to take a picture, like, the first Easter bunny picture and, this baby is so small and wiggly and I may have fallen asleep for like a split second. And when I did, this wiggly little baby kinda like did like a, like a backbend, like it was gonna fall out of my hands. And so the woman goes to grab it and then I get startled awake and I yanked the baby away and it turned it into, like, this big fiasco. And so, uh, after that my little sister pulled me to the side and let me know that, uh, that I'd, uh, was being let go from the Easter bunny position.

**Earlonne:** [05:28] So how long did you last on the job?

**Chayne:** [05:30] Like thirty-five minutes? I think. [Laughs]

**Nigel:** [05:34] At the time, Chayne was already struggling with drugs, which was the main reason he couldn't keep a job.

**Earlonne:** [05:39] But he did have a hustle: robbing stuff and breaking into cars.
**Chayne:** [05:44] I’d broken into a car. I was in the person’s trunk, and, like, someone just runs up and, like, it’s a guy and his girlfriend, he was like, “Hey man, what the fuck?” And I’m like, oh shit. And, like, his girlfriend’s like, “light him up, light him up, light him up.” I was like, uhh. And then he’s like, “Chayne?” I was like, oh, [Laughs] I was like, I was like, “Larry?” I like, [Laughs] I like went to high school with the guy, he’s like, “you take anything?” I was like, “no,” just like pathetic heroin addict, like, “no, I didn't take anything.” He’s like, “here's ten bucks, man.” His girlfriend’s, like, “beat his ass, beat his ass.” [All laughing] He’s like, alright man, you don’t look like you’re doing too good and I’m like, “I'm not.” [Laughs]

[06:16] [Abstract industrial sounds, whirring, cranking metal, chains, and door closes shut that fade out]

**Nigel:** [06:21] When we talked to him about a week before he got out of prison, I thought he was looking pretty good.

**Earlonne:** [06:25] He looked great.

**Nigel:** [06:26] But, like we said, he had a checkered work history and not a lot to put on his resume. [To Chayne] Is there anything you’re nervous about leaving?

**Chayne:** [06:33] Yeah. Getting a job. I mean not, I mean, I don't know. I've got a bunch of dumb tattoos, you know, I just, uh, where you been for the past two years, but…

**Nigel:** [06:41] …I guess they don’t have the rule anymore, or the law that you have to say that you’ve been in prison.

**Chayne:** [06:44] Well that's great information. That's nothing I didn't…

**Nigel:** [06:46] …I'm pretty sure, didn't that law changed? You don’t have to…

**Chayne:** [06:47] … But see, but when you come from a small town like Santa Cruz though, it’s like they have this thing called “mugshots” and they just like Google your name and then all your mugshots come up. So, a part of me feels like even though they may not ask you, they could probably, if they were curious, or put two and two together.

**Nigel:** [07:02] I think that's what everybody does now.

**Chayne:** [07:03] Yeah, right. It's like a background check. I know my girlfriend did that when she first met me. She was like, hmm, I don't know about this guy.

[07:09] [Gentle, dreamy synth tones with repetitive percussive tapping begins]

**Nigel:** [07:13] We'll get back to Chayne later in the episode to see how it went for him when he got out. But now we’re gonna to hear from Tracy Hartway. She had a lot of trouble with background checks after she did time.
Earlonne: [07:25] Tracy served several short terms. The last one being two years in a Nevada prison. While she was there, she dreamed about having a career as a writer and some of the other women she was locked up with ended up being her first editors. [Gentle, dreamy synth tones end]

Tracy: [07:39] A lot of times I would read them excerpts of my book and be like, how you think the sound, you know? Do you think that's good or whatever? I mean, and they were really my cheerleaders, you know what I'm saying? Shout out to all the girls in there who listened to me repeat the same shit over and over again. [Laughs] Does it sound better like this or does it sound better like that? You know? And then I would listen to their stories and be like, ooh, I could use that. You know what I'm saying? Or ooh, that sounded like some dope ass shit. I never thought about using it that way. You know what I mean?

Earlonne: [08:04] And when you were in there writing it, like, you was just in your own world, huh?

Tracy: [08:07] I was for, I mean, I could write for hours, you know what I'm saying? I could write for twelve hours in a day. I get in the zone, put my headphones on, tune everything out and just go.

Nigel: [08:17] She also wrote business plans while she was inside. One for a cleaning business and one for fashion company. She had big plans.

Earlonne: [08:24] Big plans.

Tracy: [08:26] But when you touch down and you come out here to the world, shit don't happen like that. Life show up. [Dreamy, percussive tones begin] It’s where am I going to sleep tonight? What am I gon’ eat? You know, what is my PO gon’ say?

[08:38] [Dreamy, percussive tones continue]

Earlonne: [08:40] Tracy didn't have a transitional house lined up the first time she got out.

Nigel: [08:44] And she kept having this experience where she'd get through an interview, get hired and then after a few days on the job, HR would run a background check.

Earlonne: [08:52] First time this happened, she was working for a very large online retailer. [Dreamy, percussive tones end]

Tracy: [08:57] They did the mouth swab drug tests and then they hit me with a pre-adverse action notice.
Earlonne: [09:03] A pre-adverse action notice. That's some bureaucratic bullshit.

Tracy: [09:08] I done got this letter so many times, [Laughs] I damn near know by heart. [Dreamy, percussive tones begin] [Inaudible]. We are sorry we have to rescind our offer of employment to you.

Tracy: [09:18] In the fine print, it says you have, like, five days to dispute this, to dispute anything that's found on the background check, if you requested a copy. And most of the time you think dispute? Well shit, I can't dispute none of that. I did that shit. It's on my record, like, you know what I'm saying?

Earlonne: [09:33] Like Tracy said, she ran into this a lot, in spite of the fact that in California it's prohibited to ask about criminal records on job applications.

Nigel: [09:41] Banning the box as it's called. But because she didn't have to admit her criminal record upfront, she kept having that same experience where she'd get partway through the job hiring process and sometimes even to orientation and then they'd run that background check on her—goodbye job. [Dreamy, percussive tones ends]

Earlonne: [09:57] Finally, she did get hired through a temp agency. She got a job at a call center for a major bank.

Tracy: [10:04] I was hella happy. I was like, yes. It was, it was exhilarating. And it was something that you can be proud of. Like shit, I finna go to work, you know what I'm saying? And I mean, I would, I hate getting up in the morning, [Upbeat, dreamy synth tones begin] but I was there at seven o'clock, you know what I'm saying? Like it was nobody's business.

Earlonne: [10:19] Things were going really well for her for a while.

Tracy: [10:22] I loved my job. For nine months, I did that job and I did it well. Being the nature of my crime, I should have not had a job with so much access to sensitive information, but nothing ever came wrong up with any of my accounts, you know? I was done with that lifestyle. [Upbeat, dreamy synth tones end]


Nigel: [10:42] And you mean tax fraud? [Earlonne laughs]

Earlonne: [10:44] Yup. In your head, when you got the job, did that other person that you used to be was like, I can't believe this shit. They let me in here with all this damn money.

Tracy: [10:53] Hell yeah. [Earlonne laughs] Hell yeah. I ain't gonna lie. I was like, oh shit. And then once I realize what type of access I had, you know what I'm saying? I mean, I'm getting name, birthday, social security numbers, security question, the whole
nine yards and you can try to do some fuck shit, but who wants to jeopardize their job and their freedom behind that? Actually doing something or actually trying something was the farthest thing from my mind.

Earlonne: [11:17] 'Cause you was, you was content...

Tracy: [11:18] Right. I was grateful.

Earlonne: [11:19] ...with having a job.

Tracy: [11:20] I was glad they let me in...


Tracy: [11:22] …when nobody else let me in. You know what I'm saying? So why would I bite the hand that feeds me?

Earlonne: [11:26] After nine months at the job, Tracy got in a fight with her roommate and the roommate called Tracy's boss and told them about her criminal history.

[11:35] [Wobbly synth tones begin]

Tracy: [11:38] About a week later, I got a phone call saying that they wanted to do a conference call with me. I took that conference call and it was a trip because I was on the phone with like five or six big wigs, you know what I'm saying? I had some white people swimming in my head, you know what I'm saying, and um, they basically asked me, you know, is this you? Yeah, that's me.


[12:01] [Wobbly synth tones with steady percussive beat continue]

Tracy: [12:03] For six months. I'm getting denial, after denial, after denial. And everybody like, oh just, just keep trying. Don't give up. What the fuck you mean? I'm losing everything while you're telling me to keep trying and I keep getting a door slammed in my face, you know what I'm saying? I went from living in a three-bedroom apartment to living in my car. I stayed in my car for, I say total, maybe four of those months. Not straight. I mean, sometimes I would, you know, if I could afford it, I would get a hotel room or I would run into people that will, like, let me stay with them for a couple of nights or I would stay in, like, um, abandoned houses. If you be discrete about it, you know, you might can stay there for like a week or something like that before anybody say something to you. But yeah...

Earlonne: [12:50] Tracy ran through her savings, maxed out her credit cards and then, she got into a fist fight, which was a parole violation. That put her back in custody for two months.
Nigel: [13:03] This time when she got out, she went into a transitional house in San Francisco so she wouldn't have to deal with the crazy Bay Area rents yet.

Earlonne: [13:10] Ooh, I feel her on that one.


Earlonne: [13:12] I mean, Parole officers can't even live in San Francisco.

Nigel: [13:15] I know. I mean, honestly, I don't know how people getting out are supposed to live here.

Earlonne: [13:20] And that makes getting a good paying job even more important. So Tracy got her resume on a job site ASAP, but when a shipping company asked to interview her, she was skeptical.

Tracy: [13:30] Look, I haven't replied to your request for interview because I don't think you're gonna hire me. Just straight up. I have this charge and they're a shipping company, so I didn't think, you know, that they would take me. I've been in and out of other shipping companies. So when they hit me, I was like, oh yeah, I ain't gon' be able to interview with y'all. She was like, oh, just come in anyway. And I was like, look, lady, I didn't, I really didn't want to interview with them, you know, I just didn't want to go through it again. And, um, I ended up going on the interview. They ran the background check and fucking hired me anyway.

Nigel: [13:59] Yes. They hired her anyway. Some companies do actually recognize that people change. Things are finally looking up for Tracy.

[14:06] [Mellow, upbeat, percussive tones begin]

Earlonne: [14:08] And through all her job hunting, she never stopped writing.

Nigel: [14:11] That's right. She has since finished two novels. They're part of an urban fiction series about two sisters pulled into a life of crime. [Upbeat, dreamy synth tones end]

Tracy: [14:20] [Atmospheric synth tones and a page turns] “What? Calm down?” Lori said, both she and Nina were staring at Kisses in shock. “What? Tell us what the fuck happened?”

“Just go,” she insisted, looking at them eyes wide.

“Oh shit.” Lori says, spotting a man, running out of the hotel, arms flailing, yelling obscenities.
**Nigel:** [14:36] She just sent off for her copyright and she's even got artwork for the covers. All she needs now is a publisher. [Atmospheric synth tones end]

**Earlonne:** [14:42] Can’t wait to read them.

**Tracy:** [14:44] The main thing that drove me to write a book was I wanted to leave something behind with my name on it. Like I can’t do this shit that I wanted to do when I was a kid. You know what I'm saying? No fucking way they gon’ let me be nobody's lawyer. So, but I had to find a new dream. I had to find something else that I wanted to do with my life.

[15:01] [Abstract industrial sounds, voices, dripping water, chopped sounds of metal hitting hard surface, and cart rolling by]

**Chaves Stills:** [15:10] My name is Chaves Stills. I clean up the Tenderloin area, San Francisco. Picking up trash. [Cars driving by on street] I went to prison in nineteen eighty-eight. Murdered someone. April twenty-eighth, nineteen eighty-eight. First degree murder. And I got out March twenty-eighth, twenty nineteen. [Car whizzing by on street] My whole life, I robbed people. I sold drugs. I did everything against work. I didn't think I'd ever get out of prison. Now I told myself while I was in prison that if I ever get out of prison, I'd shovel shit if I have to. You know, I ain't gonna go back to doing crime. That's, that's far gone. So if you'd got some shit you need me to clean up, call me. [Laughs] And I'll take the job.

[16:02] [Atmospheric synth tones begin]

**Earlonne:** [16:05] Recently, I spent an afternoon on a job with Chaves Stills. He actually lives in the same transitional house as Tracy in the Tenderloin. He’s got a job cleaning up the neighborhood there.

**Chaves:** [16:16] The Tenderloin is probably one of the roughest neighborhoods in San Francisco because of the homelessness. I'm not from here, but this is where I'm from now. So 'til I leave, this is my home: the Tenderloin area. The way I do it, I do the long streets one day from O'Farrell to Bush. Then the next day I'll do two cross streets from Van Ness to Leavenworth. [Car honks horn]

**Earlonne:** [16:48] So square mileage, what is that, like a one square mile?

**Chaves:** [16:51] Yeah. One square mile. The grab is to pick up trash. [Trash hits trash bin] The bags is to put the trash in.

**Earlonne:** [17:00] I see you have like this little red box. So I assume that’s for like hypodermic…

**Chaves:** [17:04] Syringes
Earlonne: [17:05]...yeah

Chaves: [17:06] Syringes. This box for syringes. Little tongs here is to grab the syringes. I have hand sanitizer, I have a straper. To strape gum and stuff off the ground when I see it. Pen...

Earlonne: [17:22] So yeah

Chaves: [17:23] …graffiti wipe. [Cart wheels rolling]

Chaves: [17:25] This is what I do.

Chaves: [17:31] Homeless people, they, they kind of feel like, this is their home and I understand that. So they really don't want you getting close to it thinking that, you know, you're gonna to take something from 'em. So when I see 'em kind of gimme that look, I-I just back up. Even if there's trash in the area, I just go around and just keep going. 'Cause they give you that look, you know, when you've been around a long time, you kind of know that look. By being a criminal yourself and just being out here, you kind of know that look. He, he knows what I'm talking about.

Earlonne: [18:05] It's that look like, this ain't trash, this my property. [Chaves laughs]

Chaves: [18:07] This my property. Yeah. You know, like, like you go ask somebody for something that they sell. That look they give you like, like I ain't got it.


Chaves: [18:15] Keep it moving, you know?

Earlonne: [18:17] Indeed, now that's what's up. But they don't even trip that you out here. They live on the streets and you just trying to make the streets look better while they live here.

Chaves: [18:24] No, half of them tell me thank you.


Chaves: [18:27] Yeah. Lotta them say thank you. Even the homeless people, you know, they might throw some trash now to tell you thank you but [Laughs] that's okay, you know. That's why I got a job.

Earlonne: [18:39] In hindsight, committing crime back in the day, I assume, I don't want to put words in your mouth, was a job for you.

Chaves: [18:46] That's what it was. Way of life. Didn't care who I hurt, as long as I had something in my pocket.
Earlonne: [18:54] Yeah, I don't know where we get that mentality from, but I think everybody in every ghetto got that mentality growing up.

Chaves: [19:00] I know where mine come from. Seeing all the older guys runnin' around the neighborhood with these pretty cars, pretty women, plenty of money in their pocket and I knew what they was doing. So I picked up the same habits that they was doing. That's how I become that guy. But I took mine to another level. Half of them was just, like, maybe doing burglaries and stuff. I started robbing and doing other things. I started adding as I went. [Cart wheels rolling]

Chaves: [19:33] This job is about sixteen dollars an hour. It's not the money though. Just being able to be out here and talking to people, seeing what they up against. So I don't put myself in that same situation. It's still possible. If we don't get ourselves together when we do get out here, we can be that same guy, living on that sidewalk. I don't have nothing. I'm just like them. Just a paycheck away from being homeless myself.

Chaves: [20:07] I was given another chance at life. So this time I'm going to take it and run with it.


Chaves: [20:13] I don't get no more chances. That was it.

Earlonne: [20:15] So, you know, I-I understand that, you know, a lot of us have a lot of, way more years behind us then we got ahead of us.


Earlonne: [20:22] So we just gotta live to the best of our ability no matter what.

Chaves: [20:25] Yeah. Go in prison, you're young. Come out. I was twenty-nine years old and went to prison. Finna be sixty-one now. So that's the stretch we do. [Beeping synth tone, followed by rolling cart wheels that fades out with a faint closing door sound]

[20:44] [Dreamy synth music begins]

Nigel: [20:44] We'll be back, after the break.

[20:54] [Abstract industrial sounds and whirring]

Earlonne: [20:58] What was your work history before you went inside the prison?

Jason Jones: [21:02] I didn't have no job. I hustled.
Earlonne: [21:04] What was your hustle?

Jason: [21:05] I sold dope.

Earlonne: [21:07] What kind of dope?

Jason: [21:08] Uh, crack cocaine and marijuana.

Earlonne: [21:11] Were you fluent on computers before you got locked up?

Jason: [21:13] Nah, I didn't grow up in no household that had a computer.

Earlonne: [21:17] You were selling dope, fool! You should've made money.

Jason: [21:18] Man. Wasn't nobody thinking about no computer. We had pages when we first, I first started selling dope. That was our computer.

[21:25] [Bright, upbeat synth tones begin]

Nigel: [21:25] This is Jason Jones. Jason served a thirteen-and-a-half-year sentence and about five years of those were at San Quentin. He's been out for just over a year now and has an awesome job and Earlonne, you wanted to find out how he got there.

Earlonne: [21:39] I did. Because I knew him in prison and a few years ago I would not have said that this guy is going to get it together. [Earlonne to Jason] So what was your work history inside of prison?

Jason: [21:49] My first job was in the kitchen at Corcoran State Prison. Then I worked in the knit mill so we was making socks. I didn't like that either. [Laughs]

Earlonne: [21:59] Jason left his jobs and was out of work. And you know what they say about idle hands. They'll get you in trouble. His rule violations had him on limited time out of his cell. No care packages, no programs, all from fucking up. But once his disciplines was done, [Bright, upbeat synth tones ends] another prisoner, a lifer who looks out for younger guys, took them up under his wing.

[22:19] [Upbeat piano music with gentle percussive beat begins]

Nigel: [22:21] I remember when he started coming down to the Media Lab, he got involved in that photography project I was doing and he was great. Smart and always really fun to be around.

Earlonne: [22:30] Yeah. He was a cool little dude. You know, he just needed a little direction. But he started taking this computer coding class run by this group called Last Mile.
**Nigel:** [22:39] Okay. It's worth mentioning that he didn't get into the class because of some driving ambition. [Upbeat piano music with gentle percussive beat ends] He kind of got pushed into it.

**Earlonne:** [22:46] Pumped up. [Earlonne to Jason] When you went to the coding class originally, why did you want to go?

**Jason:** [22:52] Um, just to play solitary. [Both laugh] I want to play solitary for like two months and then, and then quit. I had no, man, I didn't know what coding was. I only went out of respect for like the, like the OGs. Like, you even told me. I went over 'round there, you was like, man, you stupid as hell if you don't go. Everybody was telling me like, man, go. Just go, just go. So I went. I didn't, I mean, it wasn't because I thought I had a future in it.

[23:17] [Strong, acoustic bass begins]

**Nigel:** [23:18] The first day, they gave him a task.

**Jason:** [23:20] Okay, so today, I want you to pair up with somebody and by the end of the week we want you to build a website. I was like, what the hell? Build a website?

[23:28] [Strong, acoustic bass continues]

**Jason:** [23:29] Early on, the first challenge was the racial barrier. Like, I-I paired up with this white bald-headed dude, I thought was racist as hell. [Under breath] I was like, “ah, they got me with this racist.” Right? Dude ended up being my friend. End up being hella cool. We still talk to this day. I learned a whole lot from him.

[23:46] [Strong, acoustic bass with bright synths tones begin]

**Earlonne:** [23:49] Turns out, Jason was kind of good with computers, so he stayed in the class.

**Nigel:** [23:53] He was so good at it that he and some of his other colleagues started doing projects for honest to God outside companies like Airbnb, which wasn't easy because in San Quentin, guys don't have access to the internet.

**Earlonne:** [24:05] Incarcerated people in the state of California are not allowed to get online.

**Nigel:** [24:10] But, of course for Jason and the other coders, there was a work-around. [Strong, acoustic bass with bright synths tones ends]

**Earlonne:** [24:14] They basically had to build an offline replica of Airbnb's website and then figure out how to fix it.
Nigel: [24:19] That is crazy. But that crazy work-around was just fine because people noticed the good work coming out of San Quentin.

Earlonne: [24:26] And one day, not long before Jason was going to get out of prison, a recruiting guy from a tech company came in to visit the guys.

Jason: [24:33] And he came to sit down in our dev shop, talked to us for about an hour, and then at the end of the hour, breaks out the contract, right there. I didn't even read it. I just signed it. He was like, you ain't gonna read? I was like, no, I'm go 'head sign it before you change your mind. [Laughs]

Earlonne: [24:44] Mmm

Jason: [24:45] [Laughs] Sign it and it was the first time. It was like, cool, because it'd, before that, a lot of people showed interest. They was like, oh man, get at me when you get out, contact me. I've got a job for you, this and that. But that don't mean nothing, you know that don't mean nothing. That's like to say...


Jason: [24:57] …yeah, yeah but that's like to say when somebody getting out like, man, write me, I'm a send you some money.

Nigel: [24:04] [Light, fluttery synth tones begin] When he first got out, Jason worked as an engineer at a big entertainment tech company. But now, he's working for the same program that taught him coding in San Quentin.


Nigel: [25:15] Yup. Basically, he's teaching the classes he used to take inside.


Nigel: [25:22] Mm-mm.

Earlonne: [25:22] He's got classes inside of correctional facilities for youth and adults in five different states, as well as a class at a local high school in West Oakland.

Nigel: [25:30] And when he's talking to people inside who are scared about finding work when they get out, he tells them not to worry because they already know how to hustle. [Light, fluttery synth tones end]

Jason: [25:14] You know, there's people in there that wash clothes and-and-and, like, cook all day to sell, sell tacos on the tier in there for-for seventy-five cents for three soups. Right? So if you can't take that hustle into something that you love doing, then you playin', you playin'. [Sound of computer starting up]
Earlonne: [26:02] What's the most surprising thing about your job, man?

Jason: [26:05] The most surprising thing. How much people want me to change the way I dress.

Earlonne: [26:12] Hmm?


Earlonne: [26:13] It's tech, everybody do that shit in boxes and shit.

Jason: [26:15] I don't agree with the concept, but code switching, like you gotta fit into this culture. I believe in creating culture and I believe in being who you are. Tech has a real problem with thinking diversity. You only mean cosmetic diversity and I don't think that's what diversity means. I believe diversity means you have to accept my background. You have to set my, my religious beliefs. You have to set my, my, my uh …

Earlonne: [26:36] … weirdness

Jason: [26:37] …yeah. All my weirdness that come with and everything else. Right? Like, remember I-I'm pro with a Mohawk and I dyed it a little bit after that with a blonde Mohawk. Right?

Earlonne: [26:46] Right.

Jason: [26:46] And I'm comin' in, I'm comin' in with Jordans and everything else, chain, my grill, everything. Right? I'm the only one look like that in there. [Laughs] Right? Lotta— that made a lotta people uncomfortable.

Earlonne: [26:57] Yeah. I see you corrected that shit. You look normal now. [Both laugh and high-five]

Jason: [27:04] Well, actually, I cut my hair only because I wanted to, uh, dye it a regular color and I'm just too lazy to grow it back.

Earlonne: [27:10] I'm with you man. But I think you pullin' my leg/ I think you conformed on me. I think you sold or— did you send out on me?


**Jason:** [27:16] I’ll still be who I am. And I think, it’s a, there’s a level of professionalism that needs to be, be, uh, respected, right? But when you start to use the word professionalism, the concept of professionalism to, uh, compromise my identity, then that’s when I have a problem with it.

[27:32] [Bright, upbeat synth tones begins]

**Earlonne:** [27:36] Jason may have cut his Mohawk, but he’s still got style.

**Nigel:** [27:40] Mhm.

**Earlonne:** [27:40] When I talked to ‘em, he was sporting a designer shirt with fancy rips across ‘em, jeans and Jordans. He looked good.

**Nigel:** [27:48] And it’s great to know that he’s doing so well.

**Earlonne:** [27:49] Well, I mean, a lot of people that come to that conclusion in their life that they’re tired of doing this shit, end up doing well when they get out of prison. [Bright, upbeat synth tones ends]

[28:00] [Abstract industrial sounds, whirring, voices and door closes shut that fade out]

**Nigel:** [28:05] Alright. I think it’s time we caught up with Chayne to see how he’s doing. He’s the guy who worked at the San Quentin sewage facility and E, you recently caught up with him.

**Earlonne:** [28:12] Sure did. [whooshing sound as segway]

**Earlonne:** [28:14] Is that, is that Mittens? Is that Mittens?

**Chayne:** [28:16] What’s up, big dog?

**Earlonne:** [28:17] Is that Mittens? [Earlonne and Chayne give dap and pat each other on backs] ‘Sup, dog?

**Chayne:** [28:19] How you been?


**Nigel:** [28:24] Mittens?

**Earlonne:** [28:25] [Both laugh] That’s his prison nickname. I asked him where it came from. [Earlonne to Chayne] Hey, why is it mittens, man, tell us.
Chayne: [28:31] Because I came up to my buddy one day and I said like, hey Haas, man, wouldn't it be sick... 'cause I was always trying to come up with like nicknames, 'cause, like, I met so many dudes in there with, like, cool nicknames. I was like, I kinda want …

Earlonne: [28:41] …right

Chayne: [28:41] like, a cool nickname, but, like, none of 'em really ever fell into my lap. But, uh, I, when I saw Haas on the yard, I was like, hey Haas man, wouldn't it be sick if there was like a guy, and he was like hella good at fighting. And they would call him “Mitts,” but you know, just to fuck around, they’d call ‘em “Mittens” and he’d say, so you want me to call you “Mittens”? I'm like, no, man. And he was like, alright, Mittens.

[28:59] [Joyful, plucky synth]

Earlonne: [29:01] Mittens it is. And Mittens it shall be forever … [Nigel laughs] for me at least.

Nigel: [29:07] Okay, prison nicknames. I love how guys have so many different names, but since he’s out, maybe we should just call him by his birth name.

Earlonne: [29:13] Probably so. I met Chayne Hampton, AKA Mittens, down in Santa Cruz. We sat outside the transitional house where he’s living now. He’s been out about a year and a half.

Chayne: [29:24] I did put on my resume, though, that I was in the Sewage Treatment Plant in San Quentin.

Earlonne: [29:30] That sounds so...

Chayne: [29:31] It sounds so fancy...

Earlonne: [29:32] ... so fancy...

Chayne: [29:33] [Laughs] It's a glamorous lifestyle, right there. [both laughing]

Earlonne: [29:37] Very important.

Chayne: [29:38] Yeah, your only tools, like, trash bags that always rip and a pitchfork. So... [Laughs]

Earlonne: [29:44] [Quiet tinkering synth] Ol’ Chayne, he's not working in shit no more.

Nigel: [29:47] No, but his job is still kind of sewage adjacent? He started looking for this job when he was still on blackout.
Earlonne: [29:55] A blackout is when someone first goes from prison to transitional housing and is not supposed to leave that facility. Chayne was on blackout for two weeks.

Chayne: [30:04] I didn't want to get off blackout and have nothing to do and I'd already watched, you know, *Stranger Things* and like all the stuff, you know. And I was like, I was kind of a week into it, you know, and I was ready to get crackin'. So I emailed and I called a couple of places.

Earlonne: [30:16] And he got through to Jason, the owner of a local plumbing company.

Chayne: [30:21] I told Jason straight up. I was like, listen man, like, I mean, I've been in prison for like a while. You know, he came down and talked to me and he's like, hey man, like, I'm sympathetic to guy in your position. We're going to give you a shot, you know? And he's like, how much you think you're worth? I'm like, [Laugh] I don't know, not much. [Laughs] So he's like, alright, well, we'll start you off at this. And then, uh, since then I've got—made, like, I mean, I've got, like, a four dollar raise, you know, over the course of the year.

Earlonne: [30:46] He's now earning about eighteen dollars an hour.


Earlonne: [30:49] Yeah, it's a long way from that eleven cents an hour back at his job shoveling shit in San Quentin.

Nigel: [30:54] And aside from his familiarity with wastewater, there's some other things he learned inside that he's found useful in his new job.

Chayne: [31:01] When I go to a job, like if I'm on new construction, I treat it like if I was going to, like, a yard. Kinda lay low for the first couple of days, you know, just, uh, see who's who. Do as you're told. Follow the rules. Maybe even eat lunch by yourself. We know who the foreman is, right? But like, who's like a good guy to take advice from? Maybe who's just kinda like messin' around, you know what I mean? And just skating by, you know? Maybe some guy tells you like, ah man, you can take four—fifty-minute lunch, but you can't take a fifty minute— they can take a fifty-minute lunch, 'cause, for whatever reason. But, like, you don't wanna set yourself up to get in trouble.

Earlonne: [31:34] So far, so good. Chayne hasn't gotten himself in trouble. But, he still has his worries.

Chayne: [31:40] [Tinkering synth] You know, you don't wanna make leaks. You don’t wanna flood someone's house or like a four-story, like, or multi-unit apartment building. So that's why I tighten things so tight, [laughing] it's 'cause I really wanna make sure it doesn't leak. But then when you tighten things too tight, you could also break them. And I'm lucky enough where my dad, he's a plumber in the union in San Francisco, so I
could call him and be like, I don't know what I'm doing. Help me. And, like, I'll put them on like, you know…

**Earlonne:** [32:05] … FaceTime

**Chayne:** [32:05] … video. I'm like, look at this. [Laugh] What is— Why is it doing this? [laughing] So, he'll like walk me through it and stuff ’cause he's been doing it for thirty five years. We talk almost every day now. It's always about work, but it's still, you know, you're still talking to your dad.

**Earlonne:** [32:19] Right. That's good, man.

**Chayne:** [32:21] It's a cool thing, man. I could talk to him before you guys came over here and told him how I split that fitting. Now we're gonna have to cut the wall open and ask ‘em if I'm gonna lose my job over it [Laughs]. ‘Cause I have a lot of, like, unrealistic, like, fears, you know, from, like, my past employment history. But what I gotta remember is, like, I'm not using anymore and that was ninety-nine percent of the reason why I ever got fired from any job. I mean, I showed up late because I was getting loaded earlier, whatever, you know? And so now that I don't do those things, it's still like in the back of my head. Like on Mondays, like I'm usually freaking out that I'm going to lose my job because, like, I overtightened something, but, like, that's probably not really realistic.

[32:56] [Abstract industrial sounds, whirring, voices and door closes shut that fade out]

**Earlonne:** [33:02] What does it feel like to have a job?

**Chayne:** [33:04] I feel, you know, useful. I feel like, you know, like I got something to offer, you know? I mean, I'm able to pay my car insurance, you know, pay my cell phone bill. I don't think ask Dad for help. And, like, my fiancé, she's a business owner. But she's a new business owner and when taxes came around, they were, like, a little overwhelming when you're a small business owner, you know? She was like, what the fuck? This is... [Laughs]

**Earlonne:** [33:24] She gotta pay that shit quarterly.

**Chayne:** [33:26] … way more than I expected. Right? So, um, and I was in a position where I was like, cool, here.

**Earlonne:** [33:02] Is it safe to say that this is the longest job you've had?

**Chayne:** [33:35] Oh, fuck yeah, it is. It's crazy. I've never had a job this long before. [Dreamy synth] It's amazing. It really is.

**Nigel:** [33:54] So Earlonne, we’ve been talking with a lot of formerly incarcerated men and women about their struggles and successes in the job market.
Earlonne: [34:00] Right.

Nigel: [34:01] And we know it's hard finding a job. It's even hard for people who haven't done time. But what do you think are the most difficult challenges?

Earlonne: [34:09] Well, the first difficult challenges is those background checks.


Earlonne: [34:14] You may be able to get in the door without telling your employer about your incarceration...

Nigel: [34:18] Right.

Earlonne: [34:19] ... but how do you convince them that you're not the person you were five, ten, fifteen years ago?

Nigel: [34:24] I know that's a hard one because some people actually don't want to believe in that change.

Earlonne: [34:28] Another big challenge is confidence in yourself. You need to feel like you can compete out here. If you've been out of the workforce for decades or never even been employed, you might not feel so good about your prospects.

Nigel: [34:40] Mhm.

Earlonne: [34:40] You might feel that everyone else has experienced that you've been denied.

Nigel: [34:44] Yeah. So how does someone deal with that?

Earlonne: [34:45] Well, for people that's in prison, you can start by taking advantage of whatever program and education you can get on the inside.

Nigel: [34:52] Mhm.

Earlonne: [34:53] And for those that's now out, first work your parole officers to see what resources you can get ahold of. Tap in with your networks. And also, remember what Jason Jones said, that same hard work that got you through your prison term is gonna serve you well out here on the streets.

[35:10] [Joyful, plucky synths]

Nigel: [35:14] Big thanks to Mittens, AKA Chayne Hampton.
Earlonne: [35:18] And Jason Jones, Chaves Stills, and Tracy Hartway for sharing their job experiences with us.

Nigel: [35:26] This episode was almost entirely recorded on the outside, but we'll be back next week with our inside host Rahsaan “New York” Thomas. Our other inside producers include me, Nigel Poor, Pat Mesiti-Miller, and John “Yahya” Johnson.

Earlonne: [35:40] Our outside producers are me, Earlonne Woods, and Bruce Wallace. This episode was scored with music by Antwan Williams, David Jassy, and Rhashiyd Zinnamon. Erin Wade is our digital producer, Curtis Fox is our senior producer and Julie Shapiro is our executive producer for Radiotopia.

Nigel: [35:57] We want to thank Warden Ron Davis and as you know, every episode has to be approved by this guy here.

Automated Voice: [36:02] Voice Message received at six forty-two P.M. today.

Lt. Sam Robinson: [36:07] [Via phone] It's Lieutenant Sam Robinson, the public information officer at San Quentin State Prison. And for the first time, I'm actually going to give an approval outside of San Quentin. I'm actually several thousand miles away in Kansas City, Missouri en route to the East Coast, delivering my daughter to what they call the real HU, for those of you who know what that is, I'm sure you know. But again, this is Lieutenant Sam Robinson outside of San Quentin, but still the public information officer at San Quentin State Prison and I do approve this episode.

[36:38] [Loud church bells, fluttery synth theme music]

Nigel: [36:39] Next time on Ear Hustle, we're doing our “Catch a Kite” episode. That's where we answer listeners' questions.

Female Voice: [36:45] And my question is whether it's hard to sleep in prison with the noise or the temperature and whether you all take naps during the day.

[36:53] [Theme music continues]

Earlonne: [36:57] 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: [37:07] Check out our website, 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, please follow us on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook @EarHustleSQ.

Earlonne: [37:24] 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: [37:33] And I'm Nigel Poor.

Both: [37:35] Thanks for listening. [Theme music ends]

Chayne: [37:41] I remember some guy tried to convince me to do this little hustle, right? You know, “you gonna go to prison, start following the rules.” I'm like, yeah, yeah, motherfucker [Laughs]. That's exactly when I'm gonna start following the rules. I'm not trying to go to jail and prison. You must be crazy.

END OF EPISODE.