Episode 68: Camp Grace
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Alex Watson: This is Alex Watson, Editor of Apogee Journal, where we have an upcoming issue featuring incarcerated writers. The following episode of Ear Hustle contains content that may not be suitable for all listeners, including mention of attempted suicide. Discretion is advised.

[transition comes in - abstract industrial sounds]

[loud industrial whirring sound in the background]

Andrew: My name is Andrew. [pauses]

Interviewer: Tell us what’s your dad’s name?

Andrew: Uh... Frankie.

Interviewer: Do you have any roses? Anything good?

Andrew: No.

[as narrator]

Earlonne Woods: Andrew ain’t givin’ up nothing, Nyge.

Nigel Poor: Mm-mm, mm-mm. [negating]

Earlonne Woods: I don't know, it’s like pulling teeth with these kids.

Nigel Poor: I know. And I wasn’t sure how it was gonna go. I mean, obviously they were nervous. They were away from home, they were being asked questions by adults they don't know, and it really brought out the teenager in them.

Elias: My name’s Elias Gonzales. [hesitates] I'm a camper. My dad's behind bars. [giggling, slightly uncomfortably] One of my roses are... my family, my dog, my cat.

Geneva: Hi, my name is Geneva and my dad’s name is Peter. And my rose is that I'll be able to see him.

[as narrator]

Nigel Poor: So emotionally, I think these kids were kind of all over the map. I mean, they were on the verge of a really important experience.

Earlonne Woods: Yep. All of them have dads who are incarcerated. Most of them haven't seen their dads in person in like a year. And for some of them, it's been 10 years.

Nigel Poor: A lot of these kids live really far away from the prison, which makes visits difficult. And also, during COVID, visits were pretty much shut down for a long time, so there just weren't in-person visits happening.

Earlonne Woods: But the next day, these kids was gonna go into Salinas Valley State Prison to spend two full days with their dad. And that’s really unusual in the prison system. I know we’ve covered family visits where there's an overnight with the moms or something…

Nigel Poor: And those don’t happen very often either.
Earlonne Woods: But this is just the kids by themselves spending full days with just their dads in a maximum-security level four prison. But the thing is, when you bring incarcerated dads together with their kids and no other family, it gets complicated. You know? [music fades out]

Camper 1: My rose is that... I don't really have a rose. My thorn is... I don't know if I want to see my dad.

Earlonne Woods: That's a deep thorn right there. [Nigel affirms]

Nigel Poor: Yeah, yeah... it really is. Well, on this episode... a lot of roses, and definitely some thorns. [Ear Hustle theme song comes in]

Earlonne Woods: For real. And Nigel, it's also the last episode of the season.

Nigel Poor: That it is my friend. Today on the show, we're going to camp — Camp Grace! I'm Nigel Poor.

Earlonne Woods: And I'm Earlonne Woods. I always wanted to go to camp. This is Ear Hustle from PRX's Radiotopia.

[theme fades out]

[ambient noise comes in – voices chattering and laughing in the background while MC Hammer's Can't Touch This plays]

Nigel Poor: A few months before we recorded those kids doing their roses and thorns, we drove down to Salinas Valley State Prison to meet some of their dads.

[ambient noise continues, Can't Touch This continues, then stops, and starts again, implying people are rehearsing a chorography to the song]

Earlonne Woods: They were trying to come up with a dance routine that they were gonna perform for their kids. Kinda like the icebreaker. You know, you got these hardcore level four ex-gang members not accustomed to acting silly and shit.

Nigel Poor: Right. But they all knew that this big reunion was coming up and that it might be just really intense for everybody. So, the idea was to kick it off with something kind of silly and goofy to get everyone to loosen up and be comfortable.
Choreographer: OK, so walk through that again, ‘cause it’s the first opening second. So how is Gilbert positioned?

Earlonne Woods: Gilbert’s a big burly guy, he’s got all the gang ink, all tatted up on his head, on his neck; and, surprisingly, he’s not the best dancer.

Nigel Poor: [Earlonne and Nigel laugh] Oh, really? But Earlonne, clearly he was really trying, it was pretty sweet. He obviously wanted it to be great for his kids.

Gilbert Herrera: Gilbert Herrera and my daughter is Gigi and my son’s Angel. I can’t wait ’til they come, you know. I can’t wait. Yeah, I’ve been looking forward to this all year.

Earlonne Woods: For all these guys, and I think especially for Gilbert, there was a lot riding on this visit.

Nigel Poor: Yeah, I mean, Gilbert hadn’t seen his kids in two years. And whenever he could get them on the phone, he could tell that they were having a really hard time. Their mom was struggling, and for a period of time, those kids were put in foster care.

Gilbert Herrera: You know, they got tooken away, and that was a big thing for me. Like, I was going through it, you know? And Angel, just shut down completely... [getting emotional] so, they got them back and right now their mom’s all lost and stuff. And they deal with this like... they grew up fast. Like, Gigi has her belly button pierced. When I found out I was trippin’, I was like, What the heck? And she was like, “Dad, what? You’re not here.” She throws it to my face all the time. They tell me all the time like, “If you were here, this wouldn’t be happening.”

Nigel Poor: When I hear this, you know, I think about how lopsided relationships can be when you’re in prison. You are completely reliant on that family member outside to
make things happen. And if they can't do it, there's nothing you can do when you're inside. [crosstalk]

**Earlonne Woods:** [crosstalk] There's nothing. I mean, you only have two forms of communication, Nyge — the letter and the phone. [Nigel affirms] And if you can't get your message out on those two, it's helpless.

**Gilbert Herrera:** It feels like you're dying inside, because you can't do nothing for the people you love. You can't hold them, you can't do nothing. What are you if you can't take care of your own people? Like, you can't do nothing for your own kids, what do you do? Them being so little, and them being so fragile, and knowing the people they wanted to be in, they can't do that because I'm not there. It's a massive feeling. I tried to kill myself a couple of times, as a matter of fact. I tried to OD once, and I tried to hang myself once in the county jail. There's no living without the people you love, you know?

[to Gilbert]

**Earlonne Woods:** So what are you expecting in October?

**Gilbert Herrera:** In October? To see my babies, to hug 'em. To... reassure them that I'm still their daddy and I love them. That they don't have nothing to worry about. That I'm never going to change on them. And that at the end of the day, when things are hard, we have opportunities like this with Camp Grace, and that Camp Grace is always going to be there for them.

[music comes in] [as narrator]

**Earlonne Woods:** Usually this program Camp Grace is longer, with the kids coming into the prison every day for five whole days. But because of COVID, this year it's only two days.

**Nigel Poor:** And that means trying to squeeze a *whole* lot of fathering into a really short time.

**Earlonne Woods:** It's a lot of pressure. You know, some of these dads barely know their kids. [Nigel affirms] Maybe they've had visits before, but that's different, it's much shorter, just a few hours. Plus, you've got the mom talking relationship stuff, it could be other family members there acting like a buffer. But at this camp, it's just the two of them, so it's very intense.
Nigel Poor: Exactly. But, maybe, Earlonne, because there’s no buffer, sometimes there’s a breakthrough. And that’s what happened with one of the other dads, Jose, and his son, Alex.

Jose: First camp, he, the third day in, he started calling me “Dad”, so...

Nigel Poor: So, Jose is a small guy. And like Gilbert, he’s bald and covered with tattoos. He has this very intense coiled up energy, but he also has these beautiful, watchful eyes, like he’s taking everything in around him. And he’s been coming to camp for a few years with his son.

Earlonne Woods: Jose was sent to prison when Alex was just a little kid. And there wasn’t really time to establish a righteous relationship.

Nigel Poor: So when Alex called him “Dad” for the first time, it kind of stopped Jose in his tracks.

[music fades out]

Jose: He was going to the bathroom, and he was like, “Dad, I'm gonna go to the bathroom, and I'll be right back.” I think he just kind of stopped for a second to see my reaction, you know? So I didn't want to show too much reaction, so I was like, “Oh yeah, cool, cool. Try to play it off.”, But it was a big thing for both of us.

[to Jose]

Nigel Poor: And what did that feel like?

Jose: It felt good. It actually made me feel like a dad for once. Like, I knew I had a son. I knew I loved him, and it would hurt if something would happen to him. But I never really felt like his dad. [Nigel affirms] So once I saw myself as a dad, I started asking myself, Well, would my son would be proud of this decision that I'm making?

[as narrator]

Nigel Poor: So this decision he's referring to, this is something we have always wanted to talk about on the show and we just never could.

Nigel Poor: So one of the main rules of Camp Grace is that if you want to participate and see your kids, you have to go through a whole year without getting any write-ups in prison. Basically, you gotta have a clean record.

Earlonne Woods: But when you're in a prison gang, that's really hard to do. Because if you're affiliated, you live by the gang rules. You have to go out on the yard at certain times, do whatever they say. And sometimes that means doing the kind of shit that not only would get you written up, but it will probably get you another case in court. Honestly, it's hard to find people to talk about this on the show because there's such a strict ass code of silence around this gang shit in prison. So, anyone who talk about it, is technically putting their life in danger.

Nigel Poor: Right. Jose and the other guys in this program, well, pretty much all of them were gang members really tied up in the politics of the Mexican prison gang culture.

Earlonne Woods: But they wanted to keep seeing their kids, so they made the decision to tap out.

Nigel Poor: And when you leave a prison gang, basically your whole world changes. You're taken away from the mainline and put into protective custody. [music fades out]

Jose: It was the hardest thing I ever had to do in my life. I wrote on a piece of paper, like five times, ‘Hey, I need to leave.’ And then would crumple and throw it away, like, Oh, I can't do this. What am I doing? Like, at least five, six times that day, you know?

[as narrator]

Earlonne Woods: The day Jose finally decided to drop out, he didn’t go out on the yard like he was supposed to; under gang protocol, he just stayed in his cell.

Jose: The officer noticed something was off ‘cause everybody went out to the yard, and I didn’t go. And then, when you’re in those types of yards, everything's mandatory. So, he came up there, and I just told him in Spanish, “Hey, I need to leave. I need to get out of here.” He just looked at me, Are you serious? And I was like, “Yeah, I'm done.” He was like, “All right.” And then they just called me out of medical and took me to the gym. What that entails is that I'm renouncing everything that I've ever known. Everything that
I've ever believed. Every friend that I ever made along the way, I turned my back on them.

[to Jose]

**Nigel Poor:** So they just, you leave your cell, you go to the gym — that's it.

**Jose:** Yeah.

**Nigel Poor:** You don't see anyone again? You don't say goodbye to people? [crosstalk]

**Jose:** [crosstalk] No, you don't say goodbye to anybody, nothing. And they just take it to the hole from there.

[as narrator]

**Earlonne Woods:** That's how it works. They take you to the hole for protection, until they can move you to a different part of the prison where you'll be safe.

**Nigel Poor:** And so, he was really breaking with everyone. Not just inside the prison, but outside too.

**Earlonne Woods:** Because Jose grew up in this gang life shit. [Nigel affirms] So this was going to affect not only prison shit, but his street life as well.

**Jose:** One of the officers told me that day, “It can't be harder than coming to prison.” Coming to prison for us is like a rite of passage. It's like something we look forward to, and that I used to look forward to like a dumb ass, excuse my language. But that's just the way that it was growing up. You know, the blue shirts... I’m always expected to come to prison.

[to Jose]

**Nigel Poor:** Was there anyone you were able to talk to about dropping out? Anyone in your family... [crosstalk]

**Jose:** [crosstalk] No.

**Nigel Poor:** It was all an internal dialogue.
Jose: Mhm. Mhm.

Nigel Poor: It sounds so hard.

Jose: It’s harder than what I’m making it seem. It was the hardest thing I ever had to do, but I think it’s the best choice I think I ever made.

[as narrator]

Nigel Poor: Jose told us that the way he got through was to create a kind of tunnel vision. He just focused on this one thing he really wanted and he tried to block out everything else.

Jose: When I think of freedom, I think of a lake. Being able to just pull out lawn chair, with a fishing pole, like a little cooler right there, and my kid. That’s like the perfect evening for me.

[music comes in]

It makes it easier for me not to partake in certain things because they don’t fit in my little picture. I have my little picture and whatever it takes to get there, that’s what I’m gonna do. At the end of the tunnel, just that light, that picture, that lake. That’s it. That's my destination.

Nigel Poor: Yeah. How often do you look at that tunnel?

Jose: Every day in the morning. Every day in the morning I wake up and I see myself there. There’s my goal.

[music fades out]

[ambient noise comes in, Alex practicing his rapping, We get caught in our sleeping... Ms. Candice be scarin’... Homie, you know... that... dang it, wait uh...]

[as narrator]

Earlonne Woods: Fast forward a couple months, and we’re with hanging with MC Alex.

Nigel Poor: Yep. That’s the kid that Jose can’t wait to see.
Alex: Always get ready to get some ladies... hit me up, I’m 13 years old. I’m about 5’4”. I got brown eyes, slicked back hair. You already know I’ll treat you right… I can cook, I can clean...

Nigel Poor: Oh my god, Earlonne, those kids... I don’t know what to say. They were hyped.

Earlonne Woods: Hell yeah they was hyped. [Nigel laughs]

Nigel Poor: And there was this one kid Geneva, the only girl in the program, she took over our microphone and was like, “Lemme at it, lemme at it!” [Earlonne laughs]

[Geneva comes in singing a K-Pop song]

Earlonne Woods: We arrived at the prison about 8 in the morning. Everyone had to get processed to go in, which took forever.

[ambient noise at Salinas State Prison comes in – voices chattering and monitors beeping as guests go through processing]

Nigel Poor: Then, finally it was time to head into the visiting room where their dads were all... just waiting!

[ambient noise from inside Salinas State Prison continues - Coordinator speaking to dads says, “Are you ready?”, voices chattering in affirmation, “OK, they’re coming”, followed by laughter and excited chatter]

[music comes in]

Nigel Poor: So we walked into the visiting room, it’s this kind of big space. It looks a bit like an elementary school. But you can tell you’re in a prison because of the signs of “Don’t go there”, “Don’t touch this”. It’s echoey... and when those kids went in, Wool! It was loud.

[ambient noise continues – loud, excited chatter, and sound of squeaking sneakers]

Earlonne Woods: And there were dads. All standing there in kinda a zig zaggy awkward ass line. [Nigel laughs]
**Nigel Poor:** As soon as the kids walked in, they ran to their fathers. Like, they were all jumping into each other’s arms. There was hugging and screeching, and the room was just like full of this... I don’t know... this delightful, positive energy. It was like they were saying “We’re here!”

[Earlonne chuckles]

**Earlonne Woods:** Alex ran right up to his dad, Jose, gave him a big old hug.

**Nigel Poor:** And Geneva, the one who was singing that K-pop song, she was jumping all over her dad.

**Earlonne Woods:** And then there’s Andrew. He was the kid who was so quiet at the top of our show, his dad, Frankie was just standing there with this huge grin on his face.

[to Frankie]

**Nigel Poor:** I wish you could see your own face right now. You look like a kid. You look so happy. Your eyes are like this big and smile. And you're just glowing.

**Frankie:** Thank you. [crosstalk]

**Nigel Poor:** [crosstalk] It's really great to see it.

**Frankie:** [crosstalk] Thank you. This kind of feels like freedom, to be honest. Everywhere we move in there, we have guns on us, so, you know... everything is controlled. Right here all the walls come down. And it's relaxing, but at the same time because it's something different, I'm nervous. Like, I'm out of my element. This is something different, like, the making small talk, filling all these hours... enjoying this is blessing, but also, like I say, I'm nervous because I want it to be so good. I want him to be comfortable, I want him to be happy. I want this to be a great experience for him.

[as narrator]

**Nigel Poor:** Yeah, obviously there were a lot of emotions and nerves on that first morning. So, before long it was time for... an ice breaker. And E, you know what time it was.

**Earlonne Woods:** *Doon doon doon doot, doon doot, doown doot* [singing *Can’t Touch This*]
[ambient noise comes in – MC Hammer’s *Can’t Touch This* plays while dads perform for their kids, soft laughter is heard in the background and sneakers squeaking as dads dance]

**Earlonne Woods:** Nigel, I was looking at the kids’ faces as they watched their daddies dance, [Nigel laughs] and some of them probably was feeling embarrassed to watch it, and some of them was enjoying it. You know?

[ambient noise continues – now, *The Macarena* plays while dancing continues along with sneakers squeaking on the floor]

**Nigel Poor:** Yeah, I mean that screeching of the sneakers on the floor kinda says it all. [Earlonne affirms] [laughs] Had that kind of feeling to it. But honestly, I think all the kids got into it. Because remember eventually, the dads were beckoning [Earlonne affirms] them to come up and join them and they all did.

**Earlonne Woods:** Yeah, it was cool to watch.

**Nigel Poor:** And then as the day went on, you could really see relationships developing.

[ambient noise continues – voices chattering as dads and kids have conversations and bond]

You know, like that ice breaker works!

**Jose:** He’s taller than me! He’s taller than me.

[as narrator]

**Nigel Poor:** Jose kept checking out how tall Alex was, [Earlonne affirms] and seeing how good his fade was.

**Earlonne Woods:** And then you had Frankie and them just, you know, like padding each other, you know what I’m sayin’? [Nigel laughs] I don’t know if it was boxing pads, or... it was something.

**Nigel Poor:** That’s right. And Geneva she kept asking her dad about, “When am I gonna get that cat? Mom said I could get a cat.”
**Earlonne Woods:** Definitely, and he was like, “Soon! Soon!” [Nigel laughs]

[to Nigel]

**Geneva:** Yeah, so I’m getting the cat.

**Nigel Poor:** Does your dad know about this plan?

**Geneva’s Dad:** I do now. [laughs]

[as narrator]

**Nigel Poor:** But then, E, there was this one dad and his kid and honestly, I could hardly look over there. [Earlonne affirms] And this was the kid who the night before camp told us that his thorn was he wasn't sure if he wanted to see his dad.

**Earlonne Woods:** Yeah. And now he was finally with his dad, and it was hella awkward. [Nigel affirms] I mean, every time the father hugged the son, the son just went limp — arms down, no interaction, like, *Who is this dude?*

**Nigel Poor:** His mom asked us not to use her son’s name.

**Earlonne Woods:** So, we'll just say that the dad is tall cat, one of the older dads in the room. He had this old school sports-type of build.

**Nigel Poor:** And at one point, I pulled him over to ask how it was going.

[to camper’s dad]

So, what have you learned about your son and yourself?

**Dad 1:** What I learned about my son... that he got his own mind. And I learned about him, too, that it's like, I've been gone for 10 years, and it's like that gap where I used to give him a shower and sit him on his highchair, change his Pampers and whatnot, that is over. I gotta go forward. But even in that, is some bumps. At the end of the day, I really don't know him. [Nigel affirms] from 10 years, I don't know him.

**Nigel Poor:** How does it feel to have to say, “I don't know my son?”
Dad 1: Feels like your choices that you make could shatter a whole bunch of stuff like glass. You can't put a bottle back together once it broke. [Nigel affirms] It's like, reaching for the wind. [Nigel affirms] It's going through your hand. You know what I mean? It's like, Wow, it's just smoke. When it's all said and done, it's like smoke, like, poof.

Nigel Poor: Does that hurt?

Dad 1: Yeah. Because you're searching for a relationship that's not there, you know what I mean? [Nigel affirms] And it's like, Man, where do you start at?

Nigel Poor: So what did you learn about him?

Dad 1: I learned about he's not no dummy. And he got his guards up. [Nigel affirms] To the fullest. And that's a good thing. And that's what I pray, “God guard his heart. God guard his heart and his mind.”

Nigel Poor: Do you think he has his guard up against you?

Dad 1: [sighs sharply] Right now, I think he's mostly hurt, I think. I love my son, you know, but sometimes I don't know where to start.

[as narrator] [music comes in]

Earlonne Woods: I was watching that dad and his son, [Nigel affirms] their table was sort of off to the side of the room a bit, away from the others. And often just seemed very quiet, like they wasn't really talking to each other. The son’s face was hella long, and he was looking down and shit.

Nigel Poor: Yeah, but other times, they’d be working on a craft project together and it seemed like they were connecting just a little bit...

Earlonne Woods: Yeah. I remember one time, they were decorating a shaker, and the kid decided he wanted to decorate it with his dad’s birth year and then the kid’s birth year. So, the kid painted it blue and gold, which he said was like these “royal” colors.

Nigel Poor: I know it was cool. It was like suggesting there was some connection between them. [Earlonne affirms] And this is really deliberate on the part of the camp organizers — they have all these craft projects so the dads and kids can basically create crafts together. They call it “side-by-side” work, so they create something instead of just sitting there looking at each other, like What do we do now?
Earlonne Woods: Right, right. And then, at the end of the day... you know what it was time for, right? [Nigel affirms] Another round of roses and thorns.

[music fades out]

Camper 2: A thorn is that tomorrow's our last day. And that I don't get to take food home. [everyone laughs]

Dad 2: A rose is being able to be silly, and obviously spend all that time with your child and able to take that shine with you out there to the yard.

Camper 3: Me and my dad did each other's nails. [laughs along with others]

Camper 4: My dad. Like, seeing how happy he is.

Earlonne: Well, I guess, my rose is just having an opportunity to walk back in here and hang out. You know, I spent years in here, in this place, so one of the thorns is it's always kinda bittersweet... but I can just walk out, but just leaving cats in here and not seeing y'all going home with y'all kids, that's a hella thorn.

[music fades out]

[music comes in]

Nigel Poor: For me, there was one big thorn hanging over the whole day, and it had to do with Gilbert, that burly guy, whose kids had spent time in foster care.

Earlonne Woods: Yeah, Gilbert was so worried about those kids and really desperate to see 'em.

Nigel Poor: But after all that, his kids didn't show up to camp.

Earlonne Woods: And we'll talk about that after the break.

[music fades out]

[transition comes in – abstract industrial sounds]
[back at Camp Grace at Salinas State Prison, everyone sings “Happy Birthday” joyously]

**Earlonne Woods:** On the second day of camp, the staff brought out this big old cake and a gang of cupcakes.

**Nigel Poor:** And they all sang “Happy Birthday”.

**Earlonne Woods:** It's like a gumbo of everybody names when it get to that part.

[group continues singing “Happy Birthday”, saying different names all at the same time when dedicating the song]

**Nigel Poor:** Exactly because they are celebrating everyone's birthdays, all the kids' birthdays and all the dad's birthdays.

[group finishes song, then clap and cheer for one another]

**Earlonne Woods:** Pretty much making up for lost time.

**Nigel Poor:** Everything about Camp Grace is deliberate. And that includes how the meals are served.

**Earlonne Woods:** First of all, let's just be clear, [Nigel affirms] they did not inside food.

**Nigel Poor:** Nope.

**Earlonne Woods:** This stuff came from an Italian restaurant.

**Nigel Poor:** Yeah, kinda like fine dining, right?

**Earlonne Woods:** Street food!

**Nigel Poor:** And the tables where people sit are also very intentional. It kind of looks like a wedding, there’s like these 4 or 6 top tables, they have tablecloths on them, centerpieces...

**Earlonne Woods:** [crosstalk] Balloons!
**Nigel Poor:** [crosstalk] ...there are place settings, balloons. It’s really like you’re at a party. So at each table, there’s a dad and a kid, a prison official and then somebody from either Ear Hustle or from the Camp Grace organization.

And the idea is to set it up again like a party, you’re just meeting and there’s small talk. There isn’t like a hierarchy. You’re sitting and just and having a good time.

**Earlonne Woods:** The only hierarchy was the dads were served first. And then they had ‘em served by the warden and associate wardens, which is some shit you would never see that happen in prison.

**Nigel Poor:** But again, there was intention to it. The idea was for the kids to see their dads being treated with dignity and respect by people who would normally be seen as, what—how would you say it, Earlonne?

**Earlonne Woods:** I always describe it as “by the oppressors”.


**Nigel Poor:** Over the course of the camp, you could see some of the kids and the dads really warming up to each other. But E, there was that big thorn hanging over the whole camp...

**Earlonne Woods:** Yep, Gilbert the guy who was so worried about his kids.

**Nigel Poor:** The day before camp was supposed to start, Gilbert got some devastating news. The mother of his kids had changed her mind. She wasn’t gonna let Gigi and Angel come to camp after all.

[to Gilbert]

What made you come here today?

**Gilbert Herrera:** I don’t know. My cellie just pushed me and pushed me and pushed me. And he wanted me to meet his son. And I don’t know, man, I didn’t want to come, I really didn’t. But he’s right. You know, like I at least owe it to all of them, you know? Show my face. I am part of the Camp Grace family, you know.
Nigel Poor: Is there any way to explain that... what does that feel like, or what is that?

Gilbert Herrera: Like, I've hurt. I've lost family members, I've lost cousins. I lost friends. I've... this pain is like a different type of pain. Like, you're taking something away from me that really, really means everything to me. Those children gave me a purpose to live in life. You know, I gave up my neighborhood, I dropped out. I did everything that I never thought I would do for people that... like, I didn't care about life. I had very little regard for life, you know, in the game that I was a part of you couldn't care about life. You couldn't care about somebody else. And falling in love with these children, it gave me a real purpose to live.

Nigel Poor: Can I make a physical observation? [Gilbert affirms] You are so tense. And I feel like you're about to explode. [Gilbert chuckles softly] Not in anger, but in something.

Earlonne Woods: Yeah, that knee hasn't stopped chattering.

Nigel Poor: Yeah, or your hands haven't stopped moving.

Earlonne Woods: Man.

Nigel Poor: Just everything about you seems tight.

Gilbert Herrera: Yeah... tight. [Nigel affirms] Fuck. Yeah. [Nigel affirms]

[music comes in]

[as narrator]

Earlonne Woods: It was interesting to see all the relationships. [Nigel affirms] They were all a little different. Frankie, he was taking this “father-knows-best” approach, you know, kinda stiff and formal.

Nigel Poor: Yeah, and Alex and Jose, they were super physical. I mean, they couldn't stop touching each other. Every time I looked over there, their hands were just like everywhere. It was kind of like Jose was afraid if he stopped touching him, his kid was going to disappear.
**Earlonne Woods:** Just disappear. *Poof.* [Nigel affirms] And Geneva, she had this kind of bossy relationship with her pops. She'd be like, “I'm gonna paint your nails, Dad.” [Nigel laughs] And he'd just sit there, like, *OK, OK.* [Nigel and Earlonne laugh]

**Nigel Poor:** Exactly. But then there was one dad and his son we mentioned earlier. We're not using their names, but they were the ones who were having a hard time connecting.

**Earlonne Woods:** And this was a hard one. I mean, I know he wanted to have a relationship with his son, but it just seemed like he didn't have any idea of how to reach him and how to get there.

**Nigel Poor:** No, no.

**Earlonne Woods:** You know?

**Nigel Poor:** Yep. [softly]

**Dad 1:** I was raised up... different. My mama, my daddy, they ain’t never sat me down and said, “This is what I did.” And confess their sins to me, the errors of their ways and what not. Ain't never did that. And I love their dirty socks, in spite of that. And I think that was healthy, too. Some things is better not known, because God, even God, when you come to him, he say he throw away your sins if you seek forgiveness. If there is not a daddy to show them truth, where is they gon’ find the truth?

[to Dad 1]

**Nigel Poor:** Has that happened with your son here?

**Dad 1:** I believe that ... that's what he see. He see I'm sound. I'm not somebody telling my son, “Cuz... You better man, cuz... I'm up in here, cuz...” [mumbles indistinguishably mimicking type of person he’s not] I ain't do none of that. Go to school, son. [Nigel affirms] Get your education. Get to know your creator. See what God said.

[as narrator]

**Nigel Poor:** Oh boy, man. His main strategy was to just talk about God. [Earlonne affirms] And it wasn't working.
**Earlonne Woods:** Yeah. I tried to step in and, you know, offer a little advice to him, you know?

[to Dad 1]

**Earlonne Woods:** Can I make a quick suggestion?

**Dad 1:** Yeah.

**Earlonne Woods:** You gonna be open for it?

**Dad 1:** Yeah.

**Earlonne Woods:** Just don't talk religion all day to him.

**Dad 1:** OK. I'm trying not to...

**Earlonne Woods:** Talk about you. And him. And try to leave God for a minute.

**Dad 1:** OK. I'm trying to... and...

**Earlonne Woods:** Connect on that level.

**Dad 1:** And I'm trying to, too. I'll do that.

**Earlonne Woods:** Trust me.

**Dad 1:** I trust you. [Earlonne affirms] [Dad and Earlonne chuckle]

**Nigel Poor:** Do you think it worked, Earlonne?

**Earlonne Woods:** Well, one thing I've learned about Christians in prison... *nah*, they base everything on God and Jesus.

[music comes in]

[as narrator]

**Nigel Poor:** As the day wrapped up, it was back to roses and thorns.
Gilbert Herrera: My rose is that I got to come and spend time with everybody. My thorns are that my kids didn't get to come.

Speaker 1: My rose is the kids... I love the energy that they bring to this place.

Geneva: My rose is that I got to paint my dad's face and his nails. [group claps] And my thorn is that I did not finish the Italian food. [group laughs]

Alex: I had a lot of fun playing football today and dancing and rapping.

Dad 1: My thorn... yeah, grieving because I haven't been around my children. The relationship and the bond that we had was taken away when I came to prison, and I grieved for him. That's my thorn.

Camper: My rose was being here... talking to everyone, playing with the football outside, running around.

[as narrator]

Earlonne Woods: And with that... Camp Grace was coming to a close

[ambient noise comes in from Camp Grace and coordinator says, “Goodbye to Camp Grace? Say goodbye to Ear Hustle?” Another coordinator says, “On the count of three.” “1... 2... 3”; group responds in unison, “Goodbye Camp Grace! Goodbye Ear Hustle! ‘Til next year!” followed by clapping]

[music fades out]

[ambient noise comes in of campers walking away from camp, walking on a gravel path speaking to one another indistinguishably]

Nigel Poor: Earlonne, there was this moment, as the kids were leaving the prison, and they were talking about how the camp had gone.

Earlonne Woods: It's pretty hard to hear, but as they're walking out, one of the kids said to another kid, “You don't really like your dad, do you?”

[ambient noise continues, quiet conversation between campers continues]

Nigel Poor: And this was the kid who really having a hard time bonding with his dad.
Earlonne Woods: Yeah, the dad I was trying to give advice to, like, “Don’t talk about God so much.”

Nigel Poor: Exactly. And this situation, Earlonne, I hate to say it, but there was part of me that was asking myself during this camp: *Does every kid need to be reunited with their parent in prison?* Because sometimes, it just might not work for everyone.

Earlonne Woods: Yeah, I mean, some kids are forced to go into that visiting room with the other parent. [Nigel affirms] And you have these situations where a lot of times the kids ain’t feelin’ it because... You know, personally I have this nephew that kinda hates his dad because his dad been in prison his whole life! [Nigel affirms] There’s no relationship, no communication. It’s... a big blank for those kids, in a way. [Nigel affirms]

[music comes in]

Nigel Poor: About a week later after camp, I ran into Jenny, one of the organizers of Camp Grace, remember we were walking out of San Quentin?

Earlonne Woods: Mhm.

Nigel Poor: And I asked her about that kid who wasn’t getting along with his dad. And she told me this amazing story. Camp Grace gives the dads these t-shirts to wear, and at the end of the camp, they give them to their kids so they can take them home and wear something that smells like their dad.

Earlonne Woods: Right. Right.

Nigel Poor: So, that kid that wasn’t getting along with his dad, when he got back to where they were staying, they could not find that t-shirt. And he was absolutely distraught. He thought the kids had taken it or hidden it, and he really wanted that damn t-shirt. That idea that he couldn’t connect with his dad in person, but that he wanted this symbol of his father, this thing that held... this kind of intangible scent of him? [Earlonne affirms] He wanted that close to him. [Earlonne affirms] It just told me that every kid has that in them somewhere. And something as transitory as a scent is a starting point for them.

Earlonne Woods: I mean, I think a lot of times technically you can’t see eye to eye because it's been what, 10 years since they had seen each other? And it's complicated, you know? I mean, time, space and prison really gets in the way of those relationships.
[music fades out]

**Nigel Poor:** E, even though we didn’t get to meet them at Salinas, we do have some special guests to read the credits.

[music comes in]

**Earlonne Woods:** That’s right. Gilbert’s children, Gigi and Angel came through for us.

**Gigi:** Ear Hustle would like to thank all the parents and children who spoke to them for this story. And a big thanks to the Camp Grace team: Karen, Jenny, Sandra, Candace, and Maria.

**Angel:** Thanks also to Alma, Jen, Adriana, Officer Muros, Officer Guevara, and Warden Atchley at Salinas Valley State Prison.

**Gigi:** This episode of Ear Hustle was produced by Earlonne Woods, Nigel Poor, Rahsaan “New York” Thomas, John “Yahya” Johnson, Rhashiyd Zinnamon, Bruce Wallace, and Tony Tafoya.

**Angel:** It was sound designed and engineered by Antwan Williams, with music by Antwan and Rhashiyd Zinnamon.

**Gigi:** Amy Standen edits the show. Shabnam Sigman is the digital producer, and Julie Shapiro is the executive producer for Radiotopia.

**Angel:** Ear Hustle would also like to thank Warden Ron Broomfield at San Quentin. And as you know, every episode of Ear Hustle has to be approved by this guy here.

[music fades out]

[to Lieutenant Sam Robinson]

**Earlonne Woods:** This is the last episode of season number 8!

**Lieutenant Sam Robinson:** Who would’ve ever thought... [Earlonne laughs] back in 2017, when we started this journey, man, we’d be here. It’s just amazing how this thing has evolved. And there are just so many more stories that are out there that are waiting to be told. And... just like this episode here, it took this whole different avenue with kids
and how incarceration impacts them, so, with that, Merry Christmas. To the Ear Hustle world, Merry Christmas, Happy New Year, Happy Kwanzaa, Happy Hanukkah and whatever else you may celebrate. And with that, I will say I am Lieutenant Sam Robinson, the Public Information Officer at San Quentin State Prison, and I do approve this episode as we finish the season, anticipating many more.

**Earlonne Woods and Lieutenant Sam Robinson:** [simultaneously] *Feliz navidad!*

[Earlonne sings the word “navidad” and sustains the note comically]

**Earlonne Woods:** See, got everybody.

**Lieutenant Sam Robinson:** You know what I had on my mind today, man? I just can't blow it though.

**Earlonne Woods:** What's that?

**Lieutenant Sam Robinson:** It's *The Temptations*. That Merry Christmas with that big bass.

**Earlonne Woods:** Oh with the bass. [Lieutenant Robinson affirms] *Yeah...*

**Lieutenant Sam Robinson:** [singing] *Merry Christmas.* [Earlonne laughs] I can't get it man. I'm not there. [laughs]

**Earlonne Woods:** Hey, you need some eggnog man. [Lieutenant Robinson and continue bantering indistinguishably]

[as narrator]

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

**Nigel Poor:** Ear Hustle is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX. Radiotopia is a collection of independent, listener-supported podcasts.

**Earlonne Woods:** Some of the *best* podcasts around. Hear more at [radiotopia.fm].

[to Nigel]
This is the last episode of Season 8, Nyge.

**Nigel Poor**: I know! I cannot believe it.

**Earlonne Woods**: I can — we've been working our ass off, what you talkin’ about?

**Nigel Poor**: I know, I'm excited for a little break, but I'm also really excited that we will be back at the beginning of March.

**Earlonne Woods**: Yep. We got this new season for you in the beginning of March. [Nigel affirms] It should be very interesting. You know, we kick them off with bangs. [Nigel affirms] And I've got a great idea for some holiday gifts too before we go.

**Nigel Poor**: Are you talking about a certain book?

**Earlonne Woods**: Yes! *This Is Ear Hustle: Unflinching Stories of Everyday Prison Life* would be great stocking stuffers.

**Nigel Poor**: You’d have to have a pretty big stocking for that. And Earlonne, one other thing, if in between seasons listeners want to keep up with Ear Hustle, you can also sign up for our newsletter, The Lowdown, [Earlonne affirms] at our website: earhustlesq.com.

**Earlonne Woods**: That’s where you’ll find out about Ear Hustle related events and projects, *and* you get bonus information from recent episodes and see photos as well as messages from our listeners.

**Nigel Poor**: And in between seasons, keep your eyes on our feed... there may be a special bonus episode coming out as soon as next week. In the meantime...

**Earlonne Woods**: Happy holidays.

**Nigel Poor**: Happy holidays.

**Earlonne Woods**: Happy New Years. Happy, to all you lovely women out there, Happy Valentine's Day, every day. [Nigel laughs]

**Nigel Poor**: Yeah, OK. [Earlonne laughs]

I'm Nigel poor.
Earlonne Woods: And I'm Earlonne Woods.

Nigel Poor and Earlonne Woods: [simultaneously] Thanks for listening.

[music fades out]

END OF EPISODE.