

**Ear Hustle**  
**"Do You Know Who I Am?"**  
**April 12, 2023**

**Delinia Lewis:** My name is Delinia Lewis. I'm an Associate Warden at the California Institution for Women. The following episode of Ear Hustle may contain language and content that is not appropriate for all listeners. Discretion is advised.

**Kier:** *The graffiti in the cells is different at the women's institution than it is at the men's institution. At the men's institution, you seldom see something nice written on the wall. It's usually bad words, swear words, gang signs, threats of some kind. It's bad. But at the women's institution, it said things like, "I miss my kids," "Michelle loves Sarah," things like that. And I thought, "Wow, this really is different." I've never seen graffiti that says, "I miss my kids," at the men's institution.*

**Earlonne:** This sounds like it's just about hitting up on the wall, some graffiti, but what's going on here is a much bigger deal than that, Nyge?

**Nigel:** Exactly. What's so striking about this tape is that we're hearing from someone who has been incarcerated at both at men's and a women's prison. She has seen the inside of both prisons, from an incarcerated perspective. And, Earlonne, that is a perspective we have never been able to hear before.

**Earlonne:** Nope. And it's all because of a new law in California that's really shaking shit up.

**Nigel:** Yes.

**Earlonne:** I'm Earlonne Woods.

**Nigel:** I'm Nigel Poor.

**Earlonne:** And this is Ear Hustle from PRX's Radiotopia.

[Ear Hustle theme playing]

**Cassidy:** *Here, if I want to get silly, I can get silly and not have to worry about anything. If I'm going to laugh and giggle about something, I can laugh and giggle about something. Not have to worry about some guy going, "Hey, stupid broad. Quit doing that silly stuff."*

**Nigel:** *What's the silly thing that you do?*

**Cassidy:** *I do tend to whistle more than I probably should. And I laugh, I have kind of a high-pitched laugh. My voice is not [clears throat] a female voice, obviously. That at first freaks them*

*out when they hear my voice because it is a little deeper. I mean, they look at me and they think, "Okay, that could be a woman." But then they hear my voice, and they say, "Oh, nope, that's not a woman." [chuckles]*

**Nigel:** *Hmm.*

**Cassidy:** *And I'm cool with that. It's just a matter of, "Hey, here I am, this is what I am, let me introduce myself." And, usually, it turns out really well.*

*My name is Cassidy Porter. I am 66 years old, transgender, male to female. And I'm here at California Institute for Women.*

**Nigel:** Cassidy spent like 20 years in the military.

**Earlonne:** Yeah. She was a combat medic.

**Nigel:** And she has kind of a tough build which, honestly, is probably what it took for her to survive all those years as a woman incarcerated in a men's prison.

**Cassidy:** *I used to be a really big guy. I mean, I had 16-inch biceps. I was very strong. I've been in multiple fights, two rape attempts. Just an ungodly amount of attention from all the wrong people at all the wrong times. I mean, I've been hit up in the chow hall, in my dorm, on the yard, I'm working out. There's a category of men in prisons that they don't care. If you look like a woman, then you are a woman.*

**Nigel:** *When you were first incarcerated at a men's prison, did you think you would make it?*

**Kier:** *No, to be honest. When I came to prison shortly after my trial ended, they transferred me to San Quentin. And I was clean shaved, and I looked fairly young even though I wasn't. And I got a lot of attention from the male inmate population.*

**Earlonne:** This is Kier. We heard from her at the top of the episode. Like Cassidy, Kier is incarcerated at the California Institution for Women, or CIW for short.

**Nigel:** She's 56 years old, tall and slender with this long wispy hair and she kind of has this angular Joni Mitchell-esque face.

**Earlonne:** Kier has been incarcerated for 16 years. She started her sentence in reception at SQ.

**Kier:** *I did not want to come out as trans because I feared that I would be raped or otherwise mistreated. I did not want to be exploited or used or abused or killed by the other inmates. And I didn't want to be perceived as weak for being trans either.*

*I didn't want that attention, and so I let my hair grow and I let my beard grow. And that went on for years. I had a gigantic Jeremiah Johnson mountain man beard, and nobody wants that guy. So, it was pretty effective at keeping the hound dogs at bay. But I was also pretty miserable because I wasn't myself.*

**Earlone:** For a long time, Kier and Cassidy didn't have any other option than to stay at a men's prison. But then in 2021, a new law came into effect in California that allows transgender, non-binary, and intersex people to be housed in a prison that aligns with their gender identity.

**Nigel:** Yeah, and I think when listeners hear about this law, depending on your political persuasion, you're either going to think it's amazing and progressive or you're going to be like, "This is nuts, only in California." But for Kier and Cassidy, it was, honestly, life changing.

**Kier:** *I was really surprised. I never dreamed that it could happen. But when I heard that not only was it possible but that it was going to happen, I immediately filed my paperwork. I wanted to be the first one on the bus.*

**Nigel:** *Do you remember when you started hearing that the laws were going to change and that you could come to a woman's prison if you wanted to?*

**Cassidy:** *I was so pumped.*

**Nigel:** *Did you think it would ever happen?*

**Cassidy:** *No. I thought it was just all smoke and mirrors. I was absolutely surprised when they finally passed it. I mean, the shock of this actually taking place and occurring was so overwhelming for me that I just cried, these tears of happiness. My cellmates thought I was too emotional but, yeah, I was excited.*

**Nigel:** *Can you tell us about the decision to leave a men's prison and come to a women's prison?*

**Earlone:** *Wasn't a hard decision. Huh?*

**Cassidy:** *It was a hard decision.*

**Earlone:** *It was?*

**Cassidy:** *There was quite a bit of thought put into it. I can go from one prison to another on a men's side, and I know what's going to happen. I know what the dynamic is, I know what the yard feel is going to be. I can tell when things are going good, and when it was going bad. I didn't know what that was going to be like. But once the decision was made, I was committed to it.*

*I had two goals. One was to get my surgery. That was the primary goal, was to go through that part of it. And I knew I couldn't do that any place else, but here at women's prison because I could not be like this in a men's prison. It's just far too dangerous.*

**Kier:** *I really didn't know what to expect. What I was really looking forward to is being among women and having those role models. Not being trapped in male prison culture, which is a hard, cold environment.*

*[crows cawing]*

**Cato:** *Hi, my name is Michelle Cato. C-A-T-O.*

**Nigel:** *And what pronoun do you use?*

**Cato:** *I consider myself a transgender. I identify with being male. However, in my environment, I don't like to stress the pronouns. I just like to be called by my name.*

**Nigel:** *Michelle.*

**Cato:** *Yes. Or Cato.*

**Nigel:** *Or Cato?*

**Cato:** *Yes.*

**Nigel:** *Okay, which do you prefer?*

**Cato:** *I prefer Cato, but either or I'm okay with, but I prefer Cato because it has a more of a masculine feel. I don't want to change what my mom put, so I go by my last name first.*

**Nigel:** *Yeah.*

Cato is also incarcerated at the California Institution for Women, and he's like sort of compact, has these short dreads. What really made an impression on me was his face. It was really open and invited conversation.

**Nigel:** *You just said something that grabbed my attention, that you don't want to change the name your mom gave you.*

**Cato:** *Yes. My name is my name. And my mother gave me that name. So, it's honorable. My name is Michelle Cato, and I prefer to be called Cato. But I'm still a sister, I still have siblings. I'm still a daughter that this is going to always be my mother and I'm going to always be her daughter. I'm learning to mesh both of what I have to be who I am, just want to be comfortable in my skin, and unapologetic about it.*

**Earlone:** On paper, under the new law, someone like Cato could transfer to a men's prison.

**Nigel:** Yes. But so far, not a single trans man has done that.

**Earlone:** *Have you ever thought about transferring to a male prison?*

**Cato:** *Absolutely not. I wouldn't put myself in harm's way. It don't take no genius to figure that out whether I got a surgery or not. I don't know of no female transgender from female to male that wants to really be in a male facility. Now, you hear people that do the talk, but I have yet to know one. They say it would be okay, but I wouldn't put myself in no situation like that. I'm born female. What do I look like going to a men's prison, just because my arms is bigger or I have this? Whether you have the surgery or not, if a man knows that you a once a woman, then you're not safe.*

**Nigel:** *That's what you always say.*

**Earlone:** *Yeah.*

**Cato:** *Yeah. You're not safe.*

**Nigel:** *Yeah.*

**Earlone:** *We've asked trans men, would they go to a men's prison.*

**Miccal:** *Oh, yeah.*

**Earlone:** *What's your thoughts there?*

**Miccal:** *I wouldn't personally.*

**Nigel:** This is Miccal, another trans man incarcerated at CIW.

**Miccal:** *I personally don't feel safe. When I say that it's due to my trauma as a child. I don't feel safe around men in there. You could be a target-*

**Earlone:** *Right.*

**Miccal:** *-for being a trans man. So, I don't want to experience that.*

**Earlone:** Basically, the belief is that if you have or had a vagina, you're not safe at a men's prison.

**Nigel:** That's what a lot of people are saying. I mean, every time this comes up at San Quentin, that's what people say. A woman is just not going to safe. In fact, Earlonne, last time we were in there, someone was telling us about a trans woman there who is getting all of the surgery done and wants to come back and be at San Quentin. And even her friends and her support system there is telling her, "It's not going to be safe for you to be here. You really should transfer." And she does not want to. Under the new law, trans women do not need to be taking hormones, nor do they have to have had any gender-confirming surgery to apply to transfer to a women's prison. They just have to identify as female.

**Earlonne:** And that makes some people at the women's prison nervous. Here's Kier and Cassidy again.

***Kier:** We were very cautious. We didn't want to scare anybody. We didn't want anyone to be afraid of us. I was pretty sensitive to that. I'm not here to hurt anybody. I'm not here to sexually exploit anybody. I wanted to be accessible, friendly. I didn't want to turn anybody off.*

***Cassidy:** There was a bit of trepidation in my coming here, plus the things that I had heard about this place that we weren't wanted, that there was a lot of angst as far as our presence here. And I do get that on occasion. I'll have women tell me flat to my face that, "We don't want you here."*

**Nigel:** How do you feel about transgender women coming to a women's prison?

***Leroy:** A lot of people were scared. The ladies were thinking, "Oh, they're going to take it from us," and all.*

***Ann-Marie:** There are a lot of women here that were abused by men, so they have that instant fear.*

***Cato:** It's awkward. It makes a lot of people uncomfortable. You see some transpeople that are here from men's prison that are legit, and you see some that are not.*

**Nigel:** I think we should we unpack that a bit, Earlonne.

**Earlonne:** I think what Cato is saying that he thinks some of these trans women are just pretending to be trans.

**Nigel:** Yes, and we should make it really clear: It's not like you can just say, "I want to transfer to a women's prison," and you're on the next bus out. There's this extensive vetting process. It can actually take years to do.

**Earlonne:** But still, I think there's a real belief that some men will just lie and say they're trans so that they can come to the women's prison and have sex with women. Or, just because it's a nicer place to be.

**Nigel:** *Has that caused tension?*

**Cato:** *Yes. It causes tension. It causes a lot of tension. Like, in the shower, we have somebody that's in our unit that's like that and nobody likes to be in a shower with him/her. It's awkward, it makes a lot of people uncomfortable, people just rolling their eyes. They don't want to be rude, but this is the type of feeling that you get because you can see that something that was put in place to help people, that's under that umbrella, somebody has found a way to manipulate it, to use it to get here.*

**Kier:** *The day we were transferred from the men's prison to the women's prison, I came with another inmate. It was early in the morning. It was a beautiful day. We were driving into the rising sun. It was pretty inspirational. Through the most beautiful parts of California, there were vineyards on both sides for miles. I felt pretty optimistic. This day has finally come. We came to the gate. I started seeing the female porters and said, "We're really here."*

**Cassidy:** *I can recall the very first moment I pulled up in the reception for women. I was in oranges, so I had to strip out. Men, they just kind of throw things to the grate, "Here's your shirt, here's your pants, shoes," da da da. Women, they brought it out in a nice little box, "Here's my shoes, here's your socks, here's your underwear, here's your bra, here's your shirt, here's your pants. If these sizes don't fit you, you just let us know. We'll get you some more to fit you." And I was kind of like, "Ooh. Really? You would really do that?"*

*The greatest thing I've had is this decrease in stress that I experience. That hyper-awareness that you have to have on a men's yard, you don't have to have at here. And that just makes your sleep better. I mean, I sleep through the night now. I've really haven't experienced that until I came here. I like to skip sometimes, because you don't skip on the men's prison,*

**Nigel:** *I'm sure not.*

**Earlone:** *Ever.*

**Cassidy:** *Yeah. I don't have to walk the yard with a buddy. I'm really accustomed to doing that. I don't have to be aware of my surroundings or who's around me. I don't feel a threat anywhere around here. Even some of the big girls, I don't sense as being a threat. In fact, quite a few of them are my friends.*

**Kier:** *I feel so blessed. I'm very grateful to be accepted and appreciated here. I have lots of friends. People are really nice to me. I just had a birthday earlier this week and I work in the sewing factory. Everybody's saying happy birthday to me, and they sign my birthday card. And so many people told me that they love me and they're glad to have me here. I'm humbled and grateful to be a part of it and it has really helped me with my transition. Here, I'm among women and that really helps me with my gender expression because I need role models.*

**Earlonne:** We're taking a quick break. When we come back, all the shit you don't have to deal with anymore when you get transferred to a women's prison.

**Nigel:** We'll be right back.

**Earlonne:** *So, you can basically tell us this, what are the differences between men and women prisons?*

**Kier:** *Well, they're all prison, so they have fences and barbed wire and guards and a lot of rules. But there are some big cultural differences. At the male prison, racial politics are a big deal. There are some yards where you really can't talk to someone of another race, and that is enforced by the people of your race. It's not like that here. I have not seen any kind of gang or racial politicking here.*

**Nigel:** *Why do you think that is?*

**Kier:** *I think there's a long tradition in California prisons of male prisoners essentially dividing up along racial lines, gang identification lines, where you're from, what city you're from, maybe even what neighborhood you're from in that city. So, there's a lot of that.*

**Nigel:** *But do you think it says anything about the difference between the way men and women think, or do you think it's purely history that created it?*

**Kier:** *No, I think there is a gender difference in the way that men and women think.*

**Nigel:** *Could you talk about that a little bit?*

**Kier:** *Men have concerns about status and being perceived as being somebody important. There's people who have to have the most expensive watch available from the package catalog or the most expensive pair of shoes, because they want other people to perceive them as being, I guess, affluent. And that attitude also permeates prison culture. "Do you know who I am?" "I'm somebody important from wherever I come from within my racial group, within my gang, within my town," it's a destructive entitlement. "Do you know who I am?"*

**Nigel:** Earlonne, I was fascinated by this observation because I do feel like a lot of times, guys inside just talk your ear off about who they are and how they want to be seen. It really resonated with me when Kier said there's a destructive entitlement about "do you know who I am?" And I kind of get it because your ego is so bruised when you go into prison. All that identity is taken away from you.

**Earlonne:** Definitely. I mean, it's more of, "I'm in control," or, "I got this, I got that." I think that's the image people push.

*[indistinct chatter]*



**Cassidy:** *I actually struggled in the beginning with hearing a lot of women talking at one time, and just that, I know this is probably inappropriate, but that cackle, just constantly around my head. It was something I wasn't used to. I was much used to much more lower tone voices. Those were the kind of little things that I had to get used to.*

*[pensive music]*

*Race isn't an issue, so my friends are every walk of the earth, we don't have any issues as far as that's concerned. In that respect, I find this place is safer because the violence dynamic doesn't exist here. It's more kinda like a slap fest when fights occur. With men who are far more weapon oriented and far more violent. When two guys get into it, they start throwing fists. After it's all done, the statement is, "We're cool?" "Yeah, we're cool." And we go to chow hall and have chow together. Here, and that happens, that grudge holds on for ages. I mean, for years, they can be pissed off at each other. But men, "You won. Next time we'll see how that goes."*

**Nigel:** You know what's driving me crazy about this episode?

**Earlonne:** What? You heard something that you didn't like just now? [laughs]

**Nigel:** No, no, no. There's so many things when we're talking about men and women that fall into these gender stereotypes. Like we're talking about how trans women look, we're talking about men having destructive entitlement.

**Earlonne:** Mm-hmm.

**Nigel:** And now we're talking about how men don't hold grudges, but women do. And guess what, Earlonne?

**Earlonne:** That's true.

**Nigel:** I see myself in that because when something comes up, I know you kind of let things go.

**Earlonne:** Of course.

**Nigel:** I'll hold onto stuff forever. So, what do we make of that? What do you make of these stereotypes that end up having some odd truth-- not odds, but having truths to them?

**Earlonne:** Well, it's the reality man. Again, I think guys don't hold-- Well, I couldn't say all guys.

**Nigel:** Not all guys, but in general.

**Earlonne:** Most of them don't. I don't.

**Nigel:** Well, I know you don't.

**Earlone:** I don't let stuff get to my core.

**Nigel:** That's almost your tagline. You don't let stuff get to your core.

**Earlone:** Definitely.

**Nigel:** I don't let stuff get out of my core. [laughs]

**Earlone:** That's the problem right there. See, I can't have nothing in the core.

**Nigel:** Who has more gray hair, you or me?

**Earlone:** Look, the core got to be peaceful. Y'all have to have peace.

**Nigel:** [laughs] Really?

**Earlone:** Yes.

**Nigel:** It's not supposed to be consternation?

**Earlone:** Nah, hell no.

**Earlone:** Here's another thing I noticed.

**Nigel:** Mm-hmm.

**Earlone:** The general vibe between the guards and the women at CIW, it's really different than all of the prisons I've been to, San Quentin included. It's totally different.

**Cassidy:** *They do things here that I've never seen done before when it comes to dealing with women. I mean, the way they deal with men, they deal with women is completely different.*

**Nigel:** *What's an example?*

**Cassidy:** *Okay. Just recently we had a cell extraction.*

**Earlone:** A cell extraction is when a person does not want to come out of the cell and the officers have to go in and get the person to come out, forcefully.

**Cassidy:** *Men's prison cell extraction, they give you two chances. "Lay down on the floor, face the wall, feet towards the door. We're going to crack the door open. If you move, we're going to pepper spray you." Here, it's like, "Hey, come on, come on outside here. We're just going to talk*

*for a minute. Let's have a conversation. What's going on? What's really the problem here? Is there something we can do to kind of alleviate the stress here? Do you need something to eat? Would you like to water? Are you doing okay? I mean, if not, we can get mental health over here to talk to you." It's not like that in men's prison. It's, "Shut the F up, lay down," and they crack the door, and they send 10 guys into a 7 by 10 foot room, press you against the wall, cuff you, and then drag you out. They don't do that here.*

**Nigel:** So, we didn't witness any cell extractions at CIW. But we did see a lot of day-to-day interactions between women there and male guards. Those women, I don't know how else to say it. They're just sassed back.

**Earlone:** You were shocked?

**Nigel:** Yeah. I was kind of speechless because I never see that at other prisons.

**Cassidy:** *Women, the way they talk to the cops here is just unbelievable. [laughs] If I talked to a cop on a men's yard the way they talked to them here, they'd had me in cuffs on the ground at no time at all. I mean, they argue, they swear, they tell them no.*

**Earlone:** But when we talked to Cato, a trans man at CIW, he had a whole different experience when it comes to interacting with male COs.

**Nigel:** There is really something about the battle between incarcerated men and male COs. And it seems to happen whether you're at a men's prison or at a women's prison.

**Cato:** *I get around certain men and I can see that I'm being sized up. And I can see that they're so caught up in my appearance to where now because I'm masculine and muscular, their approach to me is to be aggressive.*

*The transgenders, we make a joke amongst each other that even though we have beards and mustaches, it's certain police-- we kind of drop our shoulders around because our masculinity is so much to where you feel that your heart is racing, but that don't have nothing to do with me. And I don't want the aggressiveness, the machoism to come just because you can't process this, instead of just saying, "Hey, how you doing?" And then, it breaks the ice. Or, "I'm Cato by the way."*

**Earlone:** As we were finishing up our interview with Cato, he pulled a card out of his pocket that we'd never seen before.

**Nigel:** No. It was this laminated card that incarcerated transpeople carry that indicates their pronouns and their search preferences.

*I'm just going to read what's on here, if you don't mind.*

**Cato:** Okay.

**Nigel:** *This is a card that Cato carries, and it says, "Gender Identity: Male. Preferred Pronoun: No preference. Preferred Honorific: No preference. Search Preference: Male."*

**Earlonne:** Cato carries this card because he wants to make sure he only gets searched by a CO of the same gender that he is.

**Nigel:** Yeah, he's a man incarcerated at a women's prison. And life is complicated for him. But when we asked Cassidy about the trans card, she was like, "Why do I need a card?" It's like now that she's finally at a women's prison, the word trans isn't really useful to her at all.

**Cassidy:** *I go out to medical, and a sergeant asked me, "Where's your trans card?" And I told her, "I don't have a trans card." She says, "Why not?" "Because for all practical purposes, every inch of my body looks just like your body does." She was female. "Do you ask ciswomen what their search preferences are? Well, no, because they're women. That's my point, Sergeant. As far as I'm concerned, I'm a woman."*

**Earlonne:** So, Nigel, I wonder if you noticed what I noticed.

**Nigel:** What was that?

**Earlonne:** That there were no black trans women at CIW.

**Nigel:** I wonder why? What do you think?

**Earlonne:** Privilege. Come on, I know there's a gang of black trans individuals in prison.

**Nigel:** Are there?

**Earlonne:** It has to be.

**Nigel:** Maybe they don't want to be transferred.

**Earlonne:** I notice a lot of white trans women. That just struck me.

**Nigel:** Hmm. What that really brings up for me is that this story concentrated on two trans women stories. There's a lot more to tell here.

**Earlonne:** Oh, no, definitely.

**Nigel:** I'm curious about your question about race. I'm curious about, will trans men ever move over to men's prisons? Earlonne, we're probably going to want to spend some more time on this another season.

**Earlonne:** Sounds good to me. Let's do it.

**Nigel:** Ear Hustle is produced by me, Nigel Poor, Earlonne Woods, Amy Standen, Neroli Price and Bruce Wallace.

**Earlonne:** Along with Rahsaan "New York" Thomas, with help from Tony Tafoya inside San Quentin.

**Nigel:** Thanks also to Casper Cendre at ABO Comix and everyone at the California Institution for Women for welcoming us there.

**Earlonne:** This episode was sound designed and engineered by me, Earlonne Woods, along with Darrell Sadiq Davis, and with help from Fernando Arruda.

**Nigel:** It features music by Antwan Williams, Darrell Sadiq Davis, Earlonne Woods, and Rhashiyd Zinnamon.

**Earlonne:** Amy Standen edits the show, Shabnam Sigman is our managing producer and Bruce Wallace, father-to-be, is our executive producer.

**Nigel:** Thanks to Acting Warden Oak Smith. For this episode's approval, we're turning the mic over to our new friend down there at CIW.

**Lieutenant Newborg:** I am Lieutenant Newborg, Public Information Officer at the California Institution for Women, and I approve this episode.

**Earlonne:** This episode was made possible by the Just Trust, working to amplify the voices, vision, and power of communities that are transforming the justice system.

**Nigel:** Please don't forget to sign up for our newsletter, The Lowdown, where you can learn more about each episode and find out what the Ear Hustle team is up to. Subscribe at [earhustlesq.com/newsletter](https://earhustlesq.com/newsletter). You can also find the show on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram @[earhustlesq](https://twitter.com/earhustlesq).

**Earlonne:** Ear Hustle is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX, a network of independent, creator-owned, listener-supported podcasts. Discover audio with vision at [Radiotopia.fm](https://radiotopia.fm). I'm Earlonne Woods.

**Nigel:** I'm Nigel Poor.

**Nigel and Earlonne:** Thanks for listening.

**Person:** Are you guys the Ear Hustle people? Oh, my gosh.

**Person:** [crosstalk] -they walk us down today.

**Earlone:** Yeah.

**Person:** Oh, you guys are not anything I expected you to look like.

**Nigel:** What are you guys what do--[crosstalk]

**End**

*[Transcript provided by [SpeechDocs Podcast Transcription](#)]*