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Humor As Medicine: Aging And Compassion In Prison

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[00:00:00] **Edmond:** What's up, everyone. This is Edmond coming from the San Quentin side of Uncuffed. I'm so excited to be here. I got the guys, I got the fellas with me, how y'all feeling today?

[00:00:16] **Greg:** Doing great. Good man. Beautiful day.

[00:00:18] **Edmond:** Go ahead and check-in.

[00:00:19] **Greg:** Greg. Checking in. All as well, bro. Thanh, what's up with you?

[00:00:24] **Thanh:** Man, I'm feeling blessed. I'm feeling very blessed. I'm very excited to show y'all this story we got booming today.

[00:00:29] **Shakur:** Yeah. Yeah. Shakur here. I'm feeling playful and childlike.

[00:00:35] **Edmond:** For sho, for sho. I'm so glad to be here. We, we have a piece from our, the one and only Thanh Tran.

[00:00:44] **Thanh:** That is I.

[00:00:45] **Edmond:** So, so tell me, tell me about, about the piece that we're about to listen to.

[00:00:52] **Thanh:** Yeah. So this piece we're about to listen to, it's about this guy that we all know and love here at San Quentin. His name is Gary Cooper. He's a 73 year old Vietnam veteran, amazing human being. And I'm just excited to be able to highlight his story and his plight and what he's struggling through right now.

And y'all know, man, y'all know, Cooper. Greg. I see you smiling. Like, as soon as we say Cooper's name, smile is a hat,

[00:01:19] **Greg:** The jokester of the decade.

[00:01:22] **Thanh:** Right. Like immediately a smile pops upon your face when you think of Cooper. And he's just one of the brightest, spiritual ever me, like he has the oddest, funniest humor.

Like, I love Cooper. And it's, the thing that's bananas about Cooper as you'll soon find out is that, you know, he's really suffering from a lot of sicknesses.

[00:01:44] **Greg:** Yeah.

[00:01:45] **Thanh:** However, he does not for a second let that stop him from bringing joy and smiles to this world. He's always joking about his condition.

Sometimes it feels uncomfortable cuz he's making jokes about him dying. I'm like a,

[00:01:59] **Greg:** He don't wanna laugh.

[00:02:00] **Thanh:** Yeah. He's like, this is heck a funny, but it's like, do I laugh? Does it make me a bad person, that this is a good joke? So that's Cooper for y'all. Hey, so I remember one time Coop stops by myself. So Cooper lives on the same tier as me.

That's how I know Cooper. And I would see him every day just, and every time he passes by my cell and he sees me in there, he would be like, "Hey." I'm like, "What's up Coop?" "You know, I talked to the doctor today, right." I was like, "Yeah, how'd that go?" Right. I'm genuinely concerned. I'm like, "Man, how'd that go?" "She says I have erectile dysfunction."

Wow. And I fall out, I'm like Coop, man. Like I wanted the real update. And that's just like, that's the epitome of like, Cooper's humor. Yeah. Like he's never gonna let you like be down. And if he has an opportunity to make you smile, he's gonna do it, man. And I love Cooper. I love Cooper.

[00:02:55] **Greg:** Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. He's always. And it's like you say Thanh, it's it's almost. It almost makes you cringe when he makes those jokes about his health. Like matter of fact, I remember seeing him in the hospital a little while back, and I was like, what's going on Mr. Cooper? He's like, Hey man, how you doing, man? I'm just hanging on in there. You know, I got these, I got these sores that's popping up on my body.

I don't know what's going on. And I said, are you in the hospital to check on it? He said, oh, no, I don't have. He said, I got, I got about 34, 40 other issues to work on before I get to that. That's nothing. That ain't gonna kill me yet. So I got it. It gotta get in line.

[00:03:31] **Thanh:** Yeah.

[00:03:32] **Greg:** And, and at first I'm like. I said, man, that's crazy.

It's, it's funny. But it's, it's super sad to see this dude going through all that. And I'm like, man.

[00:03:42] **Shakur:** But he takes it with, with humor, you know. That's, that's the big thing. That's, that's the thing that I really respect and appreciate.

So every

[00:03:50] **Thanh:** time you would see Cooper, it's important that we also note that he is with somebody. And that somebody is - what Shakur?

[00:04:01] **Shakur:** An IDAP worker.

[00:04:03] **Thanh:** What's an IDAP worker?

[00:04:04] **Shakur:** An IDAP worker. Okay. IDAP worker stands for inmate disability assistant program. And an, an IDAP worker basically takes a person who has a, a disability throughout the prison. It can be, he can take him to get his canteen. He can take him to pick up packages. He can push him in his wheelchair to a doctor's appointments and even bring him down to the yard.

[00:04:31] **Thanh:** Absolutely. Yeah. That's for people who've always wondered, like how do elderly people who are infirm in prison, how are they taken care of? It's thanks to these IDAP workers, which are now known as ADA workers, which stands for American Disability Act. They are the ones that take care of these incarcerated people.

[00:04:55] **Shakur:** Yeah. And they also, they walk around with these like, gold or orange, not, not, oh, I'm sorry. Gold or yellow coats.

[00:05:01] **Thanh:** Mm-hmm.

[00:05:02] **Shakur:** So oftentimes they're referred to as gold coats, gold coats or yellow coats. Mm-hmm. And it has IDAP worker on the back and now ADA worker.

[00:05:12] **Thanh:** Factual.

[00:05:13] **Cooper:** Right now I'm facing neuropathy, heart problems, glaucoma. I'm NEIC now, leukemia. Yeah. It's, I don't know if you're aware of it was, but I've been fighting leukemia for two years now. Give it, like I told the doctor, I got room for a few more things. If you need a, well, my white blood cells way down, you know, count. The bummer about it is the medicine was working, but it's put in the hospital three times, you know. And three times serious, you know.

[00:05:54] **ADA worker:** Yeah, I wasn't aware of the fact that you were fighting leukemia, and that's all the more, you know, saddening to me. Just outta curiosity, about how many meds do you take all together?

Like how many do you think you take?

[00:06:08] **Cooper:** I showed you about 15 pills or more a day, you know. All suppositories. Yeah.

[00:06:20] **ADA worker:** I've been a ADA worker here at San Quentin for the last three years, little over three years. As an ADA worker, my primary job is, would be to take disabled people who are confined to a wheelchair to and from their various appointments, such as medical appointments. We would take 'em to education.

We'll take 'em to their groups. We'll go pick up their packages for 'em. Take over to the showers. Feeding. Cell feeding. Helping them move into cells and, you know, cleaner stuff. Some instances we even been. You know directed to clean poop, which we do, you know. You know, the list goes on. Just whatever a person basically can't do for themselves, we're there and we're happy to do it.

[00:07:04] **Cooper:** I have a hard time picking up to put my pants on, you know, but I'm not gonna give up, you know, if I have to lay down to do it. I was doing fine before the COVID. You recall that. As soon as I got to COVID, we had no mobility. Especially when it first happened, we all stayed in the cell all the time.

You know, the IDAP worker was there on call all the time, you know, with. They didn't have much. In fact, you guys didn't have hardly any movement for yourselves either. But there's so much improvement they could do for all of us, especially this elderly.

[00:07:39] **ADA worker:** Well, I feel like this. Yeah, I do have my doubts and my concerns as to whether or not you would make it. Because these strands that are coming out are beginning to get more and more contagious and more and more deadly. Today now, it's kind of sad to me, honestly, to see that your health is debilitating here in San Quentin. And I feel like people like you that serve their time, that, you know, in my view can no longer pose a real risk of danger to public safety should be given consideration as far as being released. But love you because you don't give up. You know, you refuse to give up man, and that's just that's should be inspiration for anybody.

Thankfully, there's a lot of people like you who make the job rewarding. You know, that appreciate us, that understands that this is a service and that we're trying to give back and that we're trying to become better people. And, you know, you just help us to become a better person.

[00:08:33] **Cooper:** Yeah, the like I, I tried compassionate release, but they said the type of cancer I have, you could live for a long time.

Did I think, well, that's pretty good because all the cancer meds I use almost killed me, you know? So I, I, I just tried for compassion release again. I don't know what's gonna happen, you know? But I'll live with whatever it is. Only have five minutes oxygen left. So if I pass out, turn it on for me.

No, I you know, I just love messing with everybody, especially all the IDAP workers I screw with, you know. And it, if people are laughing, they can't be sad.

[00:09:35] **Edmond:** So we're back. Thank you so much, Thanh. That's a good story, man. I know, I know you've known Coop for a long time. I've probably known him for the last couple months. And every time I say hi to him, like I get the same person, day in, day out. He's always smiling. He's always with somebody. Sometimes it's just a friend pushing him around.

But just, just hearing what it was like for him before the pandemic, he was mobile. He was on the yard, walking, interacting with people. Then of course the pandemic hit. And it forced him to stay in his cell. And this is when he started to fall apart. Mm. And I know like you're a couple cells down for him.

Like what, what was that like for you? To see somebody that you knew for the longest time, just essentially fall apart in front of you?

[00:10:47] **Thanh:** It, it was bananas for real. Like, I would literally always hear Cooper got sent to the hospital again on an emergency. Cooper got sent again to the hospital on an emergency.

I'm talking about, there was five times, seriously, five times where we were not sure we would ever see Cooper again. Right. And, and there was like a mourning on our tier. Like, when Cooper is gone, there is like the sunshine has been taken away. It's like a gloomy atmosphere on our side of the tier, and everybody is like, everybody's asking each other.

Hey, do do y'all know if Cooper is gonna make it back? I don't know. We don't, we don't know he's gonna make it back, man. I hope he makes it back. Hey, anybody heard about Cooper yet? Anybody heard about Cooper. And this is. It'd be, we'd be on pins and needles as we wait the week or two weeks. And all of a sudden, you just hear the tear, like in raucus joy and laughter you hear Coop walking down the tier.

Yep. Hey, are you assholes? Miss me or what? Oh my God. Hey. We're like.

[00:11:54] **Edmond:** So hilarious.

[00:11:54] **Thanh:** Getting ready to be in tears. We thought you were gonna die, Coop, and the first thing he do is call us a bunch of assholes. You know. We love Coop. We love Coop, man. And yeah, so it, it kills me. It kills me to constantly and like continually, even as from when we recorded this story to now, he's been ho hospitalized at least two times, and he's, he's melting away in front of me and it's bananas.

I, I really don't know how to describe the feeling besides like a sense of like helplessness. Almost like a despair, because like I'm, I'm praying that he doesn't die in prison.

[00:12:39] **Greg:** Mm-hmm.

[00:12:39] **Edmond:** Greg, tell me what most resonated with you.

[00:12:43] **Greg:** Yeah, first of all, Thanh, great, great story, bro. I think the world needs a few more Coopers, a few more people with personalities that can, that can lift people up outta dark spaces.

And it's a scary feeling, you know, as somebody that's serving a life sentence in prison, it's like, I came to jail when I was 20 years old. Like, am I. Like, am I going to be a Cooper?

[00:13:06] **Thanh:** Mm.

[00:13:06] **Greg:** Am I gonna be somebody that's sitting inside of prison in my seventies?

[00:13:10] **Thanh:** Wow.

[00:13:11] **Greg:** With failing health, you know? So, so he's actually. He's a reality.

He's a reality check. Like I was sentenced this to life in prison and... That, that could mean my very last breath could be in this place.

[00:13:29] **Thanh:** Mm.

[00:13:31] **Greg:** And Lord forbid that it happens, but it just, that just really makes me just, that resonates with me. And also just a human kindness that you see from these ADA workers, like Wiz. His care, Cooper's caretaker. Cuz these dudes go far and beyond what their job entails. I mean, these dudes go inside of people's cells and they change their sheets. They clean, they scrub their toilets, they wash walls. They help these dudes shower. Get in, in and out of the shower. And so the level of compassion is so great that it's mind blowing. But it's beautiful to see that, here we are, two convicted felons inside of prison, one Black and one white, and yet they're helping each other out. Whiz is helping him out. And Cooper's helping him out by giving him inspiration. By giving him hope. And knowing that, regardless of what happens, you still gotta fight. You still gotta live. You still gotta smile.

That's my take on it, man.

[00:14:46] **Thanh:** Greg, I just wanna say this man, like. When you said you could be a Cooper .That really, it sent chills down my spine man, like cuz how scary that is, because I really wanna highlight the fact, like, what is it? 50 years to life you got? Like.

[00:15:05] **Greg:** 65 years.

[00:15:07] **Thanh:** So you literally.

[00:15:08] **Greg:** Two life sentences.

[00:15:10] **Thanh:** You literally will not see the board of parole until you're Cooper's age. Until you're 70 years old.

[00:15:17] **Greg:** 70 plus, possibly.

[00:15:18] **Thanh:** You, your first chance at freedom will be when you're in your seventies.

[00:15:26] **Greg:** Or the elderly, which is at 60. I'll get a, I'll get a look at when I get, when I turned 60.

[00:15:34] **Thanh:** I'm just shaking my head. It was that, that was a little too. It was a little too real, man. That was, that was real that most people would know as bananas, man. Shakur, I just want to ask you, like, you know, I'm sure you heard about other people on the yard. There's so many Coopers around. People might think that this is an anomaly, but there's so many aging and dying people in prison. Like people dying from cancer is a regular thing. Like.

[00:16:09] **Shakur:** Pretty much. Yeah. I mean, first of all, yeah. I want to give you a shout out for that story, you know, for providing that window for the listeners to, to, to view into. First of all, I wanna say, even though he tries to deflect his pain, his suffering with his humor. Like, this is a sad story for me. Mm-hmm. Like when I listen to the story and, and I hear you guys talk. Like I'm in a really somber mood. Mm. And, and not only that, you know, cuz I'm experiencing something personal right now. You know, I experienced, I lost my son's mother, she passed away two weeks ago, and she died from cancer.

[00:16:51] **Thanh:** Mm.

[00:16:51] **Shakur:** So,

[00:16:51] **Edmond:** Sorry to hear that.

[00:16:52] **Shakur:** Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. So as we go through this, as this story, I'm also reflecting on, you know my own experience with somebody who you know, went through cancer. But yeah, I see, I see it pretty much all the time, you know, older guys, like, like being taken care of by the IDAP workers. Right?

So it's, it is a shout out to them guys, you know, because it takes a degree of compassion. It takes, you know, wanting to be of service. So anybody can't just get that job, anybody can't just, you know, say I wanna be an IDAP worker. And it's also like, they have to go to classification and be interviewed and get cleared to get that job.

[00:17:30] **Thanh:** Yeah. That brings up for me too. I've talking to a few ADA workers now. IDAP workers, also known as ADA workers. It's a hard job. Like beyond the actual physical labor that you do. like, I would like one ADA worker told me about how many people he's wheeled to the hospital and never got to wheel back.

[00:17:55] **Shakur:** Wow, man.

[00:17:56] **Thanh:** Right? Like, you witness the constant death in prison.

[00:18:04] **Shakur:** Yeah.

[00:18:04] **Thanh:** On a regular basis. And they tell me like, these ADA workers are super humans to me, man. Like they tell me about the, the compassion, about how that drives them to like, try to give 'em the best care possible cuz they've, they don't want them to be that next guy they wheel to the hospital. Yeah. They can't will back. Right. You know, so it's just really powerful stuff.

[00:18:26] **Greg:** Yeah. You know, Thanh. It adds just, just to add a little bit to that. I remember, I remember talking to one of the ADA workers, like a little like years ago, and they were talking about helping one of the guys.

I can't remember who it was he was helping, but he was helping a guy. And, and I remember he made a comment about... I think one of the nurses were coming over there to come get the guy, and he was. And, and he insisted on taking him over there to the hospital himself. And I remember him clearly saying that, I got you, like, you're my responsibility.

You're not their responsibility. Like basically saying like, like it's us taking care of us, even though you have a medical system in place here, but he was so adamant about being the one to take care of his his, his patient. That he called. Right. Mm-hmm , you know what I mean? And so I, that just really just shows the camaraderie between the, the, the person that need, that's needing assistance.

And the assister. You know, it just shows that like how we come together, like to help each other, man. I just want to highlight that. That's just, just beautiful to see.

[00:19:44] **Edmond:** So I just want to, this is Edmond. I want to respond to everything that Greg just said. I've been down 12 years.

And it's crazy to have a life sentence, because you are always looking at older men that you're incarcerated with and thinking that's gonna be me one day.

[00:20:15] **Shakur:** I just wanna respond briefly to what I'm hearing, right. Because I can relate to both what you and Greg said when it comes to being a lifer. Like I had, I had a sentence, or I have a sentence of 71 years to life. And I came in when I was 19. And I'm what, 56 now. So. I never thought that I have an opportunity to get outta prison, but there's a chance that I can get outta prison by the end of this month.

So I, I, so I, I say that to say that like, there's always some degree of hope. Right. You know what I mean? And as long as you continue to do what you do and stay focused, you never know what, what the future brings, and what the future holds. So I just wanted to say to both you and Greg, you know, even though we, we have these sentences, things change. For sure. Not, you know, I didn't expect, like they have all these different new laws to come into effect, right.

SB 261, which was a youth offender bill. And that's one of the reasons why I went to the board sooner. But I also did all the time that was required of me, like in my sentence as well. So, but there's hope.

[00:21:27] **Edmond:** For sure, man. I appreciate you saying that. Another thing that I wanna highlight out of the piece is Wiz and Coop talked about compassionate release.

Yeah. Threat to public safety. I really don't know the ins and outs of how one applies for compassionate release, what the process looks like. But I do know Coop is the epitome of a person that you should look at for compassionate release. So I'm gonna, I'm gonna toss this over Thanh to speak a little more about the process of compassionate release.

[00:22:13] **Thanh:** Yeah. So the compassionate release process is so confusing and convoluted, and it's always changing and evolving. A lot of people ask, all right, who is granting this compassionate release or who is denying this compassionate release? Is it the governor? Is it the head of the Department of Corrections here in California? Like who is it exactly, right. So it's a many step process. First, your doctor, his own personal care taker, has to file for it, and put 'em up for it. And say, you know what this person is going to be is gonna die within a year. I recommend him for compassionate release. Then they have to get a second opinion from an outside hospital. And then the outside person has to confirm that and say, you know what? This person has a year less to live. In Cooper's case, they said, you know what, he might have 18 months. So he don't fall within the 12 month, 12 year mark, let's deny him.

Wow. That's crazy. It's that arbitrary. If they feel like you got 13 months left to live. You don't meet the mark. It's, it's literally that simple to get denied. And after say, on a miracle chance, because very, very few people ever get compassionate released. Like, I can't even think of a single person that got it.

Right. After, say some miracle happens. Your doctor puts you up. The outside doctor. The, their outside doctor confirms it. Then it goes up to another level of scrutiny all the way up to the head of Sacramento. They have a department in Sacramento that deals with compassionate releases. And then these people, then they have to determine, well, is this person a threat to society?

Is he safe enough to return? And he does return, like what medical facility is he gonna be at? Right. And it's super complicated. It's super confusing. And there's like so much more steps in between. And so many gatekeepers that I can't even explain it fully well. But that's, that's just a glimpse into how difficult it is to get a compassionate release in California.

[00:24:25] **Greg:** Yeah, this Greg again. Yeah Thanh, to. To chime in on you. Which you just said, bro, you know, what's interesting cuz I've only, in the 28 years of my incarceration, I've only known one person to actually be given compassionate release. And this was a dude I knew years ago, and he was actually diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. And, and as you know, that's a real debilitating disease, and he actually left prison.

They let him outta prison. Only to go to a hospice hospital. And when you talk about like, in order to get a compassionate release, you literally have to be on your deathbed. Like, wow. Like, like you're not going to, they're not gonna let you out just to be able to live your life. Mm-hmm. They're gonna just let you out just to die in the free world basically.

And you know, back to back to the point we were making about how much time is enough time and, you know, to be sentenced to, to these life sentences. And I know Edmond, I hear what you're saying about, you know, about that about seeing people around you. You know, that was one that was one way I used to gauge like my, like my hope was in like other people. You know, to see somebody in prison, like 30 years, I hear somebody say, man, I've been in prison like 30 plus years.

Like, I'm like, man, here I am. 2022 early on in my sentence. I'm like, man, this is, this is forever. You know, to come to prison and to hear somebody call you, hey, what's up youngster? And now 28 years later, they like, hey, what's up OG? What's up OG. It's like, damn. OG. Yeah. Like, damn. I'm like, I used to be a youngster, man.

Like, yeah. Yeah. Like what happened? And.

[00:26:18] **Shakur:** That gray on your lip with.

[00:26:19] **Greg:** Yeah. Yeah. I come in, man. My gold teeth was barely connecting. And now I can grow a full beard. At first I was growing a full old black beard. Now I can grow a full salt and pepper beard. So, so man, I know, you know, I know I love the fact that we could laugh about it.

Yeah. But you know, that's the part of that hope is knowing that I'm not gonna even speak 20, 47 into existence. Right. I'm thinking I'm gonna be going home like soon. I, I truly believe that, you know, there are a lot of, like Shakur was saying, there are a lot of things that have changed in the system. And just like Shakur had a buck Rogers far away date.

Now look at it, getting ready to go home. Yeah. And even though my board date is 2047 or elderly parole in 2033. When I turn 60, I'm not gonna see 60 inside of prison.

[00:27:17] **Shakur:** That's right.

[00:27:18] **Greg:** That's for sure.

[00:27:19] **Edmond:** Hope is what gets us up in the morning. Sure. And if you see anything in Coop, he has a lot of hope. Mm, exactly.

And that's why he keeps on pushing.

[00:27:29] **Greg:** That's that fight.

[00:27:32] **Edmond:** So just being a lifer. Coop does give me a lot of hope.

[00:27:40] **Greg:** Yeah. This Greg again, and Edmund. You know, I hear you talk about hope. You know, it's a, you say Cooper gives you hope, and it's interesting to when you, when you serve a life sentence, you know, we, we definitely need people around us to give us hope. Cuz sometimes it's kind of hard to, to grasp it and get it from ourselves.

So we need people around that can inspire us. And Cooper is inspiring. He's definitely hopeful. I mean, the man is, is suffering, and yet he's still maintains a personality. You know, he's still laughing and joking, and has this sense of. Albeit as dark and diabolical as his sense of humor may be, but it's still, but it still, it, it is, it gets him through. And, and not only does his sense, humor seem to get him through, his sense of humor seems to get everybody around him through. Like nobody feels sorry for Coop because he doesn't feel sorry for himself.

Yeah. And that's, that's amazing. That is amazing, bro, to see that, you know. Yeah.

[00:28:56] **Thanh:** And humor is for real medicine in here. And like you said, in regards to like, prison is the darkest place I've ever been in, in my life. Next to juvenile hall, of course. But there, there's so much suffering in here that to be able to laugh is like a superpower.

Like, I have suffered a lot in my life. And the way I cope with that is by laughing. Just to see Cooper, he's like the epitome of that. Like he just smiles, laughs, and he moves forward.

[00:29:34] **Greg:** So just thinking about Cooper reminds me of this old cat that that I knew years ago in prison, and he would always run around the yard, right. And he would always run, and he would always scream out. And he would say, fight, fight, fight. Right. And I used to be like, damn, what is he, why is he yelling out fight? And so one day, I asked him, I said, Hey, OG. I said, when I see you walk running around the yard, like, why do you always scream out fight? And he was like, because I'm fighting for my life, man.

I'm fighting for, for freedom. Like I'm fighting to never give up. And that's the take that I get when I think about Cooper, is never given up. That's what, that's, what it looks like. It looks like Cooper. To always continue to fight no matter what.

The Uncuffed crew at San Quentin Prison is Tommy Shakur Ross, Edmond Richardson, Thanh Tran, and me, Greg Eskridge. Thanks to the team at KALW public radio: Ninna Gaensler-Debs, Angela Johnston, Sonia Paul, James Rowlands, Andrew Stelzer, Ben Trefny ,Eli Wirtschafter, and our sound designer, Eric Maserati- E Abercrombie. Our theme music is by David Jassy, the Swedish phenom. And thanks to the staff at San Quentin Prison who make this possible.

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