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Man Down: Covid Strikes At San Quentin

KALW

Thanh: Welcome back to Uncuffed. This is Thanh Tran, your favorite host you have never heard of. And for those who don't know, Uncuffed is a show made by people in California state prisons. And today we're in San Quentin, sunny San Quentin, California, and in the room with us right now, we got a couple of the fellas.

Go ahead. Shout out man. To the left.

Greg: I'm Greg Eskridge.

Edmond: What's up everyone. This is Edmond.

Shakur: Hello? It's Tommy Shakur Ross.

Thanh: Tommy Shakur Ross, the phenome himself.

Shakur: Yes. Yes.

And we are here for a special, special reason today. Greg, why are we here today, man?

Greg: Man, this is Edmonds first piece, man. You know.

Thanh: Snap it up, snap it up, snap it, snap it up. Snap, snap it up for.

Greg: Yeah, Evan is finally getting his voice out there. Well, his voice has been out there, but he finally getting his first story, man. Congratulations.

Edmond: I appreciate. Congrat in the room right now. Thank you so much. That's right.

Thanh: I just wanna say, man, this story was really good, but you look really good right now in this room, man.

Greg: He is shining though, man.

Edmond: Stop flirting with me on mic.

Thanh: So go ahead. Tell us a little bit about this story, cuz I know. Sure. For sure. We might be laughing right now, but this is a very serious piece. Yeah. Because this is gonna bring us back to 2020. Right when the pandemic kicked off. Right. And we were slammed in the cell for like a week at a time coming out to barely ever shower.

And this is when people were dying left to right in San Quentin. Yeah. So this is a very serious story and it's a very serious moment. So go ahead, Edmond, tell us, tell us what the story's about.

Edmond: For sure. For sure. I totally agree with you. This is a moment in, in 2020 that I didn't want to forget because it was so important.

And I feel only one side of it was told, and this gives us the opportunity to tell it from our perspective. So during, during this time period, like you said, we were locked down 24 hours a day. If we were lucky, we, we, we were getting one shower a week. And if you tested positive for COVID 19, you were taken outta your cell.

You were marched down to the yard and housed in these makeshift tents.

Thanh: Mm. Tent city. That's what we called it. Those makeshifts that,

Edmond: That was the nickname, tent city. And I was down there with Scott, one of the characters, subjects in the piece. And. He decided to go on a hunger strike

And in asking him why, he told me that his cellie had went to the hospital, he doesn't know what's going on with him. Hasn't heard anything from him. And a couple, a couple of his close friends passed away. Mm. So after. The year long lockdown that we were on. And we finally got the chance to come down to the studio.

I brought Scott and his cellie Oz to have a conversation. Scott, in the piece, is the younger guy and Oz, his cellie, is the older one. So this is, this is a piece about one's one man's reaction to another man's circumstance.

Thanh: Absolutely. Absolutely. During this time of not only suffering, being on lockdown, you're stuck in this tiny four by nine cell with another human being.

I'm gonna just say it like this. You're gonna get to know this person really, really well. This guy is gonna be your night and day. You're gonna figure out every single thing about this person. So let me not ruin the story. Let's just go ahead and play. How about that? How's that sound?

Let's get into it. Let's go.

Let's go. All right.

Oz: I remember the day you showed up at my cell and course you and everybody's dresses out and it's like, oh, we're gonna get a cellie. I turned around and there you are standing looking at me like, are you Oz? Yep. And you just said, I'm your cellie? I was like, okay. And I look up. I see this, you know, chia pet hair, and this smile was like, wow, okay.

You know, this guy looks pretty cool and he speaks English. So that's all I speak. Right. And he's skinny so I can get around him in the cell. So rack up, dude, you know where to go. We started going long after that first week, day for day after that, it was just like like peanut butter and jelly man.

Kelton (Scott): When the coronavirus hit, you know, we knew that it was in the United States. And we'd realize that if it got into San Quentin that it would move like wildfire. You know, the first thing I thought is is I don't have any complications. You know, I'm only 40 years old and I wasn't real concerned about myself, but I was immediately really concerned for you.

So do you remember how you felt when we first learned there were cases in the prison?

Oz: Scared like hell. I'm suffering from the loss of a lung from being a volunteer fireman for many, many years. I've had heart attack, heart surgeries. List goes on. But my main concern was, yeah. If this thing hits and I know it's considered respiratory, but it was also affecting people's hearts. Before that I remember us.

We both kind of had fevers and we slept a little bit longer in the day. And we were like, yeah. And I remember one day we were like high fiveing going, yeah, we both got over this. You know, we, we made it through it. Remember that?

Kelton (Scott): I, I think you were more optimistic than I was.

Oz: I was.

Kelton (Scott): I think you kept saying, I think we're through it.

I think it's gonna be over now. And I kept being like, bro, you got COVID and you're like, no, we're just it's flu. It's just the flu. You're like think positive.

Oz: I was scared. That's that's the way I play off my, when I'm what I mean, COVID has became a serious thing, killed millions of people. And, and, you know, hindsight. I didn't wanna be one of those millions. And I didn't want you to be either.

I remember giving you my kids' phone numbers.

Kelton (Scott): Yeah.

Oz: Telling if I end up leaving, if you get a chance to get on the phone, call and let 'em know that I ended up going to the hospital.

Kelton (Scott): And I knew that you didn't want to go to hospital at all. You didn't wanna, you know, because going to the hospital means risking the loss of our property.

Oz: Yes.

Kelton (Scott): You know risking potentially not having a good cellie anymore. Yeah. You know, these are things that, you know, you get uprooted, especially with how many guys were going to the hospital and that they were quarantining people in other units. Nobody wanted to go. Nobody wanted to. Guys were willing to just sit it out until they were dying.

Oz: But that day when I finally turned to you and I said, look, man, I gotta go man down, man. I can't, I can't breathe. I can't catch my breath.

(Man down four 10, man down four 10, man down four 10, man down four 10!)

Kelton (Scott): Man down's what we yell when we're having a medical crisis in ourselves. We need the guards to come get us.

Oz: I knew when I got to when the co came back to escort me down. He said he had to take me all the way to TTA, where you go for a triage. And-

Kelton (Scott): The hospital.

Oz: The hospital, prison hospital. Yeah, prison hospital. And on the way there, I kept stopping every 60 to 80 feet, and I kept stopping and I take deep breaths, and I'm thinking to myself, there's two things going on right now.

One, am I gonna ever come back? Is this gonna kill me? Am I ever gonna see my kids again? Cause all I have left are my children. You know, all my, my wife, my parents are all passed away. So, and I'm thinking to myself, man, this is, this is the last thing I need. Then I get into the hospital here and, and the nurse puts the monitor on, and she runs over to the phone and starts dial on the phone and, and she comes, she's asking for an ambulance.

Stat. And I'm like, what the hell is going on here? And she turns around and she says, you know, you're having a heart attack right now. When need gets you outta here.

Kelton (Scott): After you left, it was just all morning, there was alarms, dude's leaving up outta there alarms. And it was crazy. I thought I was hoping, you know, Oz will be back in a couple days.

Don't think negatively. And a couple days went, went by. And then I started being like, damn, wow, he's been gone three days, four days, five days. At that point. I think, I think I really started thinking I wasn't gonna see you again. I started thinking about other guys, a number of other men in other housing units in the prison that, you know, older have serious health complications.

There was a lot of talk around the camp about what to do. There was there were a number of other guys there that were really worried about their cellmates and friends and whatnot, and were just genuinely. I think everybody felt like, that our lives had been rest frivolous, frivolously. I just was furious. And so I, I wanted to do something and all I could think of is hunger striking.

So it was getting more serious. And some, some of the officers really understood when I started, when I was hunger striking, they, they act, some of them were quite sympathetic. They said, we, we get it. Like we understand, you know, why you're upset. We're furious too.

Oz: Yeah. I remember finally, my final day when it was a week and a half in intensive care, they finally said we're gonna send you home. When I came back, I, I was kind of kind excited coming back home. You know, this is our home now. This where my property is, this is my friend is my cellie. You know, you. And when you saw my smile on face and I actually walked in and gave you a big hug and said, man, I miss you, Doug.

Yeah, I miss you. Yeah. And let me tell you about what happened, you know, and that was when I knew that there was actually a light at the end of the tunnel, and knowing that it wasn't completely over yet, because even that, that the. The side effects or the, the adverse reactions that did to my body. As you can tell, as I talk, now I have this like a velvety voice, right?

That's that's, COVID related.

Kelton (Scott): You know, you mentioned long term effects and like, you know I mean, shoot, the short term effects were crazy. I remember that first month was really intense though. I was honestly scared that COVID had basically altered your mind forever. It was really an emotional process for me because like I got, I got Oz back kind of, like what the did COVID do to my friend.

It was really heartbreaking to see a man who I knew as so brilliant. Be. Have a difficulty in understanding the fundamental mechanics of just like how to leave the cell and get to the hospital and, you know, make it to a ducket on time. And it was, it was heartbreaking. And you know, the fact that you've recovered, you have recovered an enormous amount of your.

Yeah, but you know.

Oz: Yeah, that was a, that was an experience too, that I'll definitely never forget. The COVID outbreak in San Quentin. Yeah. Never forget it.

Edmond: I'm happy that I was able to actually get this story finished and completed. I, I, I'm glad we have the opportunity to talk about today.

Thanh: So, absolutely. Edmond, man. I'm glad that you got this story. I, I just wanna say for myself, when I heard this story for the first time, I felt retraumatized. So I want to hear some of, some of y'all thoughts, man.

Greg: Yeah, this Greg, man. I just wanna say it was a great story. It was very relatable. And it was a sad story, but it was also empowering. Mm. Because the fact that you got these two individuals who are living together, and one person is going through a tragic situation.

And his cellie is like, super supportive of. You know, cause just like you said earlier, that cellie dynamic can be kind of up and down. But to hear these two dudes talk, man, you could just hear the love. You would just hear that concern, just hear that compassion. Fighting, you know, just fighting for a cellie, like in any kind of way he could, you know, that was just, that was just beautiful to hear, bro.

I see you over there, Shakur, nodding your head.

Shakur: Yeah, man. Yeah, I wanted to just, just commend you for putting that story out because it, it, it does provide a window into what was really going on in well actually what, June 2020, when, when when the pandemic hit.

Like, I really think that you were able to capture the essence of what we were experiencing during that tumultuous time. Yes.

Thanh: Shout out to Scott because man, it, it is a act of bravery to go on a hunger strike in prison, man.

I think there was just so much going on already, like in regards to being locked down. Like for days at a time, like showering once a week, like I literally got out, there was a period when I got out to cell once a week to shower. Yeah. Right. And the rest of it staring at ceiling, I'm just laying in bed, staring at ceiling, and for him to be experiencing this heavy isolation and trauma and be like, you know what?

I still got the will to fight. Shout out to Scott, man. Shout out to Scott. You are a better person to, to me.

Edmond: Shout, shout out to Scott. I remember just being down in the tent with him, we both have COVID. We both feel miserable. I can barely keep my food down. And he's, he's in the other cot across the room for me.

I just see him just like slowly falling apart in one morning, I just got up, went over there, had a conversation with him. Like this is a new disease that we don't know anything about. Mm. Yeah. Like, I understand that you, you wanna stand in solidarity with all the guys that are passing away, that you, and also care for.

But you can't do that if you pass too. Yes, you are fighting for us, but also give your body the opportunity to fight for itself by eating and getting the, the basic nutrients that it needs. Mm, long

story short, he took my advice. Couple days later, he was like, you know what? I'm gonna stop to stop hunger striking.

I'm gonna take care of myself. Can we do some yoga on the yard? You know what I'm saying? I was like, all, bro, I got you. We can do some yoga. We can, we can stretch him. We can try to get back in shape.

Shakur: About how long did it, did it, did it last? The hunger strike.

Edmond: If I remember correctly was like three, four days not eating anything.

He was just over there on his bunk with his little radio on listening to NPR all day.

Greg: Hey, but that's crazy because Scott is already just like barely 140 pounds as it is, as it is. And you go to hunger strike, man. I know his, I know his stomach was like shooting through his back. I mean, but.

He was in a situation like, man, like what else can I do? I mean, that's commendable though, even though when you do go on hunger strikes in prison, you know, it does, it does come with some some disciplinary actions sometimes taken, you know, you can end up with with, with, with writeups and get sent to the hole for that, you know, but fortunately he didn't have to go through all that, but, hey man, sometimes you just gotta do what you gotta do.

This was a, this was a traumatic time. Absolutely.

Edmond: No, most definitely. This is Edmond. But I remember like before I even went to the tents, just hearing man downs every day, my cellie's 56 years old. He's an asthmatic. If he catches COVID like it. What, what is the potential that I can lose my cellie. And that would just play in my head every day.

I would make sure that he would get up, drink water, take care of himself, not just lay in the bed all day. Like I love having my cellie, like I'm, I have too much energy to be in the cell by myself. Like, like I have to be talking to somebody. So like, one of the things that me and my cellie did on this pandemic was every day, Monday through Friday at seven o'clock, we would watch Jeopardy..

That was like how we bonded and man, you ain't about to get this answer. And surprisingly, my cellie is like a Jeopardy guru. Like, how do you know all these answers, sign him up. I've been living and I gotta experience youngster. So. I couldn't picture this horrible experience without my cellie. Yeah. You know what I'm saying?

That's how much I love and respect him.

Greg: Ay, it's a trip just to hear that man down phrase. I hear, I hear Scott and in, in Edmond's piece, you hear him saying that man down and I know that's traditionally, you know what we do

when, when somebody's in the cell and somebody falls out in the cell, goes down and then everybody starts to scream.

Right. And so I just trip off how, how that really brings everybody together inside of the building. As soon as you hear somebody say, man down, the next, you know, you hear hundreds of people start screaming to get the officer's attention so all the medical people can come and make sure this dude gets aid.

Right. So it's just a trip, just like how, like the care. You know, that concern that we all have for each other when somebody is falling ill. And I just I've always tripped off that, but I don't think I tripped off of it as much as I did back during the outbreak because it was so many going on.

And so everybody was like falling out like 2, 3, 4 or five times a day. And you sit in the cell, like, like, damn that it was scary. Cause now it's like, man, like, yeah, that was wow. In my next, like, like who was it? You know.

Edmond: I never experienced nothing like that.

Greg: Cause you normally hear a person go man down and then somebody else his back went out or something like that.

But here, we were hearing man downs and then a dude leave and then he don't come back.

Shakur: Hey, I gotta tell y'all like, cuz I actually caught COVID right. Mm-hmm and it was, it was interesting cuz it was doing the first wave when nobody had it. So, I know I didn't understand the seriousness of it. Yeah. But, my tear officer came to my cell and I'm laying on my bunk, I'm on the top bunk, and he says, Ross, report to the sale front.

So I'm like, okay. So I go to sale front. He. You tested positive for COVID and then he locks the door, you know, that lock mm-hmm and, and when they locked the door, psychologically, cuz they already have the bar pulled, so you can't get out the cell unless they release the bar. But when they turn the key in a lock, just psychologically. For him to tell me that I had COVID and then locked the door, like, it had a immediate effect on me.

Right. I went straight to fear and panic. Mm. Right. I just wanted to just get outta the cell, but I couldn't get outta the cell. Mm. And then I remembered my tools. I started breathing. Yeah. I started taking deep breaths. Right. Then I started to calm down and I said, this too will passed in my mind.

Yeah. And then after that, I was cool. But it was a trip though, man, just initially for the officer, just to tell me that I had COVID and locked the door.

Thanh: I wanna ask y'all real quick. What, what were some good or bad memories during this pandemic for y'all? Y'all got any specific memories that just stood out?

It was a year long of being stuck in that cell.

Edmond: I think for me, I remember being in tent city, not getting no letters. Like I had no contact with anybody. And then one day I get this letter. No, no address from who, who is from, I open it.

It's it's a drawing that says, hang in there, people care about you. You're not forgotten. Darby. Like it, it just inspired me and gave me hope. You know what I'm saying? It was cool that somebody was thinking about what I was going through.

Thanh: That's what's, hey, shout out to Darby, man. Darby wrote me too, man.

Sent me a little shout. Shout out to Darby. Shout out to Darby. Darby. Right? Love, love what that's cuffed. We see you.

Shakur: Hey, that reminds me of something, right? I can recall, like I started getting all these J pays. Yeah. Like I was getting J pays from all kind of people. Right.

Thanh: You talking about money.

Shakur: Yeah. Money. They were sending me money like left and right. Like, yep. That was, I was like, okay. It was coming from people I didn't even know. Yeah. It was coming from my friends. It was coming from family members, but it was just their way of being able to reach out to me and connect to me and show me that they supported me.

So I really appreciate that as well.

Thanh: And I just wanna say this Shakur man. I was very happy to get those J pays, right. And get all that money. But the first thing in my mind is like, I've been in prison 10 years. You ain't sent me no money. Yeah. All of a sudden. So you took me about to die in prison. This what it took y'all.

For show. Oh my God. Next time. Let's not wait till I'm about to die. Exactly. To get some money. Y'all yeah. All to shout out to everybody. We appreciate y'all. Y'all got incarcerated people locked up. Don't wait until they about on they death bed to show some love. They need love now. Yeah. Little cool, Jay.

I need love man. Come on.

Greg: And that was, and that was cool to see all the love though. That was cool to see all the love, man. Cuz we. Because we damn sure need it, man. I mean, we were like, we were going through it, bro. We were going like we were in a, we were in a tough predicament, man. Yeah. And so, so, you know, anytime a mailman stops at the door, That's that, that that's an event, a treat that's like a time of celebration to get a, to get a piece of mail and then get a piece of mail with some money attached to it.

So that's always a great thing though.

Thanh: Hey, Greg hey, you not lying too. Cuz cuz during the pandemic it's like, you know, they've taken away so much choice. Right? And I've heard this from a lot of dudes. Like, everybody gained a gang of weight.

There was probably like one or two dudes who did burpees every day in the cell, shout out to them. I wasn't one of those people. Right? So like one of the only choices you had really for me. What I'm gonna eat today. Oh, right. So I was, every day I was cooking up ghetto spreads in the sale. I was trying, I was experimenting with seasonings and sauces and trying to make different foods to eat.

Right. Cause I ain't had nothing to do. I was like, I might as well try to come.

Edmond: You became a chef over the pandemic?

Thanh: Chef.

Greg: Thanh, how much weight did you gain?

Thanh: I gained, like, 30 pounds. Yeah. Yeah. I went from like 1 57, 1 60, around there all the way to 190 something. Damn. I was an umpa lumpa. Everybody was like, bro, what happened?

I was like, I don't know what happened, man. I was eating good. The Twinkies was too good, man. I appreciate the good energy man. I loved it. So I just wanna wrap it up, man. Let's let's hear some final thoughts. Let me pass it to my left, Greg.

What are some final thoughts about this piece and this pandemic?

Greg: Yeah, man, for one, I'm glad that it's, I'm glad that they came with the, you know, with the, with the vaccines booster shots. I'm glad that, you know, we all starting to get back to some sense of normalcy, I'm just, I'm just glad to be back in the circle with the fellas again. Shout out to my boy, Nate, who went home, you know, Nate, you, Nate is out there free. So, you know, it's so we, so it's us four, you know, Uncuffed is, is slowly, but we slowly uncuffing, you know, and people are start.

Yeah. We all starting to go home. So, you know, so yeah, man, I'm just like you say, Thanh, just glad to hear the energy. Glad to be back with the fellas and let's, hopefully we can stay off this lockdown so we can keep, continue to produce more pieces. For show. Pass on you, young Edmond.

Edmond: This Edmond. I appreciate all the love and support, but Oz and Scott did a excellent job, but just highlighting his story and, and the love and, and support that they had for each other.

And I hope that the audience can take that from this piece.

Thanh: All right, y'all, before we end, I want to go ahead and read off the names of the folks that passed during this COVID pandemic here at San Quentin. So I'm gonna go ahead and go down the list. Let's start with richard Eugene Stitely, Joseph Safarino Cordova, John A. Stephans III, Scott Erskine, Manuel Machado Alvarez, Dewayne Michael Carey.

Gerald Edward Johnson, Joaquin Diaz, David John Reed, Daniel Ruiz, Francisco Ramirez, Darrell A. Gautt, Jeffrey J. Hawkins, Troy Ashmus, John "J.B." Beames, Siverin Whitney, Eric "E" Williams Warner, Joseph C. Townsel, Johnny Avila, Orlando Gene Romero, Pedro "Pete" Arias, Ralph Ruiz, Kory Saunders, Alan Beisel, Gilbert Bobby Polanco, Gary Michael "Mike" Madeux.

Michael Hampton. John "Spanky" brown. Thank y'all for listening.

You can find Uncuffed on the radio at KALW 91.7 FM, at weareuncuffed.org, or you can subscribe to Uncuffed in any podcast player. Join our community on social media by following @weareuncuffed. The Uncuffed crew at San Quentin is golden Greg Eskridge, Tommy "Shakur" Ross, Edmond Richardson, and me, Thanh Tran. Thanks to the team at KALW Public Radio.

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