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# Goodbye, Solano State Prison – Welcome Home, Luis

Published March 12, 2024

[00:00:00] **x:** KALW.

[00:00:11] **bf:** Welcome to Uncuffed, the podcast that empowers people in prison to tell our own stories. We learn the art of audio storytelling, and with those skills, we make this show, featuring the human beings behind prison walls. I'm bf Thames. This is a special episode of Uncuffed on the Solano side, where we're sending off one of our colleagues who's leaving prison.

Before he left, we recorded this conversation inside the Solano Media Center.

Luis is going home. This is the Uncuffed studio at Solano State Prison in California, and we're here for a roundtable discussion about our good friend, Luis Gomez. Why don't you introduce yourself first?

[00:01:03] **LUIS:** My name is Luis Balbino Bandia Gomez, and everybody here calls me Soldier.

[00:01:09] **IVY:** I don't know if I would have ever, like, pulled you over and talked to you if it wasn't for Uncuffed.

You know, Uncuffed brought us a friendship that, we're probably never gonna see again with another person. And I remember one time, we was in there talking. And you was explaining, like, your journey on your criminal life. Could you tell me a little bit about, like, the first time you went to prison?

[00:01:37] **LUIS:** Well, the first time I went to prison was in 2005. And, at that time, you know, I was in a spiral in my life where I was coming down, you know. Prior to that, I was in a university,

and then I had a car accident, and then that stopped me from going further in my education, so I started self medicating, and then that's when I became a drug addict.

And then after that, everything just progressed from petty crime to stuff where it evolved where I went back to the streets, and I started doing worse and worse things where eventually I got a case for a possession of a firearm, and that got me to prison. And being in prison, I continued with my criminal mentality, and nothing changed because right when I got out, I went back to the same thing, because I didn't learn nothing.

[00:02:28] **MAZZA:** Three times in prison is a lot. How'd you change, and when did that process start?

[00:02:35] **LUIS:** Well, honestly, the, one of the things that I can remember was when I was in High Desert with, one of my old cellies, his name was Jose Chavez, and he was an LWOP sentence. And then I asked him, you know, like, why is it you do all these programs knowing that you have an LWOP sentence, if you don't mind me asking?

And then he said that the reason he does it is because he hasn't given up on hope. And he told me, like, he's all, look, I've lost a lot of people while being in here, and, and you should appreciate what you have out there, your mom, your daughter, your family. Don't take that for granted. Because it's like, if I can go back and change a lot of stuff, I would, but you still have all that, so you gotta appreciate what you have, and then strive to be there for them, because it's, at the end of the day, that's all you have at the end, your family.

You know, I know I hurt my mom a lot. And then one of the things that really got to me is that my daughter, she, she, she told me, why are you coming into my life just to leave again? And right there, that, that, that hurt me. So, I realized, you know, like, it's true, the ones that I'm hurting the most are those, those that mean the most to me.

So, I decided to change for the better, cause I know my downfall, it's always been addiction. And, now I know I gotta stay away from that. And the lifestyle that I was living will always be the same thing. It's insanity. I keep coming back to this place, and in order for me to do something with my life, I know I had to change the way I, the way I was living, and the way I was thinking.

[00:04:10] **bf:** Jay, what do you have for us?

[00:04:12] **JAY:** My thing is this right here. Being housed in High Desert State Prison, you attended Lassen College. Tell me what it was like with that experience right there from the educational standpoint.

[00:04:23] **LUIS:** You know, for some reason people don't like High Desert, and I know like, being there, the type of environment it is.

But for me, I was fortunate to go to High Desert, and this was during the time that COVID was out there. And I was able to enroll in college, and over there we don't really have that much

program. So me being part of a mail correspondence class where I started Lassen, that experience to me is where, where I finally started realizing that college is possible in here.

And then I was able to enroll, even though there was a long waiting list, I was finally able to get and start college there. And at first I felt it was overwhelming. And then more is because everything's inside your cell and you have to read the books, take the test, do the homework. So that experience was all new to me.

Before I was, you know, in front of a professor or a teacher. So now, the teacher was my book. And in order for me to get something out of it, I had to invest my time in it. So, being in my cell, that helped me be able to teach myself, and I was able to get good grades and finally coming to Solano is where I finished my associate science degree, and I was able to graduate.

[00:05:40] **bf:** I met you in prison. You've become like my little brother. I got love for you, dude, because I see you as a genuine and authentic person. And I feel confident that you will be a benefit to society once you get out.

[00:05:57] **LUIS:** And I just want to let you guys know that, you know, it was a blessing, and I was fortunate to be part of the Uncuffed family.

This is really life changing, you know, for people that don't know what Uncuffed is out there. Like, you guys really gotta support this program, because it can change people's lives. It helps people, and everybody in here, we're human, you know, yeah, we've made mistakes, but that doesn't mean that, that, that we don't learn from them or can bring positive things out of them.

Coming into this program, this office right here, Uncuffed. Right here, you feel like you're free. You don't feel like you're in locked up or in prison. Coming into this office, it feels more like a sanctuary where I don't got to worry about crossing certain lines. I don't got to worry about going into someone's section that I'm not supposed to be in here.

Like right here is, you know, I'm able to sit down here and have a conversation with you. There's no barriers right here that, that I got to be aware of. I just want to let everybody know in this room that, you know, I appreciate being part of this right here, you know. It's something that. Really means a lot to me because it was life changing, you know?

Everybody here, I learned a little bit from all you guys. And usually every time I got out from prison, you know, I've been to prison three times. And then usually I get out and I forget about prison and I forget about everybody in here. But this is something that, you know, being part of this is something that I'm never gonna be able to forget about.

[00:07:32] **MAZZA:** Getting to know you's been a blessing to me, and, I just want to thank you for all the help that you've given me while we've known each other. And, you know, I understand, a lot of, a lot of your change and everything that you do on a daily basis is, you know, at the behest of your, the love you have for your mother, right?

[00:07:53] **LUIS:** Yeah.

[00:07:53] **MAZZA:** I understand she, she doesn't understand English too well. If you were to send her a message on this podcast this very day, what would you say to her?

[00:08:06] **LUIS:** (Speaking in Spanish)

[00:09:04] **LUIS:** I just want to let her know that everything she did for me, you know, she's always there to support me, she never gave up on me, she always pushed me to be better, she always believed in me. And then I just want to show her, and I have been showing her that everything she's done, that now I believe in myself just the way she's believed in me, and I'm living proof now that if you're willing to change and you're willing to do as long as you grab onto something that you know is there for you.

You'll be able to accomplish a lot more than just not believing, you know, and now I know that once you set your mind to something, it's possible.

[00:09:56] **bf:** So that was our conversation with Luis before he went home. Our Uncuffed Solano teachers, Andrew Stelzer and Sonia Paul came to greet him the morning he paroled.

[00:10:11] **LUIS:** How you doing?

[00:10:11] **SONIA:** So, how are you feeling?

[00:10:13] **LUIS:** I'm feeling excited, but nervous at the same time, you know? I'm ready though, you know? I'm ready to start this new page in my life. Today is Memorial Day, May 29, 2023, and it's 8:37.

[00:10:30] **SONIA:** A. M.

[00:10:31] **LUIS:** A. M.

[00:10:33] **SONIA:** Yeah, so where are we right now for people who can't see this situation?

[00:10:38] **LUIS:** Right now, we're in front of some beautiful palm trees. It's windy, windy, very windy, but we're in front of Solano State Prison in the parking lot. And I'm here with Sonia and Andrew, which were my editors, so I'm glad that I was able to see them, too, you know? So, right now, it's a, it's a good feeling, it's a good feeling being around people that I got to know and help me change into what I am now, you know?

[00:11:01] **SONIA:** Yeah, so, do you know who's picking you up?

[00:11:06] **LUIS:** I have no idea who's picking me up.

[00:11:08] **ANDREW:** Let's get over to the park. He's gonna be here in a minute.

[00:11:11] **bf:** Uncuffed helped link Luis with a service that provides rides home for people getting out of prison. The driver was waiting at a nearby park with Uncuffed producer Kathy Novak.

Luis, Sonia, and Andrew went to meet them.

[00:11:23] **ANDREW:** You've done this before, although probably not at Solano. You've walked out of the gates before. How does it feel compared to the other times?

[00:11:29] **LUIS:** Well, my last time I paroled, I came out to the same situation, which was homeless. My family's been going through some things, so it's different now, because now I actually went in, all in on my rehabilitation, where like, I got my college degree, I was part of Uncuffed, I got into all these programs that helped me address all my addiction and all that stuff, so now I feel a little bit better, so I'm confident now, I'm confident.

[00:11:56] **KATHY:** This is day one. Where are you going? What happens now?

[00:12:00] **LUIS:** Well, now I gotta get to Salinas, and when I get there, first I gotta figure out where I'mma stay, you know, so I already got an address for a mission or, the shelter, and I go talk to my parole, and then I figure it out there, you know? So that's where, day one's looking for me right now, and after I get that situated, I wanna go see my mom.

My mom lives in Salinas. She lives at my cousin's house.

[00:12:23] **KATHY:** Does she know that you're getting out today, your mom?

[00:12:26] **LUIS:** Yeah, she knows I'm getting out today or tomorrow, because I told her I didn't know if it would be Memorial Day. So I just left it like that. So if I didn't get out today, I can just surprise her. But if I get there tomorrow, you know, she knew.

She's nervous, and she's kind of like, she's kind of sad, because she don't have a place for me to get there. And I had to tell her, Mom, don't worry about me. I'mma be okay. And just because my brother came out, and he's homeless, and he's doing what he started doing, my mom thinks I might go back to the same thing, but I told her, Mom, I'm gonna be all right. You know, I got people behind me and I got a lot to look forward to. As soon as I graduate, I send my degree home to her. Everything I've completed in here, I send it straight to her. Like that, she says, stop lying to me.

Every time you say you're going to come out, you're going to change, you know, like, just show me. So I have, and that's what I plan on doing now.

[00:13:19] **SONIA:** Remind us, how many years have you been inside this time?

[00:13:22] **LUIS:** This time I did four and a half years out of a 14 year sentence. I was eligible for Prop 57, which was a non violent parole process for a second striker, so I ended up just doing my base term.

I had to put in the work though, even though I was eligible for it, didn't mean I was gonna get it.

[00:13:41] **SONIA:** And I know, you know, you're trying to figure out who you can hang out with, who you shouldn't hang out with, in order to best make sure you're on the right path.

[00:13:52] **LUIS:** Well, I got special conditions that I can hang around with pretty much everybody I used to hang around with, and as well as my brother.

And that's the one that's gonna hurt me the most, cause I told him, you know, being around you, since he's on probation. And I told him up until he gets his things straight, I can't, because my, my freedom is worth more than, you know, anything else now. Yeah, he said he wanted to pick me up, but I told him thanks, but no thanks, because I'm not going to risk the ride from here to Salinas, or where I was going, get pulled over, and next thing you know, I'm back in jail just for him coming my pick me up, so, you know, I told him I'd rather take the bus, but I'm glad that Uncuffed, Kathy, they were able to do something for me to help me out and pick me up.

[00:14:36] **KATHY:** Joe, this is Luis.

[00:14:37] **LUIS:** What's up, man?

[00:14:38] **JOE:** Nice to meet you.

[00:14:38] **LUIS:** All right, nice to meet you. Luis. Yeah.

[00:14:42] **SONIA:** Thanks for coming.

[00:14:43] **KATHY:** So, who are you, and how did you come suddenly into our lives? What is it that you do?

[00:14:49] **JOE:** Well, my name is Joe Hancock, currently a highway maintenance worker. But previously, I'm formerly incarcerated, spent 23 years total incarceration, was released from San Quentin in 2020.

And when I came home in 2020, I was doing community service work. And my friend Miguel, he asked if I would like to assist in doing gate pickups, taking people to basically shop, provide guidance with re-entry, and drop them off at their destinations. And this is how I end up here today.

[00:15:25] **ANDREW:** I'm sure you guys got a long drive together, but since we got you on mic, words of wisdom?

[00:15:29] **JOE:** Words of wisdom I would say is, priorities are self care. Obviously, you know, the initial basic pit stops, DMV, get your ID, get your license, right. Take things slow, don't be in a rush to really try to jump into things, and relax, and enjoy the blessing, right, because it's a blessing to be released, more so when you already previously were incarcerated and you're actually afforded an opportunity to come home again.

Reach out to your support circles, as well as be clear on what your needs and enjoy life.

[00:16:09] **LUIS:** Thank you. Appreciate them. And that's good advice right there. Thank you for everything. I appreciate everything everybody's doing for me. And I'm glad that I met all of you guys. And I hope I can stay within your network too, you know, that would be a blessing.

And Joe, whenever you're ready to hit the road.

[00:16:27] **KATHY:** Stay in touch. Let us know how you're doing. Good luck.

[00:16:33] **ANDREW:** Welcome home, man.

[00:16:36] **bf:** And then Luis went down the rabbit hole. You guys know what that means. Unfortunately, we lost touch with him. And that's been really tough. The rest of us producers at Solano listened to that conversation on the outside that you all heard.

We recorded our own thoughts and reactions to hearing that.

We talked about how we felt with Soldier leaving, because we all have a, a love and respect for that man. Got my dude Bryan Mazza here.

[00:17:17] **MAZZA:** Hey, what's up, bro?

[00:17:18] **bf:** Stick Talk, Anthony Ivy.

[00:17:20] **IVY:** Hey, hey.

[00:17:22] **bf:** And Mr. Evans from the heavens.

[00:17:24] **JAY:** Embracing the people like the wind.

[00:17:27] **bf:** What did you guys think about that like in general? You know, hearing a little bro get out, man, standing in front of the prison, sounding a little bit excited.

[00:17:36] **MAZZA:** It sounded really cool to hear him out on the streets, you know. It made me feel good, man.

[00:17:41] **IVY:** Yeah, that went crazy, like, to be able to bounce out, and, you know, immediately, like, it's like paparazzi, like, they coming up to you with microphones and stuff like that, and he embraced it good, you feel me? My bro did his thing.

[00:17:58] **JAY:** Aw, yeah, that was cool, he sounded comfortable on the mic.

[00:18:00] **bf:** I was appreciative to hear somebody who had formerly been in prison, the service, you know, to pick up people and to take them where they need to go or whatnot. Luis got in a car with a complete stranger. That brother did 23 years, and he's coming to prisons picking people up.

[00:18:18] **IVY:** I was wondering how, like, if I put myself in, Luis's shoes. I'm in a car, I ain't been in a car in years, and I'm with a stranger, and I was just thinking of, like, the conversations we'll be having driving back because this dude actually went through the same thing I did as far as getting out of prison, you know, seeing new things, breathing a different air, you know, looking at grocery stores and fast food restaurants and what would I be thinking at that time?

[00:18:47] **JAY:** Yeah, it had to be, I mean, the joy of getting released and then on that first day out, it's so much coming at this, brother on the ride home. I have appreciation for the guys that's out there, formerly incarcerated, picking anybody up from the prison system. That's one of the things that it was good to hear Soldier's voice, the anticipation and excitement of what was to come. Me personally, and I know his distance wasn't that far to travel, I would want to be at the airport getting on that airplane, and I don't even want to deal with the car situation, because this is, to me, it seems like if I'm up high and I'm flying, I'm not seeing all the things that I would want to do, to where once I land in the area where I'm going to reside, then that's when I put all that in play right then and there.

[00:19:38] **bf:** Let's not gloss over what Soldier said. He was being mindful. You know, he mentioned his brother. He could have got a ride from his brother, but you remember he said, no, I'm not doing that. You know, I mean, is there anybody that you guys wouldn't take a ride from? And for what reason?

[00:19:57] **JAY:** I wouldn't get in the car with nobody that's on parole. And I definitely wouldn't get in the car, probably on my first day out, with my mother, cause she'd be so excited and she might start driving like a NASCAR racer.

[00:20:10] **MAZZA:** You know, I didn't really have a plan before, and I didn't take care of the personal stuff that I needed to take care of as far as behaviorally, and I needed to really recover, you know, myself and rehabilitate myself.

I never really did that in prison like Soldier did. You know, so I ended up coming back, unfortunately, but hearing him free out there and, and being able to get in the car with anybody, including Jay's mom, I would have driven away from this place, you know, very happy.

[00:20:39] **bf:** You mentioned not really being prepared.

You didn't prepare yourself. What do you know should be done to prepare for your freedom if you have enough time. Soldier didn't seem to have a lot of time to prepare. He didn't know he was getting out as quickly as he did.

[00:20:54] **MAZZA:** He got out 30 days prior to what he expected to get out. It was like, he was like, I don't know what I'm gonna do. He had that deer in the headlight look in his eye. He was happy. He was getting out He was happy about the reality of actual impending freedom.

[00:21:09] **bf:** What does a person do to properly prepare for freedom?

[00:21:13] **JAY:** A person has to build up an economic spreadsheet. Every prison should have a re-entry class. If they were taught how to prepare, it would give them a greater chance at success and lower the recidivism rate.

[00:21:27] **IVY:** For me, I was messing up, so I had, I had, I took 17 years. I was messing up in prison, so I damn near was finna do the whole 17 years. It starts with your mindset first. If your mindset ain't right, you still gonna come back to prison.

[00:21:41] **bf:** Tell, tell, tell me what you mean when you say mindset being right.

[00:21:45] **IVY:** Like going to groups in here, you know, learning your, your, your impulses, learning your vices. You know, and learning, like, where you could go wrong at, you know what I'm saying? A lot of us got anger issues and we don't know, you know, what's the triggers of that.

[00:22:01] **MAZZA:** My last term before this one, believe it or not, I was, I did like eight and a half years. I made the mistake of just thinking I could flip a switch when I got released and everything would be okay. But I found out that after eight and a half years, I felt like the world owed me something, and I had to make up for lost time.

I had to make up for lost material stuff. I wanted to obtain all these things in order for me to feel whole. Unfortunately, I put the cart before the horse, so to speak, because I didn't take care of myself rehabilitatively, like Ivy was saying. My mindset was, was totally screwed up. I had to deal with substance abuse issues that I never addressed.

And although I was successful to a certain extent with it. The material stuff that I, I, I thought that would, might make me happy. So, that's why I really admired Soldier's efforts, because he, you know, went to work and did the work. You, Brian, helped him out a lot, you know, as mentor, and you said in the piece that he was like your little brother, and you did treat him well, and he was a good kid.

[00:23:11] **bf:** I would suggest that people add to the preparation by building social equity. You don't know who you're gonna meet in prison or on the streets. And if you build that social equity, I've seen it many times. It's happened with me. People will introduce you to folks and be like, hey man, I know such and such.

[00:23:37] **MAZZA:** The connections.

[00:23:38] **bf:** Yes, that's that social equity.

[00:23:41] **IVY:** I don't want to sound like I'm just advertising, you know, Uncuffed and like the podcast. This podcast class, it helps you out with that. All of them things. Being social, networking with people that you probably never would have talked to before, your mindset, coming to work on time, being at work, being able to help other people, that's like, it's like a great tool, like, like for a life skill.

[00:24:05] **JAY:** Now, I thought about what you said about social equity, and that was a good point, because It's so many things, and since he was compelled to... go out there to Monterey County, because that's a county that's small in a rural area, and it's not like going to Los Angeles or San Francisco, Alameda County, or even Sacramento County, where those areas is pretty much a million people in the county, with more accessibility to things.

[00:24:37] **MAZZA:** Right.

[00:24:38] **bf:** What do we think about the apparent lack of a network? That it appears the soldier didn't really have a network. He had the social skills, he had some social equity, he had some other things, but it appeared that he either didn't have a network or he didn't have a strong network. He even had KALW there.

[00:25:00] **MAZZA:** But he had a plan. I remember he said he was going to parole to his uncle's ranch, and he, his uncle was going to support him, and it was a great environment, and he was going to get work through his uncle, and the parole department forced him to go back to Salinas for some reason, outside of his planned landing spot, to go right back into the belly of the beast, so to speak.

I find that wholly unfair, and if there's not a flaw in the system, that's one huge flaw.

[00:25:30] **bf:** Getting back to, specifically back to Soldier. So, how do we feel about the fact that it's been difficult to reach him and haven't really heard from him in a little while. How do we feel about that? And if there's anything that you would like to say to him, let's go ahead and do that now.

[00:25:58] **JAY:** Hopefully the difficulties is because he's out there so busy doing positive things that he's too busy to respond. Right now it's the holiday season. We got Thanksgiving and Christmas, New Year's back to back. And hopefully that brother is doing some double overtime work and providing some gifts for his daughter... gifts for his mother and all the other people that he had in his life while he was serving his own sentence.

[00:26:31] **bf:** Whether or not that's happening, that was really cool to say, Jay. That's a cool sentiment. What about you guys?

[00:26:43] **IVY:** I mean, I ain't really sweating it like that, cause when I holla at him I just told him like, I'll just catch up with him when I get out. So I really, I really wasn't tripping on like keeping communication while I was in here.

I know he busy out there trying to, you know, get his feet running and stuff like that, and I'm still trying to do what I need to do, but. Man, shit, when I touch down, we already know what it is, like, I'll find him on social media or something like that, so, I ain't really sweating it, I know, we gonna tap in.

[00:27:15] **bf:** Cool. Bryan?

[00:27:18] **MAZZA:** Yeah, he owes me money, so I'm looking forward to hearing from him again. Somehow, somewhere. But, you know, I've really learned to love Soldier, what he represented in this program, his outgoingness, the way that he approached people outside of the studio really made me admire him a lot. And, you know, it's kind of, it's kind of frightening not hearing anything from him, but I'm with Jay.

I hope that things are well with him. I know he had a lot of hopes for his future, he had a lot of good feelings towards his mother and his family, he wanted to help his, help his brother out and whatnot, I know that didn't work out, but... you know, for me, until I hear differently, I'm, I'm, in my mind, I, I, I, he's out there thriving right now, and I'm gonna leave it like that.

[00:28:13] **bf:** If I were going to say something to Soldier, I would say what I've always said to him. I wish him the absolute best because that's what he's capable of. The absolute best.

Before we go, we want to share something special we've been doing for this season of Uncuffed. Sharing our favorite songs. It's called the Uncuffed My Mixtape. Before Luis went home, he recorded one for us. Have a listen.

[00:28:54] **SONG:** Only God can judge me. That right? Only God can judge me. Nobody else. Nobody else. All you other mutha***** get out of my business.... perhaps I was blind to the... facts.

[00:29:03] **LUIS:** My name is Luis Balbino Bandia Gomez and I'm from Salinas, California. And they call me Soldier here. The song I hit different to me is Tupac, Only God Can Judge Me.

The reason I go to that song, for a long time I cared about what other people judged me for or who I was and what I was doing, but now I realize the only one that really matters in judging me, is the man up above, which is God, you know.

When I was out on the street, I was always into having loud systems in my car, and then I just liked how that song sounded on my system, it would bump.

At that time, I was in my car, listening to that song, going down the street, and I didn't have a care in the world about anything else, you know. I was just In the vibe, you know, just listen to Tupac, the way he delivers everything, and then just, you know, saying, Only God can judge me now. Only God can judge me now.

Cause everything he spits right there, you know, he's just trying to tell you, you know, there's a better way of life. There's, there's better things that you gotta do, cause in one of his bars, he says, you know, leaving his past behind him, looking, looking forward now, you know, and that's something I'm trying to do now, you know.

I know where I've been, and you know, and I know where I'm at now, but now I got direction in my life, and it's through God and only Him, you know.

[00:30:36] **SONG:** How did it come to this? I wish they didn't miss. Somebody help me, tell me where to go from here. Cause even thugs cry, but do the Lord care? Try to remember, but it hurts. I'm walkin through the cemetery, talkin to the dirt. I'd rather die like a man, than live like a coward. There's a ghetto up in heaven, and it's ours.

Black power is what we scream as we dream. In a paranoid state...

[00:31:01] **bf:** That was Luis Gomez talking about what Tupac's song, Only God Can Judge Me, means to him. And that's a wrap on that episode. The Uncuffed crew at Solano Prison is Bryan Mazza, Jay Evans, Anthony Ivy, and me, bf Thames.

Thanks to the team at KALW Public Radio: Ninna Gaensler-Debs, Angela Johnston, Sonia Paul, Kathy Novak, James Rowlands, Hakim Owen, Eli Wirtschafter, and our sound designer, Eric "Maserati E" Abercrombie. Our theme music is by David Jassy, and thanks to the staff at Solano who make this possible, especially Lieutenant Guerrero, who approved this episode.

We fact checked everything to the best of our ability. Uncuffed gets support from the California Arts Council and the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. As always, thanks for listening.