My Enemy Saved My Life

Published September 27, 2022

[00:00:00] K A L W.

[00:00:04] bf: You're listening to Uncuffed, recorded and produced by people in California prison. We're all here at Solano State Prison. I got some of my guys here. We're about to listen to a story called Died Twice, but before we get into that, I'm bf Thames. Let's everybody introduce yourselves.

[00:00:31] Cesar: All right. I'm Cesar Villa.

[00:00:33] Orlando: I'm Orlando Hassan Hassan Johnson.

[00:00:35] Mayito: And I'm Mayito Guzman.

[00:00:37] bf: So look, I've actually heard this story before, but it's been over a year. One of the things that I'm gonna ask based on what I vaguely remember is, have any of you guys ever had what you would consider to be a near death experience?

[00:00:54] Mayito: Now, when you say near death, you mean like, I thought I was gonna die, or like I actually blacked out and like, people were like, I thought you were dead.

[00:01:02] bf: Well, I don't know. I don't mean, you know, if you were getting that whooped, that's not necessarily a near death experience.

[00:01:07] Cesar: Yeah.

[00:01:08] bf: What about you Hassan?

[00:01:10] Orlando: I'm thinking about it and I have to say no. I've been in accidents, car accidents, and close to near riots where, you know, but maybe I was too young. It happened too
fast, but I didn't, I didn't feel like I was gonna, I didn't think about death and it didn't feel like a near death experience.

[00:01:29] **Mayito:** Hey Orlando, the, your car accident, would you like in critical condition?

[00:01:32] **Orlando:** No. No, no, it wasn't. It was just what I mean by like, at the moment of like, wrecking the car, actual car. I wasn't in the hospital after the fact.

[00:01:41] **bf:** Well, let's get what's the real question. Were you afraid?

[00:01:45] **Orlando:** I'm sure I've been afraid before. Been afraid a little. Yeah. Yeah. For, but not long.

[00:01:51] **bf:** You just say it, man!

[00:01:51] **Orlando:** But no, no, well, but it was short, you know, it was like for a few seconds, so it's, it wasn't long enough for it to be memorable enough.

The afraid part, the, the parts where I, where I can remember feeling like I was near death. Yeah.

[00:02:08] **bf:** Chime in bro.

[00:02:10] **Cesar:** I can remember there was a time when things were real rough in the early to mid eighties, and there was a time where you drove up to a prison and you weren't supposed to be there. You had to do what you had to do.

[00:02:21] **Orlando:** Yeah.

[00:02:21] **Cesar:** You know, to survive.

[00:02:22] **Orlando:** Yeah.

[00:02:23] **Cesar:** So there were times where we had to get 'em up and, you know, do what you had to. And I've been in that situation a few times. Well, a few times I came up short, you know, where you think that you're invincible, you know, you're young, mm-hmm, you're cocky. And I'll tell you, when you get a piece of steel ran through you, it humbles you, you know? So.

[00:02:42] **bf:** I could imagine. Yeah.

[00:02:43] **Cesar:** So that happened to me once.

[00:02:44] **Orlando:** Yeah. See, I haven't had that happen. That's what I'm saying.

[00:02:47] **Cesar:** That happened to me once where I got into a little brawl with this guy.

[00:02:51] **Orlando:** What area of the body was it?
Cesar: It went all the way through the liver, came out through the back, but. Yeah, it was, it was a time where a lot of people were arrogant.

You know, we thought we were invincible because here we are. It's not like nowadays where you get hit, you get socked up and they take you to another institution. No, back then, they sew you back up and they go right back to the main line, you know, because a lot of us did that because we don't wanna show no fear.

Because this is our life.

Orlando: Hence to have to, like gladiator school, if they're a lot of people.

bf: Well, don't, don't, don't extend on that. I want to know about the, you know, the near death part of it.

Cesar: Yeah. So, so this is what happened. So they're wheeling me into the hospital and the pain that you feel, or I felt was like a numb pain, like when you're getting socked.

So it was a constant throbbing around my area, around the abdomen, around the liver. So I knew it was real bad. My t-shirt was cut, and my t-shirt was still soaking up with blood. So I knew it was kind of bad. So here we are. I haven't talked to my family, and there's a chance that I could die. Cause I know the piece went in from the, throughout my abdomen.

I know I got hit in the back. So I'm thinking it's kind of critical. So I asked the doctor, how bad is it? He goes, well, look, we need to do surgery on you right now. Or are you gonna die. So I said, well, I want to use the phone first to call my family, let 'em know what's going on. And I said, you don't under, you don't understand the severity of this.

You're bleeding internally. Yeah. You know, we need to operate on you now. So yeah. So I refused the operation until I could get to a phone. So the doctor talked to the officer who was there with me and said, look, if we don't get this guy in the operating table, he's gonna die. So you need to talk to him. So the guard talked to me, look, man, this is it.

You may have only a few minutes left. What do you want to do? So I thought about it, and I thought about my family and everything. I said, okay, well, you know what, go ahead. Do the operation. So they wheeled me into the operating room. And I don't know if I'm gonna come out of this alive or not. But I know I did, you know, everything I was supposed to do.

I did everything right. Back then.

bf: Were you afraid?

Cesar: No, I wasn't afraid because.

bf: Why not?
[00:05:06] **Cesar:** Well, because I thought I was gonna be dead at 23, and here I am 25. So I outlived myself by two years.

[00:05:13] **Orlando:** So the phone option was off the table when you talked to the officer.

[00:05:17] **Cesar:** Yeah. So that, wasn't, that, wasn't a thing I, you know, I figured, okay.

So maybe, I started rationalizing. Well, maybe I don't want to talk to my family this condition. Maybe I will say something. Okay. That I shouldn't say. Or maybe they won't remember me the way they want to remember me. If they hear me saying I'm gonna die,

[00:05:37] **bf:** You actually have those thoughts at that time.

[00:05:39] **Cesar:** Yeah. Because here I am in the waiting room I mean, in, in the middle of the hospital and the operating room is so many feet away, so I'm starting to contemplate on, cuz they left me alone, you know, to (wow). To think about what I wanted to.

[00:05:53] **Mayito:** Well, I was gonna say I haven't had no near death experience myself.

[00:05:58] **Cesar:** Okay.

[00:05:58] **Mayito:** I mean, I've been through things, but nothing severe to the point that I sensed that I was close to death.

[00:06:08] **bf:** Well, hell and after hearing just now, I wasn't even gonna talk about my little story where I got stabbed in the finger. With a with a pencil. So I got a piece of graphite and a piece of wood in my finger.

Yeah. Hey look. It was so insignificant. I think I picked the wrong finger to show you guys.

[00:06:23] **Mayito:** I got one of those in the authority.

[00:06:24] **bf:** There it is. There it's green, right there. But look, so what we're gonna do now is we're gonna listen to the story Died Twice, by Uncuffed producer, Damon Cooke, as he interviewed Wilbur Stoneham in the spring of 2019

[00:06:43] **Damon:** Wilber Stoneham has been incarcerated since 1976. During a time when prisons were especially dangerous, the guards were particularly unpleasant and Stoneham, well, he was one of their targets. He had a terrible relationship with the Watchers, which continued for over 40 years until the day he died.

It's my understanding you had a heart attack.

[00:07:08] **Wilbur:** Yes. I had a a cardiac arrest, but there's nothing wrong with my heart. What I had with what you call pulmonary embolism. Right. And what that is is that I had a blood clot that materialized from somewhere in my body, my lower legs, thighs, whatever. I went through my lungs. Right. And got trapped and clogged up my major artery to the heart.
[00:07:38] **Damon:** Were you ever pronounced dead?

[00:07:39] **Wilbur:** Twice. I died. I died out there on that breezeway, and I died once more in the in the ambulance on the way to the hospital, you know,

I was brought back. I was brought back to life by by the nurses. Right. Which was the first responders and stuff. And the prison guards. They brought me back. They did CPR. In particular, Officer Handy, Officer Smith.

[00:08:15] **Damon:** So there's some, there's some irony there. You came to prison. You said to me earlier, hey, when I came to prison, there was a difference and there was... us against them.

[00:08:23] **Wilbur:** Right.

[00:08:24] **Damon:** And now here we are coming full circle 40 years, and now the prison guard is now.

[00:08:29] **Wilbur:** Saving my life.

[00:08:30] **Damon:** Right.

[00:08:31] **Wilbur:** It's even more bigger irony. Right. The guy Medina used to be on what you call, we call him the goon squad, right. He used to chase me around the prison and stuff all the time.

Right. Because I revolved in the criminal activity of the prison. Right. And the same guy that be chasing me all the time was the same guy that was over there, pumping life, doing CPR into my into my body. Right. Officer Handy. Right? The last 115 that I received in prison, Officer Handy is the guy that gave it to me.

But here he is, pumping life into my body.

[00:09:10] **Damon:** And 115, you mean the disciplinary infraction, the rules violation report.

[00:09:13] **Wilbur:** The rules violation. 115 is a rule violation report. Right. I don't even remember the day. Right. But what I do or remember, right, is that I didn't see no white lights. Right? Could everybody be you use any white?

I didn't see no white lights. Right. I didn't, I wasn't hovering above nobody on, you know, up in the air and all that other stuff, you know, I didn't get to talk to nobody, you know, or anything like that because there was some people that I needed to talk to, but they weren't there. Right.

[00:09:48] **Damon:** Right.

[00:09:49] **Wilbur:** I didn't get to holler.
Right. So, but anyway, one of the things that I really take pride in, I didn't feel no damn heat either.

[00:09:57] Damon: Yeah. Yeah. So you said was no lights and there was no heat.

[00:10:02] Wilbur: I didn't feel no heat.

[00:10:04] Damon: So that's a good side. Right. Okay.

[00:10:06] Wilbur: Right, right, right. So, you know, but anyway, man, even though officer handy was the last man to give me a 115, right.

Destroy my chances of going home. Right. But you know, all that's on me because if I wasn't dirty.

[00:10:24] Damon: Ah.


[00:10:25] Damon: There's the growth right there.


[00:10:26] Damon: See that, you just took ownership right there. Right. I like that. Right. Because you said, hey, it's on me.


[00:10:31] Damon: But the thinking of the man 40 years ago, it's on them.


[00:10:34] Damon: But now. I like that.

[00:10:35] Wilbur: So. I saw Mr. Handy when I got out, you know, of the infirmary. I go right up there to him, said, man, gimme some depth. Why he said, man, everybody out here looking. Man, the hell, what these people out here looking, man. Right. I don't care what the perception of this yard is or what these people are thinking about, right.

Whatever convict code that prevents me from recognizing the human in you, because you recognize the human in me, because you save the human inside of me. So, my. And the same thing with Medina. I smile when I see him.

[00:11:14] Damon: This thing has come full circle for you.

[00:11:16] Wilbur: Yes, it, yes. Yes. It had. You, as an officer, don't have to like me.
You don't have to like me at all. Years ago, officers weren't trained in CPR. They would, they would just make the call. And you died right there. Right. So I am going try to change my life. Be the grandfather that I'm supposed to be with my grandchildren, and be the father that I'm supposed to be with my children.

I can't blame my wife, my girlfriend.

[00:11:45] **Damon:** Right.

[00:11:45] **Wilbur:** I can't blame any of them things. It's all about. It's all about me. And so what I was doing, I was just seeing a wasted life and, and, and, and I, and I'm reclaiming my name. I'm reclaiming my name because I'm reclaiming that person that I was before of the drug abuse before the crime.

Right. Before the dysfunctional lifestyle. So I'm reclaiming my name, the name that's on my birth certificate is W I L B E R T, not W I L B U R.

[00:12:27] **bf:** That was just the story that was produced by, Damon Cooke, and he interviewed Wilbert Stoneham. I wanna know from all you guys. If you were dying or if you thought you were dying, would you be okay with the correctional officer saving your life?

[00:12:45] **Orlando:** It wouldn't matter. I mean, of course I'd be okay with it. I wouldn't want to die. I'm glad to be able to say that I wouldn't be that caught up at that time. You know what I mean? Cuz I'd be wrapped up in my I'm like, Hey

[00:12:55] **bf:** Bro, that's not understandable!

[00:12:56] **Orlando:** Physically. No, I mean I would know physically I'm in trouble. I would, you know, like with like with Wilbur. You know, if I'm feeling that, hey, I could be circling the drain here, or if I'm, you know, in pain or something, you know, if I got blood shooting outta somewhere, I'm, you know, go ahead, administer eight. I'm not gonna be like, Hey, get away from you. You know what I mean?

[00:13:18] **bf:** I mean, I gotta, I gotta, I got a thought, but I wanna go after you guys.

[00:13:21] **Cesar:** Yeah. I would say it depends on how old you are. Because your frame of mind when you're involved in prison and what's going on behind the walls, there's a certain attitude you have towards these guards.

And I would say that maybe like when this happened to me, back in, in the mid eighties, when this happened, I don't want no cop touching me. This is my frame of mine. I did what I did. You know, I did the dirt. So let's put this in God's hands. You know, maybe if I,

[00:13:52] **bf:** I understand where you're coming from.
[00:13:53] Cesar: If I've seen a light at the end of the tunnel and he says, hey, you know your parents don't want you to die.

Then maybe if somebody talked to you like that and started rationalizing stuff, maybe, maybe the thoughts will be different, but, but to come off the yard and with this, everything's going on. It's like, you know what, the hell with this. I'm done. I'm good. I do what you gotta do.

[00:14:15] Orlando: What I think is amazing is that, that light at the end of the tunnel, I think for him, was what he felt afterward.

[00:14:22] Mayito: He mentions, he mentions that, that he's an older man and he mentions that at one time, the staff had a different mentality too. And I know that for myself, I probably would reflect on it later. Like, like I would see him in a different light, like damn, you know what? Everybody hates this dude.

[00:14:38] bf: But would you be okay with it?

It's simple for me, for me, it's real simple. If I wanted to live, it has nothing to do with age, but if I wanted to live, I wouldn't care who saved my life. Right. It could be a cop, the worst cop. It could be someone, the worst of the worst, but guess what? I'll tell him thank you at the appropriate time, but we are not becoming friends.

Yeah. I'm not giving you a dap like Stoneham was giving him a dap. I'm not giving you a dap. And that's not because of prison optics. I'm not giving you a dap cuz I still don't like you. But I understand what, what Stoneham was saying when he said, well, you saved the humanity in me, the heat. I thought that was profound.

Mm-hmm. But right now, at this point in my life, I am not big enough. I'm very evolved on so many levels, but I'm not big enough. And I am not evolved enough to pretend that this officer who has been an antagonist to either myself or to other men in blue, that I'm gonna be okay with them as a person.

[00:15:38] Mayito: See, now, now, that. I could see maybe like, if, like how he said it affected his perspective on life, affected his humanities.

[00:15:46] bf: Right.

[00:15:46] Mayito: Now, if the officer changed, like all of a sudden stopped messing with people. There's no, we can't assume that that's the case. Cuz he might save your life today and then tomorrow you come outta your building and you're like, wow, he's still like, uncool.

[00:16:05] bf: He gave a description of somebody doing their job.

Maybe a little over zealous. But he gave a description of somebody doing their job.

Especially the one who wrote him up with the 115.

And that's Chasing me all around.

Right, right. He's doing his job.

And you really can't, you really can't be mad for somebody doing that.

Back to my my thought earlier about the white light. As far as how Wilbur described it, he was grateful that he was able to have a different outlook, like as a human being to human being.

So for me, if that happened like that, for me, I'd be like, well, that was my white light.

For me, I've thought on that. And in a sense, like earlier when I said I have never had a near death experience, you know. Now I see that in a sense, I believe also, eh, having a mental, like you could have a near death experience mentally and emotionally, and that compelled you to change your perspective on things, or that compelled you to change your attitude about something or even your whole entire life.

And it could be for growth. Or it could be for some people, even for bitterness. You know, they could, it could, it could, it could become a different type of thing. And for me, I think that when we die, cuz I've thought on that and I think that the purpose in life. I think that a lot of times when we're living, cuz none of us were born with an instruction manual told, okay, this is what you should contribute.

This is your gift. But over the years, for myself, I find myself in troubles. Even when I'm trying to do the right thing. Sometimes I have my setbacks, but I've concluded that a lot of the times, I misusing my gift, my talent. And when I'm misusing it, it's like I keep getting knocked down because if. Okay, for some people, when they succeed, it just flows naturally. I feel like those people, they're in, they're in tune with what they're supposed to be doing. And we're not all meant to be the good guy. We're not all meant to be the good guy. Sometimes. Sometimes. No, I'm gonna keep real because sometimes you may do something, in my opinion, that it was part of your growing process.

Like you wouldn't have learned a different way.

I get it.

You know, or maybe somebody else, you change.

Why you point at me, bro?
[00:18:22] **Mayito:** I'm not, you know, or maybe somebody else, you know, whatever process you went through, it changed their life for the greater good. And then maybe you'll look back down the road and look back and be like, you know what, I create, I created tough lessons for myself. Mm. But now I understand. So like, in this conversation right here, I'm, I'm looking at it like, you know what, maybe I have have had a near death experience. Just it, maybe for me, it wasn't a piece of metal going through me or a bullet.

[00:18:51] **bf:** You know what, that, that, that actually makes a lot of sense.

[00:18:54] **Mayito:** Overall. I think it might be healthy to have a near death experience for some of us, because some of us get caught up in our day to day and forget how precious life is.

[00:19:08] **bf:** All right. So that's how we do it here at Solano State Prison. You can find Uncuffed on the radio at KALW, 91.7, at weareuncuffed dot org, or you can subscribe, which we hope you'll do to Uncuffed at any podcast player.

Join our community on social media by following Weareuncuffed. But we wanna also give 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 fantastic sound designer, Eric Maserati - E Abercrombie. Our theme music is by David Jassy.

And thanks to the staff at Solano who make this possible. Mr. McCann, the man with the plan, Principal Nessie, Ms. Rice and Lieutenant Speight, 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.

I am Brian Thames, bf Thames. We are grateful for your time. Thank you.