Prison’s Secret Santas (2019)

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[00:00:00] x: KALW.

[00:00:04] bf: Hey, out there, Uncuffed listeners. This is bf Thames.

[00:00:08] LUIS: And this is Luis Gomez. We’re here at Solano State Prison in Vacaville, California, and today we’re gonna bring back an Uncuffed episode from 2019, all about the holiday season.

[00:00:21] bf: It features our crew here at Solano, as well as the guys at San Quentin. We hope you enjoy, and as always, thanks for listening.

[00:00:35] DAMON: All right, guys. This is Uncuffed, a show produced inside Solano State Prison and San Quentin State Prison. This is the last episode of our first season, so we’re gonna do something a little different this time. Instead of hearing from one prison, you’re gonna hear the guys from both prisons, Solano and San Quentin.

But what we’re gonna talk about is spirituality, religion, holidays, whatever that stuff means to you. So we’re gonna start out here at Solano State Prison, and I’m gonna let you know who’s in the room.

[00:01:02] STEVE: Steve Drown.

[00:01:03] bf: Oh, you’re pointing at me. bf Thames. Call me Brian if you want.

[00:01:07] JOE: Joe Kirk.

[00:01:08] BRYAN: I’m Bryan Mazza.

[00:01:09] DAMON: And I’m Damon Cooke.
Welcome to Uncuffed.

[00:01:13] **JOE:** You know, the holiday season, it reminds me of a lot of family. Something I really did with my life is I, I screwed up a lot, and my family doesn't talk to me anymore. And it made me put everything in perspective and realize, wow, I'm really, really missing out on a lot, you know, like even though I don't really believe in traditions, and I'm not really a, a faithful person. It's still like, I still kind of miss that gathering around with the people I'm familiar with. And seeing them smile as they as, as they get bombarded with gifts that they already expected. Because everybody knows Santa's not real, but.

[00:01:50] **BRYAN:** Santa's not real?

[00:01:53] **JOE:** Well, yeah, Santa, actually, if there's any of the kids listening, Santa is real.

[00:02:01] **STEVE:** A lot of people do have their families. In my case, my family's back in Iowa. I haven't seen them in 45 years. I haven't experienced a Christmas or Thanksgiving with them in years and years. And then I sit there at night and I watch TV, and I see these come at home moments, even if it's for a bank advertisement or something, where somebody comes home that hasn't been there for years, and I want that to be me. But I can't have that.

[00:02:28] **bf:** Hey, I feel all that dude. I feel all that, Steve, but don't you ever forget, I give you hugs at least three times a week. That is like Christmas. So miss me with that. And. And I also bring you crackers and cookies, sometimes when the rest of our guys don't even know about it. Like you got cookie squirrel away over there, and nobody knows. So don't you dare say nobody cares about you. I care.

[00:02:52] **JOE:** Christmas is a a time of the year in prison where everybody gets really lonely, and you can see the depression on some of the people. And, but there's this one man that I wanna talk about today. I'm just gonna call him Terry because I'm not sure if he wants his name to be shared.

But Terry is in my building, Building 14 in Solano State Prison. And Terry was a bank robber, and he used to be a pretty crazy guy, shooting at the cops and everything. But Terry has the heart of gold, and all year he saves his money. He barely makes anything. He doesn't have any money coming in from the streets or anything else like that, and he makes, he only makes like maybe $10 a month. But he saves it all year.

And what Terry does is he spends all that money on jars of Folger's coffee and honey buns and things like that. And he stocks 'em up. And at the end of the year, on, on Christmas Eve, He announced us in the building for everybody to line up. And he hands everybody else out a shot of coffee and a honey bun, and tells him Merry Christmas.

And I, I was like, I couldn't believe this guy does this. I was like, this guy, like, he's like the prison Santa Claus, I guess you can say.
STEVE: We had a group of guys about three or four years ago who were crocheting animals, and taking them out to the visiting room to give to the kids at Christmas. And they call themselves the Secret Santas.

BRYAN: And they still do that.

STEVE: They still do that. But the guy that started it was a guy that was what, 6'5"? 6'6," weighed close to 300 pounds. Went by the name of Bull. Administration came to him and said, we want to acknowledge what you guys do. And he said, no, no. The minute you acknowledge it, then you take away from what we're trying to do.

It was something of wanting just to give to others, to share something with others. And it was so funny to see these big bikers and giants sitting in a room, crocheting, you know, their tacked back and their crocheting, and it was one of the most incredible sites you could ever see. A lot of us give of ourselves in some way.

Something we have, something we can share, some knowledge, whatever it is. And we don't want the accolades, we don't want the acknowledgement.

BRYAN: That's the gist of the whole thing is being able to experience that, that peace and the love and the camaraderie or whatever else. In the beginning, I used to think Christmas was all about what I could get, what kind of presents I was gonna get. I mean, I remember one day, me and my little brother went out there and opened up the Christmas pre presents before anybody else was awake. We were so, so stoked about it. But you know, it always was a material thing for me. And, you know, as a year goes by, being away from my family in prison, it really hurt a lot. And I, I lost the meaning of, of, of, of spirituality.

And I figured out later on that it wasn't about what I got. It was about, you know, what I did or what, the way I thought or how I took my place here in prison, as far as me representing my family's love from in here. How best can I respect them by the things that I do and the things that I say. It makes a big difference.

I don't feel so lonely. I don't feel so isolated anymore. I feel as if I'm with my family.

DAMON: I think for me as, there's a couple things that I like to do during these times. One of which is I like to cook for others. I like to be of service.

bf: So that's coming up right?

DAMON: What's that?

bf: The cooking for others?

DAMON: Yes. It's coming up soon for you. Wait, standby.

BRYAN: Are you gonna cook in here for us?
DAMON: Yes. I'm gonna cook for you guys as well.

bf: Oh, then you may continue your story.

DAMON: Okay.

Thank you for that. So anyway, what I try to do is, I think about the guys who are less fortunate, and I look around the building and I see some guys that I know that possibly haven't gotten anything to eat or any food for the month.

And so what I try to do is, I try to reach out to them unbeknownst to them. So I go and I gather all the food up, and then I cook for them. And then on Christmas day, I serve 'em with bowls. And the only thing that they're required to do is gimme their bowl. And then I look out for 'em.

BRYAN: It's hard to give in here because a lot of people, they don't understand generosity. They think that kindness is weakness.

DAMON: Yeah.

BRYAN: And it's, it's difficult sometimes.

JOE: You know, it's funny, Bryan, I really agree with you. And like, I, I really have that, that giving attitude too. And it is funny. I got so giving in prison that when I told the psych department that I was giving all my things away, they thought I was suicidal, and I really wasn't. And I was just like, no, I'm just really nice. I'm giving things away.

BRYAN: That's one of the earmarks

JOE: And, and the thing is, is like. But in in prison though, when you start giving things to people, they take advantage of it sometimes. And the thing I thought is that, people kept telling me, oh, you need to quit being so nice.

People are going to manipulate you. They're going to take advantage of you. And I said, no, screw that. I'm just gonna keep being nice and I'm gonna keep giving things away. I'm gonna keep doing whatever I can for people. And people did start to try to, you know, take advantage of me, and they said, they started to come and ask for more and more and more and more.

You know, you give 'em an inch, they take a mile. But the thing is, though, is that eventually those guys realized themselves that they were asking for too much, but then they started to respect me and then I earned a lot of respect around my yard and my building. And it's funny, everybody told me, quit doing that.

They're, they're gonna manipulate you, and it didn't happen to me.

DAMON: Yo, B, why haven't you bought into this Christmas thing?
bf: I just don't because for me, I've had a trigger, and I mentioned this when I went to my first board hearing. I've had a trigger in my past that might still be lingering, and it had to do with authority figures, right?

And the authority figures that came from going to church and having a religious, ultra religious Pentecostal background. So saying that I had to believe something or I had to do something, and do it unquestioning, that's always been a problem for me. So in my mind, the whole traditional holiday thing falls into joining with something and not questioning it.

So that's where it comes from for me. It's like, no, I don't have to see you and say Merry Christmas. I don't have to see you and say Happy Thanksgiving. I don't have to return it if you say it to me. And it's not that I'm being malicious or mean towards anybody. It's just that I'm not into that. I, I would just as well walk up to you, give you a hug, pat you on the back, and we go about our way.

You know, I mean, that's how I show that I care. Not on some manufactured holiday that I had no part in creating. Damon look like you're about to say something.

DAMON: No. I didn't want to call it a holiday. I didn't wanna call it spiritual. I just know that there's something that resonates in us all. And what we call it is what we call it.

But each person has spoke on different things in this room today that lets me know, personally, that there's something bigger and greater than us that lives in us all.

bf: Just to make my point. At at least one time, have you seen me in the year and a half that you've been here, you know, working together, and have you been glad to see me?

STEVE: Never.

bf: That's a holiday. See, I know Steve gets really happy to see me, but the point I'm making, I continue to make that is genuine to me, that's festivities, that's personal reason to celebrate. That, that, that's meaningful to me, man. That's the, that's the stuff that makes me mushy.

You know, inside, that's the stuff that you see the heart exterior just dissolve. And I won't give a damn. You know, you'll know that I care about being part of the human race.

DAMON: And I choose to call what you just said God.

STEVE: I just wanna say one other thing, guys, just to jump out. In 42 years, I can't think of six better guys to spend the holidays with.
We are a band of brothers. We have our differences, we have our disagreements, but we also have a love and respect for each other that goes far beyond anything else. And that is the biggest gift. And shut up, Bryan?

[00:10:31] **BRYAN:** you're gonna make me cry.

[00:10:32] **STEVE:** I know it, damnit. But I come in here every day, and I know that I've got six guys who have my back.

[00:10:42] **DAMON:** All right. Thank you Steve.

We six. I appreciate that.

[00:10:44] **STEVE:** That that's my, that's my present.

[00:10:45] **x:** Thanks Steve. What?

[00:10:46] **BRYAN:** Thank you, Steve.

[00:10:46] **JOE:** I think, screw Christmas. I, I'm gonna make my New Year's resolution to get Steve a freaking girlfriend.

[00:10:52] **STEVE:** Alright, thank you.

[00:10:53] **x:** Good luck with that. Go ahead.

[00:10:54] **DAMON:** All right, guys. Look, that's it for us over here.

We're gonna throw things over to San Quentin now, to hear what they have to say about the holidays and what the spirituality and all the things that we talked about. We're gonna see what they're talking about.

[00:11:08] **GREG:** All right, so this is Greg Eskridge once again from the San Quentin side of Uncuffed. Here we are at the round table with the fellas. So let me see. Lemme look around, who I got with me today. Bun sitting right next to me. What's up, Bun?

[00:11:19] **CHANTHON:** Hey, how you doing? This is me.

[00:11:21] **GREG:** What's up, Shakur?

[00:11:23] **SHAKUR:** All is well, man. Taking it one day at a time.

Staying focused.

[00:11:26] **GREG:** And how you doing today, Nate?

[00:11:27] **NATE:** Man, I can't complain. All is well.
GREG: All is well?

NATE: All is well.

GREG: So we just wanna talk about the holidays a little bit, man. Let's talk about the holidays and what they mean to you, what they don't mean to you. Just, meals, just whatever may come up to you about the holidays, man.

We'll start with you Shakur. What's, what's on your mind when it comes to the, around this time of the year?

SHAKUR: I've been incarcerated 34 years, and I don't celebrate the holidays. You know, at one point I did celebrate the holidays when I was a kid growing up in the household, family, being a Baptist minister, a Christian.

But today, you know, I practice Islam. I'm a striving believer, a striving true believer. And so, I don't necessarily, you know, subscribe to the holidays. However, what I do appreciate about it is, all of my family members, they like, meet up over the holidays. They fly in from the different parts of the United States, and I'm able to call them and have an opportunity to speak to people who I haven't spoken to, you know, for like a few years, maybe.

So, for me right now it's just about being able to connect with my family members.

GREG: How, matter of fact, how long have you been practicing Islam?

SHAKUR: I've been practicing Islam since 1993. One thing I wanna say, as a person who identifies as Muslim, I'm not locked inside a box. For me, dimensions of, of God or Allah go far beyond brackets, right?

So when I think of like, Christmas, and I think of my conversion to Islam and whatnot, like it was a transition that I had to go through. Those, those spiritual principles, like the spirit of giving, like that's something that I definitely subscribe to. Mm-hmm. Like, that's a, that's a part of my faith. Like, charity and being charitable.

A matter of fact, that's one of the, one of the pillars of Islam.

GREG: That's what's up, man. You know, I think, I think rather regardless of your, your, your faith, whatever you may believe in, you know, I think Christmas is just about, it's just about love. And there's so many atrocities that are taking place across the world, and I think we all need a break from it.

x: Mm-hmm.

GREG: You know, just a time where somebody, where we could just say, thank you. I love you. I appreciate you. Like one of my best friend's fiance, wife, actually. Every Christmas,
she sends me a Christmas card, and she specifically always makes it a Black Santa Claus. Because, cause I'm Black, right?

Yeah. So always trip off. I remember the first time she, she sent the card, she sent me a it, it was a Black Santa Claus, right? Yeah. And so I had a Christmas card that I was gonna send her. But it had a white Christmas, white, white, Santa Claus, right? So I was like, man, I can't send her, I can't send a white Santa Claus.

But yes, we end up sending her a black Santa Claus. But, but that's just a trip. And I just think about that, man. And how, how, how, matter of fact, even around Easter time. Easter, she'll send a, I don't know if it's a black bunny or a chocolate or chocolate bunny. I don't know if it's a one.

[00:14:37] x: Wow.

[00:14:38] GREG: But I always pay attention to it. Every time she, every time she send me something, I say, okay, well let me make sure I match her. I'm not one, I don't want to offend her Blackness.


[00:14:52] NATE: You know, for me, my mother worked at Lockheed Electronics, but on the side she baked cakes as a, as a side hustle.

And she was very good at it, like decorating wedding cakes and, and special occasions, birthday cakes, and mold cakes, dog cakes. I mean, she was real good at that. So by the time I was like nine years old, I was tired of licking the bowl and the beaters, you know. But when, when I think about the the, the desserts, man, at Thanksgiving time that my mother used to put together. It, it leaves just a warm feeling. You, because we need warm feelings in here because the pies and desserts here compared to mama is busted, right. You know, but that's what I really miss the most man, is smelling that sweet potato pie and that pecan pie just permeating all through the house and waking you up. And you's like, I can't wait to get a slice of that.

That's what I did. What do you think, Bun?

[00:15:42] CHANTHON: On the holidays here, man, it's kind of sad around here. And I've been in prison for 23 years, so, you know, for me, I like to cook on holidays. Thanksgiving, any holiday, but.

[00:15:58] NATE: You can cook.

[00:15:59] CHANTHON: Thank, thank you, Nate. I mean, last year Greg said "I need a spread," so I was like, okay, Greg, we going to do this, but he said, Oh, he's gonna be seafood.

So I was like, let's go. So Greg, Greg and the fellas brought some oysters, clams, some fish, rice and you know, I brought some of my special seasoning. I can't tell you guys that.
**x:** What? The secret. That's the secret.

**CHANTHON:** I can't give you my secret. You know, and, and, and, and we whipped it up right here and everybody loved it.

And that's, that's one of my joys during the holidays to help the fellas out. And you know, we get together and we cook, and everybody just have a ball.

**GREG:** Talk to me about those oysters, man. So, where do you get the oyster from?

**CHANTHON:** Man, every three months, we're allowed to order a, a package. And we get these catalog like Union Supply, Walkenhorst, Access, and, you know, they have pouch food: clams, oysters, crabs, fish. They even have a Asian section for all my sauces. I ain't gonna tell you what it is.

**GREG:** No, you gonna have to tell us his secret.

**CHANTHON:** I ain't gonna tell you my secret, but figure this out. But I'm, I'm, I'm just gonna tell you that's where I get my sauces from. And these packages, our family orders them for us, you know, for like, something special. So.

**GREG:** How do you cook it? Once you get it, how do you cook it?

**CHANTHON:** Well, you, it they sell us hot pots here. And so I get a strainer, and I get my special sauce. I mix 'em all up. Right? Not the fish. The fish you steam def, differently. And then I put, I put 'em in a bag, boil the hot water right there, and let 'em simmer in there.

**SHAKUR:** Man, where was I at, man?

**CHANTHON:** You was in class.

**GREG:** You might have been at work.

**CHANTHON:** My, my only thing is I cook, you clean.

**SHAKUR:** Okay.

**CHANTHON:** Yeah, so.

**GREG:** What's up, Nate? What's going on with you?

**NATE:** I'm just, I'm just reminiscing cuz I remember that. It was like bringing a slice of the past in the present. We were all sitting around and, you know, it was just a normal day, you always, and around Christmas time, it's really a sad time to be in the penitentiary.

I'm gonna let y'all know that now. It ain't no bones about it. It's, it's, it's not cool. But when Bun cooked up that meal, hook up that meal, I started to call my mother and tell her she has a rival.
You know what I'm saying? It was so good and it, and just kind of, it kind of took me back to a
time when I, when innocence was there. You know, a lot, a lot of times innocence is lost in here,
but it was one of those things that we got together, and everybody seemed like they
participated.

They brought something. It, it, it really helped me get through a difficult time, and a difficult time
for me is the holidays. The holidays are very difficult because we, you know, we missing our
family. We are missing, we are missing our parents, our children, our sisters, our brothers.
Mm-hmm. You know, aunties and, and uncles that we haven't seen in years.

What the saying is. If you can't be with the one you love, love the one you with. . . That's what
we are doing around here.


[00:18:48] NATE: You know,

[00:18:49] GREG: We do a good job of it too, man, that's one thing I can say. We all come
together, pitch in. Cuz it's, it is tough for, it's tough for all of us.

[00:18:56] CHANTHON: I like cooking for everybody on, on the holidays because, you know.
Christmas is, is, some people say it's religious. And, and some people, it's all about just Santa
Claus and stuff like that. But for me it's, it's personal cuz my son, my younger son was born on
Christmas Eve. Mm. And when, when, when, when he was born, I was already in, in jail. And I
didn't find out that he was born on Christmas Eve until the 2nd of the following year because we
couldn't get the phone, the phones right in LA, in the county jail. So, for me, cooking on, on, on
especially Christmas. Like I I cook for Thanh and them. And it, it makes me feel like I'm with my
son because he's around their age. So when I get ready and cook for him and cook for the fellas
like me celebrating his birthday, cuz I always said that that was my, my, the only Christmas gift I
ever wanted.

And I don't need no other Christmas gift. And until this day, he's 22 now. He's, he's, he's my
favorite Christmas present. And if I, if I never got another one, it'll be fine. So, you know, cooking
for the fellas on, on, on Christmas means a lot to me. And it's like celebrating the birth of my,
my, my son Nicholas.

And, you know, and we, we all get together like family here.

In here, especially, man, it's just the little things. I, I seen, I seen a dude just wait for people to
walk by and throw 'em a candy. And then you see the smile, Hey, thank you. And you see the
smile right there. You know what I mean? But you know, last year I put a stocking on. And
somebody gave me a bite-size Snicker.

I was like, damn, somebody really gave me something. You know? But just, just those little
moments. And it shows that, you know, I mean, just that little smile right there. That's what
Christmas is about man.
SHAKUR: Wait a minute. You said you put a stock in what? Explain that.

NATE: Where'd you put a stock in at?

CHANTHON: I, I was, I, I was, you know, I was at a.

GREG: Why you stuttering, man?

CHANTHON: Cause, a gang of people made fun of me. I was, I was at a arts and correction and they had these felt, and I was like, man, I'll make a stocking. So I made me a little red stocking, and I put it on the bar. And I was like, man, somebody gonna gimme some candy by the time this is over with. And then, somebody dropped in a bite-size Snicker, and I was like, yeah, okay.

GREG: Hey, you know, hey, you know, when you say that Bun, that just reminded me of a time, like years ago. I went to the store. It was around Christmas time, and I went to the, I went to the store. And I bought like, a lot of food, like roast beef and chili beans and rice and a lot of different items. And, and I put 'em in a, in a, in a big brown bag.

And I came out on Christmas day, early the morning, and I said to myself, the very first person that walks past me and says, Merry Christmas, I'm gonna give him that bag.

x: Yeah.

GREG: And lo and behold, I walked outside. I, I actually, I walked past a few people. Nobody said anything, right? Everybody like said, Hey, what's up?

But nobody said Merry Christmas. I got downstairs, and I was going outside and this old white dude, he said, Merry Christus, brother. Wow. I said, Merry Christman, man. I said, here you go. He said, what's this, I said, this is Merry Christmas. That's what it is. I said, it's your Christmas, give a big bag of food. And he looked at that and looked at me like, damn, like, what's going on?

Like, he didn't even expect it. But like, to the point about Christmas and giving, man, that's what it's about. And you know what? Thinking of that story. I might do that again this year. Man.

x: Merry Christmas, Greg! Merry Christmas, Greg!


CHANTHON: Remember. Remember I said it first, Greg.

GREG: Oh, no. I don't know. You might be a three-way tie.

Might have this, pour it all on the all on the table. You guys just spread. Guys, just share it out. But. But yeah, man I, I appreciate, I appreciate the the circle today, man, I, I, I appreciate the energy in the room.
I appreciate the love up in here with the fellas. You know, I appreciate Edmond doing the sound for us and Thanh sitting back doing the editing. Even though, even though they not necessarily in this particular piece. But I appreciate your presence up in here. Thanh, get on over here, Thanh, and say something.

[00:23:03] **THANH:** This is Thanh Tran. Merry freaking Christmas.

[00:23:07] **GREG:** Edmond. Yo, Edmond, don't you get left out, man. You come here and say something too.

[00:23:12] **EDMOND:** What's up y'all? This is Edmond Richardson. I just wanna wish everybody a Merry Christmas.

[00:23:16] **x:** Merry Christmas!

[00:23:17] **GREG:** And a Happy New Year!

[00:23:19] **NATE:** Wait, wait, wait, wait. Be, Before we go. I want to, I want to tell my children, I apologize to y'all for not being there, for missing Christmases and especially this time of year. And I just want to say that I'm sorry. And I love y'all.

[00:23:38] **JOE:** All right, everybody. That was the last episode of Uncuffed for the season. We'd like to thank you guys for listening. You can hear us on 91.7 FM. That's if you have an FM radio. Or you can see us at weareuncuffed.org. If you don't have the internet, go find an internet service provider and get some. It's 2019. What are you doing without internet? You can follow us on social media. Look up We Are Uncuffed, or just Google Uncuffed. I'm sure it's there. The Uncuffed crew at Solano is

[00:24:17] **bf:** The real Brian "bf" Thames.

[00:24:19] **BRYAN:** Don't listen to 'em folks. This is Brian Mazza.

[00:24:21] **STEVE:** Steve Drown.

[00:24:22] **DAMON:** Damon L. Cooke.

[00:24:23] **SPOON:** Spoon Jackson.

[00:24:25] **JOE:** And me, Joe Kirk. And here's the San Quentin radio crew.

[00:24:28] **GREG:** I'm Greg Eskridge.

[00:24:30] **CHANTHON:** I'm Chanthon Bun.

[00:24:31] **SHAKUR:** I'm Tommy "Shakur" Ross.

[00:24:32] **THANH:** I'm Thanh Tran.
[00:24:34] **EDMOND**: I am Edmund Richardson.

[00:24:36] **NATE**: And I'm Nathan McKinney.

[00:24:37] **GREG**: And together, who are we?

[00:24:39] **x**: Uncuffed! Yeah. Season's Greetings!

[00:24:46] **JOE**: We wouldn't have Uncuffed if it wasn't for the people over KALW Public Radio. That's Shereen Adel. David Boyer.

[00:24:53] **GREG**: Ninna Gaensler-Debs, Angela Johnston.

[00:24:55] **JOE**: Kristin McCandless.

[00:24:56] **GREG**: Marissa Ortega-Welch.

[00:24:58] **JOE**: James Rowlands.

[00:24:59] **GREG**: Andrew Stelzer, Ben Trefny.

[00:25:02] **JOE**: Tiana Williams.

[00:25:03] **GREG**: And Eli Wirtschafter.

[00:25:04] **JOE**: Thanks to David Jassy for our music. And thanks to the staff at Solano who make this possible.

Mr. McCann, Dr. Williams, Mr. Unden. And Lieutenant Blackwell, who approves all our content and also is retiring this month. Shout out to you.

[00:25:22] **BRYAN**: Thanks, Lou.

[00:25:23] **STEVE**: Thanks, LT.

[00:25:24] **GREG**: And thanks to the staff at San Quentin. Skyler Brown and Lieutenant Sam Robinson.

[00:25:29] **JOE**: Uncuffed gets its support from the California Arts Council and the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

Thank you for listening, and happy holidays.