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You've Got Mail: Surprise Letters During Lockdown

[00:00:00] **Thanh:** Welcome back to Uncuffed. This is the host you love the most, Thanh Tran coming out of the San Quentin side of America. We got a lot of smiling faces in the room. Lots of smiling faces. I see Greg nodding your head. Let's go right. Greg, introduce yourself.

[00:00:15] **Greg:** Yeah, this is Greg Eskridge down in the studio again. Ready to get uncuffed with the fellas as always.

[00:00:21] **Thanh:** Mm-hmm

[00:00:22] **Shakur:** It's Tommy Shakur Ross uncuffing with the crew. Oh yeah.

[00:00:28] **Edmond:** This is Edmond Richardson. I'm just loving the energy right now. I love y'all. Y'all put a big smile on my face, so I appreciate y'all man.

[00:00:36] **Thanh:** Absolutely. I'm excited, man. I'm loving the energy too, man. We're here today cuz Greg the great, the golden Greg Eskridge has brought something more to us. Greg, tell us what it is.

[00:00:48] **Greg:** I brought Darren and Steve down to the studio, two older white gentlemen, to talk about some surprise letters that they recently received, right? Mm.

[00:00:57] **Thanh:** Recently, how recently we talking?

[00:00:59] **Greg:** So we talking about Covid outbreak recent.

[00:01:02] **Thanh:** Mm. So letters during COVID that they received. So Shakur, can you tell me, can you tell me a little bit about what the situation was like during COVID and why letters is so particularly important?

[00:01:16] **Shakur**: Well, when the outbreak initially occurred, and we were slammed, and to be honest with you, I didn't, it felt like I didn't know when we were gonna come off. Right. All I, all I knew is that I had my TV, I was able to look at the news, and it felt awesome just to be able to receive like word from the outside, through, through letters, because we weren't able to initially get phone calls.

So for me, just being able to stay in contact with my people via letter writing was, was huge for me. It helped me, you know, mentally to get through the, the pandemic.

[00:01:52] **Greg**: Mm-hmm, because I know for me, San Quentin, hasn't been on a lockdown in a long time before the, before the pandemic. And so honestly I got used to, you know, getting on the phone or sending cards.

I got kind of lazy with the letters, right. And so letter writing was like one of the main things I did throughout the day. All we had was letters.

[00:02:15] **Edmond**: Pretty much.

[00:02:16] **Thanh**: Right. That was the brightest part of the day when the CO would stop by your cell and drop that piece of mail on your bars. Yeah. Ooh, we.

[00:02:22] **Shakur**: But what about when, what about when he, when he, when he slows down, like he's gonna stop. But then he keeps moving!

[00:02:30] **Thanh**: Why you been traumatizing me right now, man, man. And that's the worst. When you think you get the, you get hit with the pump fake? Yeah, like he's like wrong cell, wrong cell. Oh, come on man know I've been in here. I ain't got nothing going for me. I need a letter right now. I need some love, LL Cool J.

[00:02:45] **Edmond**: I mean it, it was crazy during the pandemic.

[00:02:48] **Thanh**: Yeah.

[00:02:48] **Edmond**: And I say that because I got so much mail that I had to prioritize people to write back.

[00:02:54] **Thanh**: Okay. I wish I was that popular.

[00:02:55] **Edmond**: So I, so I loved it. It was cool. You are popular.

[00:02:58] **Thanh**: I'm just messing with you, dog. I got a lot of love too, man. So shout out.

[00:03:01] **Greg**: So we just, so we just poured out our heart talking about we ain't getting no mail and then you just throw at us that you get all mail every day, volumes of mail every day.

[00:03:08] **Thanh**: Right? So the whole time I wasn't getting any. It's cuz they were writing you.

[00:03:11] **Edmond:** Yeah. I'm sorry.

[00:03:12] **Greg:** You got all the mail in the institution?

[00:03:13] **Edmond:** I'm sorry. Sometimes it'd be the same person. Like two, three letters. You gotta respond to one. Like how come you didn't answer this question? Like we, we wasn't getting on the phones at the time.

[00:03:23] **Thanh:** Oh yeah, yeah, yeah.

[00:03:23] **Edmond:** So you had, sometimes you just have to pick one letter you gonna write to that day? Yeah.

[00:03:27] **Thanh:** Shout, shout, shout out to our fans.

[00:03:29] **Greg:** Shout out to the family and friends.

[00:03:31] **Thanh:** Shout out to all the, to the, to the loyal friends and family out there that was writing your loved ones during this pandemic.

Cuz let me tell you that thing matters. Yeah, it really does.

[00:03:40] **Greg:** Yeah. We needed that.

[00:03:41] **Thanh:** I needed that for real.

[00:03:42] **Greg:** Yeah.

[00:03:43] **Thanh:** I think the only thing I got besides COVID during the pandemic was carpal tunnel. From writing so many dang letters.

[00:03:53] **Greg:** Yeah.

[00:03:53] **Thanh:** I love that we could still laugh about it, though. Like it, it was a hard moment and I, I think that's why I really loved this story we're about to listen to, because it really captures what was going on, especially through the lens of keeping in contact with the people we love.

[00:04:07] **Greg:** So, first of all, you might recognize Steve's voice from Uncuffed. You know, he was one of the podcast producers down there in Solano.

[00:04:15] **Thanh:** Yeah. So shout out to the Solano side, man. For real. Yeah. So Greg, question. So what brought about this story? What made you want to go do this?

[00:04:23] **Greg:** So during the lockdown of 2020 during the pandemic, you know, there were so many heartbreaking stories about death, people getting infected with Covid, and it was just so much going on here in San Quentin. It was just so much sadness.

Right. And so I was thinking to myself, I said, man. I wonder if I can find something happy that came out of this, this pandemic. Something pleasant, something that wasn't so gloomy, right? Mm-hmm . And so I went on the search. I said, I'm gonna go find somebody to see if somebody got some good news during the pandemic.

So I ran across Steve and Darren, and both of 'em were like, man, you know, I got letters during the pandemic that were a surprise from their family members. I don't wanna spoil it.

[00:05:08] **Thanh:** Don't tell the folks nothing more. Y'all just gonna have to listen. How about we just go to the piece. How's that sound?

[00:05:13] **Edmond:** Let's get to it.

[00:05:14] **Greg:** Let's go to the piece then.

[00:05:15] **Shakur:** Let's push play.

[00:05:19] **Steve:** I have a half brother who I have, who I saw when he was eight weeks old. You know, I held him in my arms. I, I fed him. I changed him. Now, now he's six foot tall and weighs almost 200 pounds. Yeah. Yeah. And that's been 51 years. A little over a year ago, I get a letter from him, and it was the biggest surprise I've ever experienced in my life.

[00:05:47] **Darren:** So for me, it wasn't as quite as long as it was for you. It was 20 years. The last time I seen my son was in 2001. He was three years old, and here we are, 20 years later. He's now 24 with a fiancé and a child of his own. His fiancé contacted my sister. My sister, my sister sent me a JPay letter, email telling me that here's your son's address.

And his phone number, contact him. JPay has set up a email account for our family members, but there's a machine here at, in San Quentin that when they type in their message, it comes out in letter form here, and then it's delivered to us in our regular mail. You don't even wanna open 'em. You just wanna leave 'em, sit there.

Maybe you have your cellie open him when he comes back. So if there is any bad news, he can slowly break it to you. But this was a beautiful thing. This was something that was just fantastic because my son, all of a sudden wants to have something to do with me. He, like me, sitting in COVID restrictions, he's thinking about his dad.

"Oh, there's an outbreak in San Quentin. All these people just died. My dad's in San Quentin. I wonder how my dad's doing." So his anxiety went up because he doesn't wanna miss an opportunity to find out who his old man is.

[00:07:08] **Steve:** That's just. I, I can only imagine what he was going through and thinking about that because I wasn't at San Quentin when the outbreak hit here. I was still at Solano, but that was all we heard about over and over and over again. In my case, when I got the letter, it wasn't a JPay letter. It was regular US mail.

[00:07:34] **Darren:** Snail mail.

[00:07:35] **Steve:** Snail mail. And I initially thought. Okay, he's never written do I wanna open this and find out I don't ever want to hear from you again?

Don't try to, don't don't send me any more Christmas cards. I'm not gonna write back. And it was that sort of thing. So I was really leery about opening that letter. But then to open it up and see this opening of his heart, basically, inviting me in.

[00:08:02] **Darren:** Right.

[00:08:03] **Steve:** And I think that's what you got when, when you heard from your son.

[00:08:06] **Darren:** Exactly.

[00:08:07] **Steve:** What was that first conversation like? .

[00:08:10] **Darren:** So, when I got this JPay email, my first thought was to write back. Even though there's a phone number there, because I was so afraid of talking to him and then maybe hearing something like, you know, wait that here comes the other foot.

[00:08:24] **Steve:** Yeah, or, or the, the one, when we make a phone call and your call has not been accepted.

[00:08:30] **Darren:** Both of those.

[00:08:31] **Steve:** Yeah.

[00:08:32] **Darren:** But a friend of mine said, don't wuss out. Your son sent you his phone number. Go call him. Don't snail mail it. And I went and called him, and it turns out he was more apprehensive than I was. Now, I did something really stupid and I abandoned my family 20 years ago to come to prison. Let's let's face that. But we all do stupid things all day. You don't have to be in prison to do stupid things.

[00:08:54] **Steve:** No.

[00:08:54] **Darren:** And my son did a couple of stupid things with his grandmother, and he thought I would hold that against him.

That's between him and his grandmother.

[00:09:02] **Steve:** What are some of the other things that you and your son have either discussed or written to each other?

[00:09:08] **Darren:** We're just learning about everything and what he has done in the, in the last 20 years that I. You know, graduating high school. I didn't graduate high school, but he stuck to it, even though he didn't have a mom and dad there to make him go to school.

So he's got a, a wherewithal to get things done. But it's the tone of his voice that gets me every time I talk to him. Because he sounds so much like me. But I hear his mom and his mom is my high junior high school sweetheart.

[00:09:37] **Steve:** Oh, wow.

[00:09:37] **Darren:** So we go all the way back to when we were teenagers. And so his mom was always very, very special to me.

And every time I talk to him, I hear his mom.

[00:09:45] **Steve:** That's so cool. It it's like each conversation, you learn a little bit more or you share a little bit more. Yes. Or he asks more from you. And I think the same thing with the letters. You know, each time I learn more about my brother.

[00:10:03] **Darren:** The only thing is, I wish phone calls were a little bit longer.

[00:10:06] **Steve:** Yeah, I've gotta share something. When I got that first letter. If, if I can share this. This... Something that really hit me, this is what he wrote to me. He says, "As I age, I see things through a different lens. I spent a lot of time in recent years reflecting on my life and my family. I've become saddened by the fact, this, this was not how life was supposed to be. A brother whom I have never met. A family estranged. I feel bad for my children, that they were not able to know their grandparents, their aunts, or their uncle."

When he wrote that,

[00:10:45] **Darren:** Chokes you up.

[00:10:46] **Steve:** Yeah. I mean, I thought that. I thought that they threw me away. Because of what I did that put myself in prison. My sister has never wanted to have anything to do with me since I fell.

So to have the, one of the two half brothers make that statement. And make that desire to want to bring his kids to get to know who I am.

[00:11:17] **Darren:** Steve, I want to thank you for sharing that because I know how emotional and how powerful that was.

[00:11:25] **Steve:** Thank you. Thank you. I, I never thought that I would feel that way over a letter. And to have it actually put down in black and white was just the most, I, it, it, it still hits me when I think about it, when I talk about it.

[00:11:43] **Darren:** And I'm glad he reached out to you.

[00:11:45] **Steve:** And I'm glad your son reached out to you.

[00:11:47] **Darren:** Me too.

[00:11:48] **Thanh:** So we just heard the piece, man. It was both uplifting and sad. It made me feel a whole lot of emotions. Greg, I see you nodding your head right now. Like, this was your piece, man. So how are you feeling just hearing the story again?

[00:12:03] **Greg:** It was just nice. It was nice to hear that, you know, after so much time elapsed from the last time they heard from their loved ones, that they were able to get back in contact with 'em. You know, as somebody who has spent significant amount of time in prison, I know how important it is to, to stay in contact with people.

And so just to have these people come back into your life. You know, it, it was amazing. Like I, like, I really like, felt like genuine joy for both of them.

[00:12:31] **Thanh:** Yeah.

[00:12:31] **Greg:** You know, especially to Steve, to hear Steve talk about... He thought his family, you know, gave him, gave up on him, threw him away. Yeah. You know, that's, that's powerful.

Cause I know a lot of us in, in, you know, lot of, lot of us, not only lifers, but a lot of people in prison, in general, sometimes feel that way. You know, we definitely feel, feel that isolation and that separation from my families. And sometimes we wonder like, man, like y'all like, do people really still care?

You know? But then to get, get a letter out of the blue. Like, that was just so beautiful to see, man. So, you know, Shakur, I know you've been, you've done a lot of time, and I know you've had some some people popping into your life, though. So what do you think about the significance of just, people just popping up like that? You know, that, that support?

[00:13:18] **Shakur:** What I really appreciate about this story is to be able to reconnect with his son, like during the pandemic. And when he, when he unpacked that particular aspect, like. And then, then the COVID hit. So now his son, it's like having fear or anxiety about what's going on with his dad.

Possibly wondering if they're ever going to really develop, you know, a relationship because. Yeah. Essentially it just, they, they hadn't, they didn't know each other, right. Mm. So I think that for me, the fact that he was able to connect with his son under these conditions. I think that that was huge.

[00:13:57] **Greg:** Yeah, this is Greg, I still love, I still write love, writing letters, right?

[00:14:01] **Thanh:** Yeah.

[00:14:01] **Greg:** You know, I still getting out my paper, getting out my folder, getting out my pen. And I turned the paper like, slightly to the right. I wouldn't write straight. And so then once you get to, once you turn the page straight, all the letters look like they're slanted, right?

[00:14:19] **Thanh:** Ooh.

[00:14:19] **Greg:** You know, real, real nice stuff.

[00:14:21] **Thanh:** Hold on, man. This is extra fly right here.

[00:14:23] **Shakur:** What if you make a mistake? What would you do?

[00:14:25] **Greg:** Oh, it was over. I'm tearing it up.

[00:14:29] **Thanh:** Oh man.

[00:14:31] **Greg:** Yeah. Writing. And because look, because my thing is this. We in prison. We have a lot of time to sit down and write a letter. First of all, we got, we got time to write a letter, like how many people in the world are really actually writing letters, right?

[00:14:45] **Thanh:** Yeah.

[00:14:45] **Greg:** So we don't have no excuse. As busy as we are. And down here, you know, working and all this stuff we do. We still have time.

[00:14:51] **Shakur:** Do you put smell good on the letter?

[00:14:53] **Thanh:** Look at here. Smell good. Tell 'em what smell good is. First of all, what's the smell good, Shakur?

[00:14:57] **Shakur:** Well, you know, like, like we have these oils that, that we are allowed to get.

[00:15:02] **Thanh:** Yeah. The scented oils.

[00:15:03] **Shakur:** Yeah. scented oils. And you know, they come into little four ounce bottle or ounce bottle and you know, you. I, I've used it before.

[00:15:11] **Thanh:** Yeah. You rub a little smell good on your letters? Make it, give pizazz? Hold on, Greg, let me take some notes.

[00:15:19] **Greg:** So first of all, I dip the Q-tip just the tip of the tip inside the oil. Yeah. And I take every, like every page, like right. I go and I go around every page of the letter.

[00:15:31] **Thanh:** Every edge of it.

[00:15:32] **Greg:** Every edge of it, right. And then I go to the bottom of the envelope.

[00:15:36] **Thanh:** Okay.

[00:15:37] **Greg:** And put it, like put a streak across the bottom.

[00:15:40] **Thanh:** Okay.

[00:15:40] **Greg:** You know what I mean? Just so the envelope and everything can smell, right?

[00:15:43] **Thanh:** Hey, this is an art form.

[00:15:45] **Greg:** This. Man, man.

[00:15:46] **Thanh:** This is a science right here!

[00:15:49] **Greg:** This is serious, you know.

[00:15:50] **Thanh:** Sweet Jesus!

[00:15:50] **Greg:** And so then after I put the letter in there. You know, the last thing I'd do before I seal it up.

[00:15:55] **Shakur:** You kiss it.

[00:15:55] **Greg:** I kiss the letter. Drop that baby off in the mailbox.

[00:16:01] **Thanh:** Oh, Shakur knew too. Cause Shakur do the same thing. Edmund, I'm curious. You kiss the letter too, right after you write it?

[00:16:07] **Edmond:** No, I do not.

[00:16:08] **Thanh:** Why not, man. You look like the --

[00:16:09] **Edmond:** I'm sorry. Maybe I need to add that to my repertoire.

[00:16:12] **Thanh:** You know what I'm saying?

[00:16:13] **Greg:** Yeah, he doesn't yet. Doesn't.

[00:16:16] **Thanh:** Alright, he doesn't yet. No, I'm loving this, man. Hey, I'm I'm loving this convo. I'm loving this convo. I'm loving the energy. Alright, man. I want to ask y'all man, not just during Covid, but just in general, like, what was the most meaningful letter you ever got? I see some head scratching right now.

Edmond is confident. He already know what it is. He off the riff. He's like, I know.

[00:16:37] **Edmond:** So Friday, I'm getting married.

[00:16:40] **Shakur:** Whaaat?

[00:16:42] **Edmond:** And that whole, this whole relationship started from a letter.

[00:16:46] **Thanh:** Wow. Whoa. Okay. You tell us, so, so when did you get this letter?

[00:16:51] **Edmond:** It was January, 2020. So, so my boy Maserati E, he paroled. The girl that he was dating's friend wanted a pen pal, and Maserati gave her my address. And she wrote me.

[00:17:07] **Thanh:** Wow, shout out Maserati.

[00:17:08] **Edmond:** The first card that I sent her was a Valentine's day card. Right. And, and it was of Mickey and Minnie mouse. And like, Mickey was flirting with Minnie.

[00:17:20] **Shakur:** Mickey and Minnie.

[00:17:21] **Edmond:** I forget what I put it in there, but I asked her to be my Valentine.

[00:17:25] **Thanh:** Ooh. Did

you do the three boxes? Yes. No. Maybe.

[00:17:30] **Edmond:** No. Damn. No, I wish,, I wish I would have so months go by, the pandemic happens. She writes back, ask how I'm doing. And it's history ever since, I wrote her every day. Okay. So like, y'all talking about letter writing processes. Like, we have like a little word processor, we call it a Neo, and I type all my letters before I hand write them.

So this was like the process every day, three, four pages every day. Transcribing. If you see my writing right now, this is how I got good. That's why my handwriting looks so good right now. Writing her.

[00:18:07] **Greg:** Recently

[00:18:08] **Edmond:** Every day.

[00:18:09] **Greg:** Wow.

[00:18:11] **Thanh:** No, this is factual y'all because I'm, every time I stopped by Edmond's cell, he was writing a letter.

I was like, you still writing letters? You've been writing letters for five weeks now. You still writing letters? He's like, I write every single day. I was like, that's commitment, brother.

[00:18:24] **Shakur:** Could you tell he was in love?

[00:18:25] **Thanh:** Oh yeah, absolutely. He had eyes like heart shaped.

[00:18:27] **Edmond:** so even like recently she was like, I miss you writing me.

Oh, I'm like, do you know how hard it is to write a letter? Do you know my process? Like I just don't wake up and flow. Just have the words to say. And like, my penmanship is just on point.

Like there's, there's a whole process without the cologne or the smell good. You know what I'm saying?

[00:18:50] **Shakur:** The cologne.

[00:18:51] **Greg:** Hey, but that's the thing about letter writing? Like when you're on lockdown, see, normally when you're not on lockdown, you get a chance to go to work, go to school, right. Get involved in a bunch of groups or whatever you may do. Right. So, you don't really have a lot of time to really sit down and write. But on lockdown, that's all you have to do all day, is just sit down and write.

You could write like 10, 12 page letters.

[00:19:15] **Shakur:** Hey, I wanna say congratulations on a, on the wedding, man.

[00:19:18] **Thanh:** Right? Shout out brother. Hey man. Not too many people can write a letter and get a wife out of it. So shout out, my brother. I don't know what you've been writing in them letters, but you got some skills, boy.

Man, so I feel like we should have did this story about Edmond too, man. Cuz he got one hell of a letter during his pandemic. That said, man, I want to give a major shout out to Greg for doing this story. Yeah. Right. I want a shout out to, to the two characters, Steve and Darren. It was fascinating. I'm super happy for them.

Great. Right. And I wanna shout out to all of our family members out there that's took the time to hurt they wrist and write us letters too. That's what's up?

[00:19:58] **Greg:** Yeah, truly, man. I wanna say this, Greg in closing. I wanna say, man. Yeah. Shout out to Darren and Steve. Great job. I'm, I'm happy for you. Happy for them.

Last time I talked to both of 'em. They were still in contact with their family members. Everything is still going strong and smooth. I think they're even getting in contact with even more people. So that's, so that's great to hear. But yeah man, just shout out to my family, friends, everybody that's been rocking with me all these years, my new friends, new penpals, people that just pop up, people that just care, man.

You know, we may, you know, we in the isolation, you know, we in a, we in the part of a part of society, man, that. It's a dark place, but you know, one thing, one thing that's for certain that that can always penetrate these prison walls or is love. Yeah. Love and true friendship, man, you know seep through the walls somehow, some way.

[00:20:47] **Thanh:** I love that.

[00:20:49] **Shakur:** Hey, I just gotta, I just gotta give a shout out to all the people who have been writing me for the 36.8 years. Wow. I've been locked up. I just wanna say thank you to everyone

who, who have written me. I can't remember all the people that have written me. I will always remember you. And I'm, I'm so grateful.

[00:21:07] **Edmond:** I think the big takeaway for me is like, don't wait for something that happened to reach out to somebody that you love. True. Don't let anything, like any small situation, conflict, like keep you from like growing in that relationship. So thank you again, Greg. Excellent story. I love y'all. Edmond checking out.

[00:21:32] **Thanh:** Absolutely. Let's check out y'all.

[00:21:34] **Greg:** Uncuffed,

[00:21:35] **Thanh:** Checking out.

[00:21:36] **Shakur:** Yep, yep, yep. I'm out.

[00:21:38] **Thanh:** Whoop.