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Uncuffed Presents: Becoming Muslim

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

[00:00:05] **SHAKUR:** Hello. How's everyone doing? This is Tommy Shakur Ross. I'm one of the co-producers of Uncuffed, and I wanna share a story with you today from another podcast out of KALW called The Spiritual Edge. The person this story is about has an experience that closely parallels mine. He converted to Islam while incarcerated.

I too converted to Islam while serving time in prison. The first time I attended Islamic services at the Interfaith Chapel in Calipatria State Prison, I saw a young man delivering a khutbah, which is a sermon. He was about 20 years old. He was a leader in the community. He was disciplined, and he had these clerical skills that I admired. And I figured, if Islam can help him, it can also help me.

Converting to Islam was a way for me to reclaim my identity as a Black man in America. And in this story from the Becoming Muslim series of The Spiritual Edge, you'll hear how one man's experience resembles many. Reporter Hana Baba takes it away.

[00:01:13] **HANA:** From KALW and The Spiritual Edge, this is Becoming Muslim, stories of Americans who've chosen Islam. I'm Hana Baba.

An important part of the Black Muslim story has to do with American prisons. Our guide for this subject is Spearit. He's a scholar. He goes by one name, and he's a professor at Thurgood Marshall School of Law at Texas Southern University. Author of American Prisons: A Critical Primer on Culture and Conversion to Islam .

[00:01:47] **SPEARIT:** Malcolm X said it himself. He said, there is no audience that is more prime to hear the message of Islam than the Black man in prison.

[00:01:55] **x:** The first year that I was in prison didn't rehabilitate me in any way, shape or form. The prisons aren't set up to rehabilitate Negroes.

[00:02:05] **SPEARIT:** And it happens to be that starting in the 70s, we started on this turn to mass incarceration.

And so, you know, large groups of African-American men. And so they are literally a captive audience for the message.

[00:02:22] **HANA:** 30 to 40,000 prison inmates convert to Islam every year, according to Spirit. He argues that the Black Muslim story can't be told without looking at what's happened in American prisons. And that's what we're talking about today, the experience of Black men who convert to Islam in prison.

Today we're gonna meet one. Wendell El-Amin James. His story starts in 1960s San Francisco. It was a time of cultural revolution, radical ideas, and for the city's Black communities, it was also a time when the jazz scene flourished in the Fillmore District, known as the Harlem of the West. As a kid of just 11 or 12, Wedell James saw a lot on the city streets.

[00:03:08] **WENDELL:** The, the players, the pimps, the all kind of different stuff from San Francisco. You had the, the drugs, you had, the, the, the houses, you had the, the clubs, it was scars, lights. I just saw a lot of stuff.

[00:03:25] **HANA:** Wendell never learned how to read. He was classified special ed for a speech impediment.

As a teen, he would hang out in the neighborhood, in the city on Saturdays, church on Sundays, and then an unexpected turn of events. His girlfriend got pregnant.

[00:03:41] **WENDELL:** So I was supposed to get married at 18 years old and become responsible. You'd be responsible, and you get job and you make sure this girl is taken care of him, okay?

Right, and got me a job in the shipyard at a young age. But then I became a part of the street as well, and uh, I had friends that were selling marijuana weed.

[00:04:06] **HANA:** He started dealing. He needed money to keep a house and support his new family, but then...

[00:04:12] **WENDELL:** Graduated to something else. To the cocaine and heroin. Then I became a dope dealer in San Francisco.

[00:04:20] **HANA:** This was also a time of activism and social change. The height of the free speech movement in Berkeley, the Black Panthers in Oakland, plus the Nation of Islam, had a strong presence in the lives of Black people in the Bay Area. Wendell's older brother was a member.

[00:04:37] **WENDELL:** And I used to go to the mass with him, the temple with him. And I, I used to like it because they, whether they, uh, marched in their drills and it was, yeah, it was structured.

I loved it. I loved it. You know.

[00:04:54] **HANA:** Wendell admired the Nation, but he was young and as a teen, he now had this huge responsibility of caring for a family before the age of 20. He dealt drugs for years, and the money was rolling in. But by the late 70s, he wasn't just dealing heroin and cocaine. He was using too.

[00:05:14] **WENDELL:** Came, uh, to a point to where I had a dealer's habit.

My wife and I stayed together about five years. Being young, five years. And uh, then she got addicted to drugs. Off my use. Yeah. I got arrested in San Jose, and I did six months in the county jail.

[00:05:34] **HANA:** That was Wendell's first involvement with incarceration. But after he left, he went right back to his old drug life on the outside. It was the same for a lot of people. At the time, recidivism rates were notoriously high, and in 1987, he was charged with another crime, a much more serious crime: first degree murder.

[00:05:55] **WENDELL:** Saying I was scared to death.

[00:05:56] **HANA:** Wendell maintains his innocence to this day, but he was convicted and sent to prison for 27 years.

He remembers when he was awaiting his sentence in county jail. The men inside with him gave him a reality check about what would come next.

[00:06:12] **WENDELL:** And I went into a a, a holding tank with people that were older than I was, OGs so to speak, and they would tell me, youngster, you're going to prison. You be charged with murder.

You're going to prison, man. You know? Cause a lot of OGs, OGs had been to prison and they, at that time it was a war going on in prison. You know, Blacks and whites and Mexicans, they was viewing real bad. And people were dying every day, you know? So they said, you going old Folsom. If you go, you going old Folsom.

And that's where it's really bad, man. Whoa.

[00:06:46] **HANA:** This was the height of Ronald Reagan's war on drugs in the 1980s.

[00:06:51] **x:** Say yes to your life. And when it comes to drugs and alcohol, just say no.

[00:06:58] **HANA:** That led to prison populations swelling. A 1985 report on violence at Folsom State Prison counted 120 stabbings in just six months that year. A prison guard was killed the

same year Wendell was going in. And so the older men Wendell was getting advice from, they had a big tip for him.

[00:07:19] **WENDELL:** They said, when you go to prison, you go to prison, hang out with the Muslims. Said you be hang out with the Muslims, you'll be okay. What? What do you mean by that?

He said, nothing gonna happen to the Muslims. I said, what you mean by that? He said, Muslims don't play. He said, you hang out with the Muslims, you'll be straight.

[00:07:38] **HANA:** By the time Wendell went to prison in the late 1980s, there were a number of different Black Muslim groups on the inside, and they were all reaching out to incarcerated men more than ever.

[00:07:50] **SPEARIT:** The Muslim groups are the most sophisticated and organized outreach effort groups in prison. That the prison's ever known.

[00:07:57] **HANA:** Spearit, the scholar who studies Islam in prisons, says like it was for Malcolm X, prison for many is a time of personal reflection.

[00:08:06] **SPEARIT:** For many, you've gotta realize, it's the first time they've ever been able to sit down and concentrate on something, away from the chaos of the hood and the streets and all of that, right?

So there, there is that, and we have to remember in prison it's traumatic. It's a traumatic experience, and there's other research that suggests that trauma, the trauma of having to go to prison, and then finally getting there and having to live that experience. These are precursors to conversion as well.

[00:08:40] **WENDELL:** So I get there. And the first I get there, I see somebody get killed. The first I get there, the first day. I'll see somebody get killed.

[00:08:52] **HANA:** That day, his new cellmate gave him different advice from what he heard from those county jail men. This man said, you gotta be part of the war happening in prison. You have to pick a side and be loyal to it.

[00:09:05] **WENDELL:** He said, if you gonna survive, you gotta be part of this, man. If you don't, if you don't want any part this, you're gonna die.

[00:09:11] **HANA:** Wendell had a choice to make. A choice that could mean the difference between life and death. Should he listen to this man inside prison and get involved with the gangs, or take the advice from the men he met in county jail?

He was new. He was conflicted with mixed messages, but he knew he had to choose. And in that moment, he decided.

[00:09:33] **WENDELL:** I said, where the, where the Muslims hang out. He said the Muslims, he said, what, what religion are you? I said, I'm, I'm a Christian. Said, what you wanna hang with the Muslims for? I said, I wanna see what, what, what they're about.

[00:09:48] **HANA:** Someone pointed Wendell to where the Muslims hung out: the Multifaith Chapel.

[00:09:53] **WENDELL:** So I went over there and I went inside, and it was like, wow, this is cool. Had one.

[00:10:00] **HANA:** What did you see?

[00:10:01] **WENDELL:** I saw the brothers all together. It had one section where my brothers learned the prayer, and one section where the brothers learned Arabic.

In one press section where they got a, a whiteboard where they, they, they're learning stuff from the black on the whiteboard and they, it was like, it was cool. It was quiet out. Out there, it was the yard, a lot of noise. Inside, it was quiet. Everybody respectful.

[00:10:23] **HANA:** One of the men introduced him to the others, and he felt that familiar draw he experienced as a kid going with his brother to the Nation temple.

[00:10:32] **WENDELL:** You know, they glow. They just, it's a different look. It, look, look different from people in prison. You got that shine. You're serious about what you're doing. You know, you're being educated, you're being transformed.

Everything you're doing, it's different.

[00:10:44] **HANA:** And that protection the old Gs told him about? That first day, he stayed in the chapel as long as he could, and when it was time to leave, the Muslim men walked him back to his cell. In the morning, someone would be there to get him. He felt safe. He felt he was with productive people.

He listened as they read from the Quran, he watched their prayers, and when Ramadan came along, he fasted with them.

[00:11:09] **WENDELL:** My first fast, I wasn't Muslim then. Okay. But to see that how they fast, that you don't eat, uh, you don't drink, you don't do nothing. No swearing, no cursing, no nothing.

[00:11:21] **HANA:** Wedell was into all of that. SpearIt says these feelings are part of the reason why Islam is such a powerful draw for men like him in prison. This strong sense of connection, the discipline. And he says there are some other reasons too.

[00:11:36] **SPEARIT:** Many people just look at their existential situation and associate that with Christianity, right?

That this was a, you know, Christian country, these were Christians who did this to me, and I'm sitting in prison because of this system that, you know, that basically Christianity has authorized. So there is that sense that by, by being Muslim, you are joining something that has had a glorious past of standing up to Christianity, right, of having glorious victories.

And so there is this sense that, um, Christianity is something to get away from, something to have a foil against. And Islam can be that for some people.

[00:12:19] **HANA:** SpearIt says many Black American Muslims see themselves as reverts rather than converts. Going back to the past and reclaiming powerful lost Muslim identities linked to the history of Islam in Africa, and even Spain.

[00:12:41] **JUDY:** Hi, this is Judy Silber, executive editor of The Spiritual Edge. We'll get back to the story shortly, but I'm here to remind you that more stories from the Becoming Muslim series are available by looking for The Spiritual Edge in your podcast player. Or you can go to our website, thespiritualedge.org. That's also where you can donate to the project.

We're so proud of the Becoming Muslim series, but this kind of journalism isn't cheap. Believe it or not, we started planning back in 2017 and it took a whole team to make it happen. If you appreciate this kind of sensitive, in-depth storytelling, please consider making a donation. We are committed to bringing you more thoughtful journalism about religion and spirituality, but we need your help.

So go to our website, thespiritualedge.org and make a donation today. We appreciate your listening and your support. Now, back to the story.

[00:13:45] **WENDELL:** So almost at the end of Ramadan, I told her brother, I said, I wanna, I wanna become Muslim. He said, you sure? I said, yeah, I wanna become Muslim. I said, this is cool. He said, why? Why you say it's cool, man? And why you, why you think it's cool. I said, because the, the way that you guys are doing things is, is different.

You know, you got dope dealers and you got dope fiends in prison. You got everything in prison that you got on the street. You know, you got people doing the same thing on the street they're doing in prison, you know, so vice versa. So I said, this is cool. I said, if I'm gonna be in prison, if I'm gonna do some time, this is where I want to be.

I wanna be a Muslim.

[00:14:19] **HANA:** It was 1988. He remembers the day vividly.

[00:14:22] **WENDELL:** When I took my shot out, it was, it was like a, uh, well, weight was lift, lifted off me. It was like, okay, uh, you got this, you can do this, right? You don't, you don't have to worry about nothing. You can do this. There's time, whatever time they gave you, you can do this.

You know, you just keep doing what you're doing. You know, just keep reading this book, and the book is gonna give you a direction out of this.

[00:14:46] **HANA:** He was now Muslim, but it was a rough transition for Wendell. While in prison, he started going back to his old habit of dealing drugs again, and he ended up in solitary confinement. The hole. He says the Islamic concept of God watching you at all times is what helped him through it.

[00:15:05] **WENDELL:** So when I got in the hole, I realized, hey, wait, wait a minute. You can't, can't do this. Elijah, he watching me everything I do. You know, everything that I do, I'm being watched. I'm being, every day that I do things and somebody watched me at all times.

So I gotta make a promise to myself first, I gotta make a promise I allow God. Then make a promise myself that this, you can't do this. You know, you have to take control your life and know that you not the one in this. You know, you're being watched.

[00:15:36] **HANA:** Spirit says being in solitary, the hole, it can be instrumental for conversion and for commitment to the faith.

Again, he points to the story of Malcolm X.

[00:15:46] **SPEARIT:** His time in solitary is what really got him inspired and, and was the trigger for his conversion. When you've got nowhere else to turn, you're at rock bottom. You can only turn to God and only go upward from there.

[00:15:59] **HANA:** Wendell left the hole with a new vision for himself. He cut ties with the guys who were dealing, got back in with the Muslim guys.

He started going to Friday services, and he studied a lot. Over the years, he slowly worked to turn his vision into reality. He spent most of his time in the chapel or in the library. He taught himself how to read, got his GED, he got a clerkship with the Muslim chaplain, and earned a certificate in drug and alcohol counseling.

[00:16:29] **WENDELL:** Oh man. Oh man.

[00:16:41] **x:** Oh man.

[00:16:42] **HANA:** Wendell got out on July 2nd, 2015. He'd been in prison for nearly three decades. His son and the Muslim chaplain he'd known inside were there to greet him.

[00:16:54] **x:** Daddy..

[00:17:00] **WENDELL:** I didn't know what a cell phone was until I came home from prison. So when I came home, I got a cell phone, and my first thing that I did, I hooked up with some people that was doing things as far as constructive things on the street, you know, that had

been in the system. And a lot of people going back into prison, speaking to people in prison. I wanted to do that.

[00:17:20] **HANA:** When he got out, Wendell was 63 years old, and it's a dangerous phase of life to be returning to society. Older people are more vulnerable to being unhoused, unemployed, chronically sick and lonely. But Wedell had a plan. He stayed with family, and he got to work.

[00:17:39] **WENDELL:** Well, thank you for joining.

We, we we're glad to have you. We, we want any, and everybody that's, uh, they have a voice.

[00:17:44] **HANA:** He started this re-entry circle as part of Taleef, a Muslim collective that works with converts and formerly incarcerated people. It's a casual monthly get together where folks can just talk. This one was during the pandemic, so of course it was on Zoom.

[00:18:00] **x:** I was formerly incarcerated. I've been now about 10 years now, so, even though I've been formerly incarcerated, I still feel that the weight of that from other folks. And...

[00:18:11] **HANA:** on this day, there are women like this one, men, people at all stages of adulthood, and they all open up about their lives transitioning back into society. Their relationships, their challenges.

Wendell's former coworker Alaa Suliman, ran the reentry circles with him.

[00:18:28] **ALAA:** He's very open and accepting personality and energy. Like, he just attracts people to him to be able to, to just share and connect. He just has a very non-judgmental, like, all is welcome. Like, we're in this together.

[00:18:47] **WENDELL:** We say we doing this, or we, cause we made it through prison.

[00:18:49] **x:** We grown, but, but we still got mental issues, you know, so I'm still trying to learn some different ways how to deal with just, my cousin's getting killed. My brother getting killed, you know?

[00:19:03] **WENDELL:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, we, uh, sometimes we gotta take a, we have to take a, a double check ourselves. Those are those of those that think we, well, we, we we're really not, we fool ourself. I say work in progress is long gone. I, I know I got work to do.

[00:19:20] **HANA:** This kind of work is critical for rehabilitation, according to Spirit, and the Muslim version of it has a good track record.

[00:19:28] **SPEARIT:** There's an entire discussion about Islam's contribution to rehabilitation. When you look at all the religions, and they've done numbers on this, Muslims have lower recidivism numbers than all the other religious groups.

[00:19:42] **HANA:** It doesn't work for everyone, though.

[00:19:44] **SPEARIT:** Sometimes people can, you know, people will start hanging with the Muslims out of need for protection, right? Or to get out of the cell for extra perks or whatever, you know, so there's ulterior reasons that they're join, they've joined up. Uh, and so that's one of the tests to determine if someone is a sincere convert is whether they keep the faith once, once they leave prison.

And many don't. I mean, that's just a fact. And so, you know, when we talk about converts as a whole, we have to recognize that there is a chunk of converts who weren't converts at all seriously, but were just kind of there for the ride. And once they get out or get in a better situation, uh, they don't really stick with it.

[00:20:29] **HANA:** For Wendell, there was no question. He was committed to staying Muslim. He says he's doing exactly what he thinks he was meant to do.

[00:20:38] **WENDELL:** Now, I tell people my story that I, I lived in the cesspool before going to prison. I was a dope dealer. I was one of the worst of the worst. Alright. I sold poison. Everybody that wanted it, I sold it to 'em. To women that was having babies.

I, I did that. You know, I lived with that every day. Then Allah took me from the cesspool and then they sent me to hell. I went in the hell. Literally. Literally. I've seen people get killed. I seen grown men get raped. You know, I've seen some stuff that people not supposed to see.

[00:21:11] **HANA:** Wendell says he felt God was giving him a choice: Go back to the cesspool or do my work.

[00:21:18] **WENDELL:** And I chose to come back and do his work. And I do his work today. I don't do my, I don't do my work cuz it's not mine. I'm just, I'm just a, a tool being worked. And I love it. Getting me a chill. I get teary-eyed. I get that stuff behind that because I know that that Allah allowed me to come on for a reason. And the reason is to be of service. Yeah. It means that I can get up every morning with a purpose, right?

[00:21:55] **SHAKUR:** That was reporter Hana Baba reporting for the KALW podcast, The Spiritual Edge. This was a powerful story that demonstrates the power of humanity, connection, and the experiences many people in America face on their paths towards healing. Thanks to the rest of the team at the Spiritual Edge: editor Jeb Sharp, sound engineer Tarek Fouda, digital content manager Lindsay Myers-Humlie, photographer Tom Levy and executive editor Judy Silber.

This story is part of The Spiritual Edge series Becoming Muslim, about Americans who choose Islam. Support for the series come from the Templeton Religion Trust. You can find out more about that series and The Spiritual Edge on their website, thespiritualedge.org. I'm Tommy Shakur Ross, and this has been a special feature episode from Uncuffed.

Thanks for listening.