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Season 4, Ep. 5 - The Truth

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[00:00:00] **X:** KALW.

[00:00:05] **KERI:** My friends and I call him King Gregory because that's just who he thinks he is. He's always had this cleanliness, tidiness have things in order, OCD-ness about him.

I mean, I got the bathroom remodeled before he came because, No sir. No sir. You're not gonna come over here and talk about it y'all got this little ragged bathroom. Oh, no, I can't. You gonna be at a hotel, you see?

[00:00:42] **GREG:** That's my sister, Keri. She's my best friend, but things have not always been perfect. In an earlier episode, I told you all about how Keri wrote me a letter in prison that helped me realize I wanted to come home.

But for Keri, the story is very different. While I was going through my change inside prison, Keri was still waiting on me to do one thing. One very important thing that I would not do for a long time.

What's up everybody? I'm Greg Eskridge, and this is Uncuffed, the podcast that empowers people in prison to tell their own stories. This season, we're bringing you stories from people inside prison, and I'm also telling my story. And today we're talking about family. We're talking about what it's like when your reality on the inside of prison is very different from what's going on with your family on the outside.

We've got two pieces for you in today's episode. We'll hear a deeply personal story from one of our producers at San Quentin, and for the first time ever, we'll hear a round table discussion from the Uncuffed producers at the California Institution for Women. They'll talk about how

they're working on being honest and accountable with their families, and how having these conversations is one of the hardest but most rewarding things you can do while you're in prison.

But first, I wanna take some time to hear my sister Keri's version of events. Because like I said, for a long time, her story was very different from mine. And that had consequences.

So back to that time that Keri wrote me a letter. Like I said, in that earlier episode, she wrote it when I was in solitary confinement, down in the hole. It was the 1990s, and Keri was just a teenager. At the time, she really didn't know why I was in prison. That I had been convicted of a second degree murder, attempted murder and assault with a deadly weapon, or that I had been sentenced to 58 years plus two life sentences.

All she knew was what she heard around the neighborhood.

[00:03:14] **KERI:** I wrote the letter because I wanted to know the truth. I just was feeling kind of overwhelmed that he wasn't there, and I needed to know why. And I needed to hear it from him and nobody else.

[00:03:33] **GREG:** So after I got the letter, we talked on the phone.

[00:03:36] **KERI:** And it was, let's get down to business.

Did you get my letter? Answer me? And he is like, man, I can't. I can't talk about that on these phones. You know, people are listening.

[00:03:53] **GREG:** Keri was no fool. She started to figure out the truth, but I was not ready to admit it to her because I thought I had to protect her. She was my little sister, the one person I cared about more than anyone in this world.

In my mind, I would rather lie to the end of time than to lose her. So, I told Kerry I was innocent.

[00:04:18] **KERI:** There was a lot of, man, I didn't do that. It's like, but they said you did. And if you didn't do it, then why are you in prison?

[00:04:36] **GREG:** Over the years, the lie really weighed on Keri. While I was in prison, going to self-help groups, getting my degree, winning awards with the radio program, focusing on my change. She was on the outside praying and fasting. Keri is a very spiritual person. On one hand, I was the most important person in her life.

On the other, I was someone who was lying to her. She didn't know what to do.

[00:05:07] **KERI:** Do I keep fighting for you or do I let this go? Because I don't know how to not fight for you?

[00:05:16] **GREG:** Keri was angry and hurt for a long time. She kept coming to visit me in prison, but that started wearing her down. I remember one time where she really just laid it all out. She basically said, I'm not coming to see you ever again until you tell me the truth about what really happened.

[00:05:45] **KERI:** And you know, every time we call him, a phone call, he would say, you need to come up here. You need to come up here. No, I don't. I'm tired. I don't wanna do it anymore.

At that point in my life, it had been decades into my sentence, into my transformation, and I was like, you know what? I'm just gonna have to tell her. I'm gonna have to tell her the truth.

[00:06:13] **GREG:** She deserves to know the truth. Keri was so spiritual and so dedicated to me, and I could not have her praying for a lie. One day, we were just talking on the phone and she started asking questions, and I was like, you know what? That's it. It's now or never. I've sat in groups for decades working on myself, being accountable, listening to victims come in, understanding victim impact, and I've literally told everybody the truth except her.

And I was at a point where I said, you know what? That's it.

[00:06:57] **KERI:** And I said, I said, I don't wanna just know yes or no, you did it. I need every detail of what happened that night from beginning to end. I need people. I need names. I need locations. I need behaviors and actions. I need all of it.

[00:07:23] **GREG:** I walked her through that entire day of May 28th, 1994.

I told her exactly what I did. I told her everything, every single thing that I did that day. It was a lot for her to take.

[00:07:41] **KERI:** I put my phone on mute. Because I didn't want him to hear the pain that I was feeling while he was telling me.

[00:07:57] **GREG:** She could barely talk. She could barely breathe, and she was just saying like, you lied to me. You lied to me. Why did you keep lying to me all these years? All her words were just piercing my soul. I'm like, damn. Thought I was protecting her, but obviously hurting her more than anything.

After I said everything I had to say, and she said everything she had to say, and then all of a sudden she just said, thank you for telling me the truth. Now my heart can rest. Now I can go pray with the truth in mind and not a lie. It was mind blowing to see her just go from all of that emotion and saying like, I forgive you.

Let's move forward. She just said, that's it. Like now let's get your ass outta prison.

[00:09:06] **AMBI:** Let's go.

[00:09:11] **KERI:** And that day when he stepped out and threw his hands up in the air because he was free. It was just like, okay, him, but I just didn't wanna let him go.

[00:09:34] **AMBI:** Amen.

[00:09:35] **KERI:** Like he wanted to, you know, embrace and thank everyone else, and I just needed my time.

You can go talk to everybody when I say so. Because I'm not letting go right now. Just gimme a minute.

[00:09:57] **GREG:** Just hearing that just really just like makes me smile, makes me emotional. It's a testament to how the truth can be so very freeing. That's what we're gonna talk about now with the producers at the California Institution for Women. I am so excited to share their very first piece from the Uncuffed Studios at CIW in Chino, California.

These are six women who come from all over California. They are writers, students, mentors, mothers, sisters, daughters, and now, they are the newest audio producers on our team. It's crazy how things in men's and women's prisons can be so different in some ways, and so, so similar in others. Turns out this whole issue of not being honest about your crime with your family is pretty common.

A lot of people keep up with the lie for a lot of reasons. Here's a round table discussion led by Daphnye Luster with Koi Bagnerise and Julie Harper. They're responding to my story about me and my sister.

[00:11:11] **DAPHNYE:** We are here today at CIW Uncuffed Studios. This is our first round table. It is raining outside, but it's nice and cozy in here, and I'm so excited for today. Yes, yes. My name is Daphnye. We're gonna go around and introduce my sisters. I'm gonna pastor to Koi.

[00:11:27] **KOI:** Hi, I am Koi.

[00:11:30] **JULIE:** Hi, I'm Julie.

[00:11:32] **DAPHNYE:** Glad to have us here today. What do you guys think about that piece? Man, it. How did it resonate to you, Julie?

[00:11:38] **JULIE:** Well, it brought up a lot of different emotions for me. Um, obviously I've been down a long time now, and at the moment I still have a long time to go on my 40 to life sentence. And I think for those of us, I think everyone at this table is a mother, having to be away from our children, um, and thinking about what our children are dealing with out there without us is just, it's heartbreaking for me every, every day.

[00:12:03] **KOI:** It deeply resonated with me as a mother, as having family members that I have not been able to be authentic, my authentic self with them.

[00:12:12] **DAPHNYE:** You know, for me, when he was saying how he thought he was protecting his sister and his sister just wanted to know the truth. That mirrored my situation because my sister, I have, I have three sisters, but my oldest sister, I've never told her exactly why I'm in prison.

So my, my oldest sister and I, we were like Bonnie and Clyde. She is my best friend still to this day, but yet I didn't have the courage to tell her exactly what I did, or feel like I cannot tell her because I don't wanna retraumatize her, and, and I feel like I'm protecting her from that. But I, I, I'm not sure if I am or not, because maybe she wants to know the truth, but she has never asked me.

[00:12:59] **JULIE:** Well, I've gotta say, the part of your situation that really touched on me was thinking in all these decades that your sister hasn't asked you any of those detailed questions. And that's, um, been very different from my experience with, with my family. I have an incredibly close relationship with my daughter, and she was only a baby when I was convicted of my crime, and so most of her life has been away from me.

But when she was getting to be about three years old and, um, I had come at that time here to CIW and we were finally gonna be able to have more frequent and regular visits. I, I told my dad, I said, you know, I think it's time that we tell her, you know, where, where I am and you know, when we're, when we're having our visit, that it's, it's inside prison and it's the visiting room in prison.

Flash forward a couple years. Um, by the time she was just five years old, she did start asking questions. You know, she knew I was in prison and she starts going, what did you do, mommy? What did you do? And I said, okay, this, this is it. You know, we have two hours for our visit. We're gonna sit down and this is your chance.

You can ask mommy anything. And I'll be completely honest with you.

[00:14:27] **DAPHNYE:** Right. What was that moment like? Was it a part where you said like, man, this is too hard. I can't, I can't get through this?

[00:14:34] **JULIE:** Well, I, I'm, I'll say I was, I was, I was a little nervous. Biggest thing, I didn't know how she would react or how she'd feel.

So, um, there's this little, kind of like a step on the, the playground area. So that's kind of our spot. And so we, we sat down there, just the two of us, so you know, at least there was nobody within 10 feet. 'Cause, you know, normally people would right up on you.

[00:14:59] **DAPHNYE:** Right.

[00:14:59] **JULIE:** And she just started with, you know, question after question.

And I would answer the questions, but each time I'd answer, then of course that would lead to more questions. And it was really hard to talk about because, um, my crime is, is something that it, it's, it's still painful to this day for me, and the consequences, uh, and impacts on, um, my victim's family and, you know, and then having to relate that to your child because, you know, as the mother, you're, you know, you're, you're their hero.

And to have to talk about, you know, the worst moments of your life is, um, is intense. As of now, she's, she's gonna be 10 in about a month, and it still blows me away to this day, like how supportive she is, and it's just beautiful for me to receive that kindness from her as my young daughter.

[00:16:00] **KOI:** So Julie, right now, as you spoke, I relate so heavily to you because it's the exact polar opposite to my situation with my daughter.

Um, my daughter is also 10, and I have been unable to reveal to her where I am. And it's been this way since I was arrested back in 2016. So since that my aunt adopted her, which I'm very grateful and I'm indebted to her completely, but there was the conditioning that she imposed upon me with adoption.

Which was that I cannot tell her and reveal to her exactly where I am. I had to tell her that I was in college opposed to being in prison.

[00:16:50] **DAPHNYE:** Oh, wow.

[00:16:50] **KOI:** Yeah, so it's intense. That's a lot. It's a lot. So walking a fine line between trying to build a relationship with your daughter. It's very difficult when there's some limitations to being able to do that.

So like example when she comes to visit, she said, why are all of you guys wearing the same shirt? So I kind of just was like, let me think quick on my feet. And I told her, well, there's a sale at the college store. So we all just went ahead and got this shirt. And when she keeps asking, how long does it take to get your degree?

You've been in college for very many years, so how much longer? And then I have to say something else, like the credits are not there, and I'm feeling like a huge failure as a mother in doing so because it goes against my personal beliefs and values that were instilled upon me as a child with my grandmother.

So. When, it's very inspiring when you say that you were able to walk in your truth with your daughter and have that moment of honesty on the playground by the swings. I'm very familiar with that area. My daughter loves the swings there, but I fantasize about having that moment with her where I'm able to open up to her and let her know that I don't wanna lie to her.

I know that social media is real nowadays, and Google is very accessible to children, so I know that it's only a couple clicks away for her to Google me and get an idea of what I did from another person, so it's not coming from me firsthand.

[00:18:34] **JULIE:** I, I really resonate with what you said because I will say that, um. Since having the conversations with my daughter, she has Googled me and she has read stuff, and that's what led to some of the follow-up conversations where she ended up having more questions. But I was, I was so pleased and relieved that we had had the conversation together first. I'm just curious if you've had a conversation recently with your aunt.

I understand, I get how hard it is, but do you think your aunt might be open to, to changing the rules a little bit at this point?

[00:19:18] **KOI:** I believe attempts are futile, honestly, because she believes that she's gonna have to pick up the pieces after I reveal the truth to my daughter. But I often explain to her that a child is resilient.

You'd be surprised how resilient a child is and what grace looks like in the eyes of a child. And I do this thing with my daughter all the time at the end of each phone call, and I remind her how beautiful she is, how strong, how wonderful, how intelligent, how incredible, how magical. And I remember one day I was having a really tough day, and when the 60 seconds came on, I said, here I go, I'm gonna do it again.

And my daughter took it from me and she said it to me. And she said, mommy, you are strong. Mommy, you are beautiful. Mommy, you are this, mommy, you are that. And. In that moment, I knew. This is what grace is. No matter what I've done and how I've affected this girl's life, right? I know that she's still gonna love me.

[00:20:28] **DAPHNYE:** I think, you know, a lot of the women here is testaments of, of how the relationship can be restored back to a whole, you know, and, and taking it back to Greg and his sister, how that story and that outcome was restored. I recall a time where my mom would, um, go to prison. Uh, my mom, she would go in and outta jails in prisons and, and when I was younger, I would, I thought my world was like ending because she was my best friend at that time.

And then not knowing, you know, I used to get told my mother was on vacation or she was in college. I, I think that's a common theme that parents tell their children when they're away in jails or prisons, that they're in college because it sounds sophisticated to be away in college. And I didn't understand how come she was gone for so long in college.

So when you, your daughter says those things, I, I, I understand that feeling. So I could kind of relate to that feeling of being alone or feeling abandoned or neglected. For me, it carried on in my, in my life and into my adulthood. And, uh, ultimately, um. It contributed to the reason why I committed my crime.

So it's important, I think to, um, for our kids being, we're speaking on kids, for our kids to address that. My own daughter, you know what I mean? She's 35 years old now, and I left when she was three, and I remember the same age as, as you two, uh, Koi and Julie's daughter is. My daughter was 10 when I started having a conversation with her about if she was mad at me. And, and, and I told her, it's okay if you are, you can be mad at me. You know what I mean? And because I'm mad at me now that she's grown with her own, uh, child, she's still struggling with picking up the pieces. Like she tells me now, well, mama, when you come home, I'll do this and I'll do that and I'll finish school and I'll do this.

But it, it just makes me really feel what Keri was saying, like where do I go from here? It, like my daughter, where do she go from here, and, and, how can I help that? And like Greg was like, you know, that's, that's my baby sister. You know what I mean? And, and I, I got to do this for her. If I don't do it for anybody else, I gotta do it for her. 'Cause that's my girl, you know? And the same with my daughter. That's my girl. So how can I help her continue on and where to pick up the pieces?

[00:23:09] **GREG:** Wow. That was, that was amazing. That was heavy. So great to hear that round table. To hear so many similarities. It's crazy to think that so many of us inside these places go through the same thing no matter what your gender is, what your location is. It's hard when it's dealing with people that you love.

This was a hell of a way for them to kick off their first episode. That's what I'm talking about CIW. This is what we have been waiting for. A big shout out to Daphnye Luster, Koi Bagnerise, Julie Harper, and the rest of the Uncuffed crew at the California Institution for Women. We can't wait to bring you more stories from these producers at CIW. Those are coming real soon.

Now we're gonna go inside San Quentin for one more story about how long it can take to have a big conversation with your family. Jeremy Strain is a producer at San Quentin, and he didn't see his mom and grandma for 15 years. More than half of incarcerated people live at least a hundred miles from their home, and Jeremy had to transfer prisons across the state just to be able to see his family, which he did so he could finally make amends.

Here's Jeremy.

[00:24:27] **JEREMY:** Growing up in my house was a very abusive house. It, it trickled down into us and that made me resent my mom. It made me slowly build this resentment to her, to the point where like, I, I damn near hate you now. That kind of led me down this, this path of destruction, you know, and led me to not want to be home.

Why am I gonna be home and be around a bunch of people that don't care about me? I'm gonna go to the streets. I've been in and outta juvenile hall since I, since '99. I've stole a car and wrecked, so my dad couldn't go to work in the morning. I've taken money from him. I've, I've done, I caused a lot of damage and a lot of pain to my parents and my mom, and I've said a lot of hurtful things to her. I wanted to make amends to let my mom know that, you know, if I never

see you again, like I don't, I'm not holding no grudge against you. Now that I'm older and more understanding, like, like I understand, like how it all went wrong in my role that I played and let her know that, hey, I've taken full accountability for my actions and for what I did.

Like the most important part too was to make amends and see my grandma before she passed away. 'Cause my grandma was a very important person in my life growing up. It took a while, and right before Covid is when I finally, I got to visit. My mom had to bring my grandma 'cause my grandma is a older lady and she needs help navigating through life sometimes.

I remember this short, kind of Afro-ish hair, lipstick. Really, really energetic. You know, she, she, she got a lot of energy. And then when I seen her come rolling in, I didn't even know who she was. I'm looking around in the visiting room and I kept seeing this lady in the wheelchair. And I was like, is that her?

My grandma, when she seen me, she was like, all the oldness out of her just left. Like this, this youth came back into her shoes. She had like this big old smile on her face and she's like, she instantly knew it was me. Seeing them for the first time. It was like a reality check on how much I've missed, like how old they gotten.

You know, kind of just shows like a time lapse. Like, dang, I really missed 15 years of my freedom. Like seeing that, that growth in them. Like really hit me to the point where it's like, man, like you've been gone for a while. I finally got to see my mom and I talked to her and I told my mom, I said, look, mom, I don't think you realize how serious, um, my sentence is.

So, um, and I told her, I said, the whole reason why, like, I need you to come see me today is because I wanted to make amends. And I felt like I needed to do this to, um, to heal and to, to move forward. And I don't want. I don't want you to leave today thinking like, that I hate you. I don't love you, or I don't care, or I think that you failed as a, as a parent.

She was listening to me very quiet, so I know she was focused and then like, her eyes started watering. And to me that was kind of shocking 'cause my mom, she, she, she's very strong. She can hold in emotions. She won't let him, she won't let nobody see him. So when she cried, I, I kind of felt that relief, you know?

Um, she basically said that she accepts everything that I'm saying to her and like, it's okay. And like she forgives me basically. But there was nothing on her end. She never apologized or like admitted that she failed as a parent. I didn't expect anything in return. And for me, me personally, that's what it amends is about for me.

I feel like by my mother becoming teary, teary-eyed, that was the apology. That was the amends on her end. It's so easy to do the bad things I learned, but yet to do something right and to do the good thing. It's, it's, it's a lot harder, and I don't know why. Being a knucklehead and, and a a misfit is so much easier. Trying to really like, be good and genuinely good.

Like, that's hard. It made me want to continue to work on myself. Like it made me want to drive even harder. Like, oh wow, hey, that felt good. That gave me the confidence that I need to, to, to, to push forward and, and, and, and, and really understand like, what I need to do to become a better person?

[00:29:25] **GREG:** That was Jeremy Strain from our San Quentin studios, and from what I saw on the inside, Jeremy is still really dedicated to becoming that better person.

Before we go, here's a moment of freedom where folks we know who have gotten outta prison share a moment when they feel the most free. This one is from Blue Inkk Watkins.

[00:29:57] **BLEU:** I'm standing, right now standing in the sand, just fixated on what's going on over there with the birds. Um, I'm at Venice Beach, and it's been almost 40 years since I've been at this beach. And it's just me and my dog. My favorite person.

The sun it is setting over these clouds and it's just like, they look like infinity. The beauty of the birds flying over the water. Something I just always imagined being able to see. I used to always ask for photos of things just like this.

I didn't think that I was gonna ever do anything but hold that photo in my hand. But now I could reach out. I could pick up the sand, I can look at the sun. I could look at the birds in motion, which was something I never thought I was gonna be able to do.

Hey, Spike!

My name is Blue and this is my moment of freedom.

[00:31:20] **GREG:** Next time on Uncuffed.

[00:31:23] **IVY:** I used to like, want to be kind of like my mom as far as, I see her on a bed counting stacks of money. I would run up in there, could I help you count that money? I'm like, when I grow up, I wanna be a banker. But in my head I'm really thinking like, I wanna be a hustler. (Be a hustler. Be a hustler.)

That's all for this week's episode of Uncuffed, a production of KALW Public Media. You can subscribe to Uncuffed in any podcast player, or find us on the radio in the Bay Area at 91.7 FM or at weareuncuffed.org. The Uncuffed crew at San Quentin is Andre Davis, Matt Sheppard, William Harris, Vincent O'Bannon, Anthony Gomez, Jeremy Strain, and Ryan Pagan.

The Uncuffed crew at the California Institution for Women is Koi Bagnerise, Patricia Bellows, Julie Harper, Daphnye Luster, Keyna Osorio and Haena Worthing. The outside team who works on the show is Eric "Maserati-E" Abercrombie, Chirae Cannon, Ninna Gaensler-Debs, Galnadgee Joe-Johnson, Angela Johnston. Kelly McEvers, Kathy Novak, Sonia Paul, James Rowlands and Eli Wirtschafter.

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I'm Greg Eskridge. Thanks for listening.