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Season 4, Ep. 9 - Finding Home

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[00:00:00] **MASERATI-E:** What's up, everybody? This is Eric "Maserati-E" Abercrombie. I'm the sound designer and engineer for Uncuffed. I mix and write the music for the show. I've got a quick question for you. Why do you listen to Uncuffed, and what do you wanna hear more of? Take our two minute survey, and we'll put your name in a raffle for a free Uncuffed hoodie. Go to uncuffed.org/survey, or check out the link in the podcast show notes. Now, onto the episode.

[00:00:35] **X:** KALW.

[00:00:39] **GREG:** What's up, everybody? I'm Greg Eskridge and this is Uncuffed, the podcast that empowers people in prison to tell their own story. This season, I've been telling my story, and so much of my story has been about home. Running away from home when I was a kid, trying to find shelter on the streets or in gangs, being taken away from it when I went to prison. After 30 years in prison, I came home.

[00:01:08] It's funny, that's what we say, welcome home. Like home was always here waiting for us. But even now, having been out almost a year, it's hard to find. I'm still trying to figure out what my home really means. I'm learning that it's not just one thing.

[00:01:30] So today, we're going to hear from some other folks about what building or finding home means to them and how complicated that can be. We'll start with a story by producer Anthony Ivy. He interviewed Donald Vaughn, better known as Fish at Solano State Prison, about a time FISH built a tree house to survive.

[00:01:57] **DONALD:** Well, it started initially when I got kicked outta my house for going to church when I was supposed to be grounded when I was about 11 and 12. You know, that was shocking, you know, coming off the church bus that we used to take every Sunday, and as we was walking into the house, you know, my stepdad like, put his hand on my chest, was like, no, you're not coming in here.

[00:02:24] And I'm like, why? And then he said he wasn't supposed to leave the house, and he just shut the door. So I'm standing there like, now what? Then from then on I had to figure out what I was going to do as far as surviving basically in the streets.

[00:02:45] **IVY:** So you're an 11-year-old kid, you get kicked out. Did you think this was like gonna be like a temporary thing, you know, an hour or two?

[00:02:54] What was going through your mind?

[00:02:57] **DONALD:** I would say I didn't really like, have it sink in. I'll be like, ah, well I'll just go hang out for the day. You know what I'm saying? And maybe everything will blow over, and I'll come back.

[00:03:07] **IVY:** Okay. Where did you go first after you got kicked out?

[00:03:10] **DONALD:** I actually went down to the park and sat there for a little bit, trying to figure out what I was gonna do. Of all places, I went to the arcade, actually. I had my little, what do you, I don't know what they would call it, but it let me play free games, which really wasn't free. All it was was a, a token with a hole drilled in it on a piece of fish string, and you drop it in a slot. And then pull it back out. And then you can play the game without having to lose the token.

[00:03:39] So they caught on to that eventually. But yeah, we used to do it a lot. Alright.

[00:03:44] **IVY:** It's dark time. You by yourself. You 11 years old. Where did you go?

[00:03:52] **DONALD:** I actually rode the bus for a while. By that time, I'd say it was probably like midnight, and I just found me a spot that was warm in the mall area. And slept right by there.

[00:04:10] **IVY:** So what brought you to building this tree house?

[00:04:14] **DONALD:** The weather. When it started raining and till this day, I hate rain, you know, but it started raining then, you know, it gets cold. And that's when I saw the big tree, uh, weeping willow. That's why I was like, well, I'm gonna try to see if I can make one up here.

[00:04:28] It took a while, but it started to work out little by little. The materials I was getting came from like the little construction sites for where they be building up new houses. And they'll have like plywoods, dry woods, a lot of scrap stuff, big bins that they keep out there. So I would just go over there and take what I needed.

[00:04:51] Even the tarps, the little blue cover things that they be having to cover up stuff from getting wet. What I started doing was get basically camping gear. You know, sleeping bags, little lanterns, the hot place that you can cook off of, and I would get those from the little orchard supply that was down the street. And I would steal those, of course.

[00:05:14] **IVY:** Your first night sleeping in this tree house, was you scared?

[00:05:19] **DONALD:** Oh yeah. I had my nights where I was scared. For sure. Well, your mind becomes your worst enemy, so it's like. And if somebody gonna come try to do something to me or you know, somebody gonna try to steal my stuff or, you know, that type of fear, uh, damn is the police gonna find me?

[00:05:37] **IVY:** How long was you in this tree house for?

[00:05:40] **DONALD:** It was probably maybe 18 months.

[00:05:44] **IVY:** You going to school back and forth from the tree house?

[00:05:48] **DONALD:** Yep. Uh, every morning I get up. Gas station. I would wash up, change my clothes, go to school. That's where I would take my shower at. You know, it was a PE or whatever. You can take a shower afterwards.

[00:06:02] **IVY:** I know you had to be hungry in this tree house. What did you do for food?

[00:06:07] **DONALD:** I stole a lot. Like I go into whatever grocery store. And whatever. I felt like eating that day, that's what I stole.

[00:06:15] **IVY:** Did you cook anything in the street house?

[00:06:16] **DONALD:** Oh yeah, all the time. The little hot plate things were good 'cause you didn't have to worry about 'em catching fire to nothing.

[00:06:22] And it was easy to cook something where it was canned chili or soup. Or stew, whatever it was, you know, it wasn't no big gourmet meals going on up there, but it was just enough to keep you from being hungry. Sandwiches became a big part, and I still love sandwiches today.

[00:06:37] **IVY:** And how did this tree, your house, adventures end?

[00:06:40] **DONALD:** I did a breaking and entering type of thing. They sent the cops to my school. I was on the bus and they came to the bus and got me off the bus. So I'm like, okay. I'm thinking, oh, they finally found out that I'm not living at home. So I'm like, oh, well, here goes that. So they used that as a way to send me to the group home.

[00:07:01] And uh, I was there for a while. I left when I was 16, so it made me turn into a person that actually listens more, especially when our younger people, I would say, are talking. You know? And that's probably one of the main things I do now as far as my myself, based on my own experiences. I just wish somebody was actually listening, you know, and paying attention.

[00:07:37] **GREG:** That was Fish telling his story to Uncuffed producer Anthony Ivy. Ivy is actually home now working for Uncuffed on the outside.

[00:07:48] Listening to that story, it reminds me so much of my own experience living out there on the streets, wanting to be taken care of, but just too afraid to trust anyone. Sometimes though, we can find comfort in unexpected places. That's what this next piece from San Quentin gets at.

[00:08:07] Producer Matt Sheppard interviewed Anthony Gomez about a time Anthony unexpectedly ended up back at his childhood home in Madera, California.

[00:08:24] **ANTHONY:** When I moved to Madera, it was on this ranch and it was my great-grandmother's ranch. It's away from the city. If you go up to the main road, you look to your left, you look to your right, man, sometimes it's not even a car in sight, and all you see is great vineyards and almond orchards.

[00:08:43] Looking back now, it seemed like when my mom brought us home. Finally, all my uncles, all my aunts, all my older cousins, like my mom's first cousins, everybody was like always at the ranch. This was the go-to spot for any occasion, whether it's my birthday or any one of my siblings, whether it's Easter, whether it's Christmas. It didn't matter. This was like the get together spot, and we're going to the ranch.

[00:09:10] You know, it's going up. We have pretty much have a skate park. We have ramps everywhere. We have bikes, we have BB guns. It was just all us kids, just being kids, man with all the land in the world to just run around and do what we wanted. So if we weren't skating or riding bikes or just, we used to walk down the way, especially when it would get hot, we'd walk down the way and we would jump in this canal.

[00:09:31] We used to just swim in this canal.

[00:09:33] **MATT:** Sound like you was living a good life, man. What happened?

[00:09:35] **ANTHONY:** In 2006, my great-grandmother died.

[00:09:38] **MATT:** Okay.

[00:09:40] **ANTHONY:** In a way, she kind of kept everybody together as well, because not long after she had passed away for whatever reason, like my parents were like, well, yeah, we're moving. We're going to the city.

[00:09:54] Once we hit the city, we stayed in the city, but we always moved to like these random spots, you know? So as a kid I was always getting in trouble. Like my immediate solution was like, fight. By the time I got to high school, I'm already expelled from the district. Things definitely took a different turn in my life.

[00:10:16] I started to just get in a lot more serious trouble. At some point, my parents told me they wanted nothing to do with me. They, they looked at me. They saw how I was, they saw my get down. They wouldn't even let me hang out with like some of my other cousins.

[00:10:30] **MATT:** Man, that, that sound like a sharp contrast from living on great grandma's ranch with the family and.

[00:10:36] **ANTHONY:** Yeah. Yeah, things changed. I'm telling you, once we moved to the city and we all like kind of grew up and things started to happen. Around that time, we had all found a way to like pass by the house on the ranch. But I remember one day specifically, uh, we're just chilling and I know one of us just has this bright ass idea, like, what's up? Let's grab a couple beers, let's get some blown wraps. We got dang all day. Let's just cruise one time and we're like, all right, bet. And it's me, and it's my little brother Patrick and my older brother Izzy. And somehow we're just like, Hey, let's go to the ranch. And I remember just leaving the city, man, you gotta drive down like Howard Road, man.

[00:11:18] And it's just deserted. There's no more houses, there's no more businesses. So I remember we just driving down the way we get over there. We passed by and my brother bused a U-turn because we're like, let's go to the canal. So to get to the canal, you turn onto the ranch towards the back, there's this dirt road. And it's really secluded between like two vineyards.

[00:11:43] And I remember we're driving towards it. And my brother Izzy, for whatever reason, he steps on the gas and just starts going fast and he just smashes. And I'm like, dude, slow down. I don't know if he thought that he was just gonna hit the brake and just be able to stop in time, but it was like loose, gravel and dirt.

[00:12:02] There was nothing stopping this truck. Last minute, he steps on the brake, but it's way too late. I'm just like bracing, 'cause I'm like, this is it. The truck hit some air and then came down to like land in the canal. Almost like a ramp, bro. It was almost like everything was slow motion. I almost feel like while it was slow motion, I'm looking at my brother like, you idiot.

[00:12:28] Just wanting to strangle this with like.

[00:12:30] **MATT:** Y'all in the truck waiting this with a, with a beer can floating in the air next to a blunt wrap. Huh?

[00:12:35] **ANTHONY:** Oh, I'm telling you, there's like, there's, there's we there. There's sweets in the air floating around and droplets of beer coming out of the can. So I remember we're up there and we're brainstorming.

[00:12:45] I'm thinking, I'm gonna call my pops, and he's gonna know what to do. And he's like, nah, we can't, we can't. I'm calling, I'm calling for help. It is what it is. All right. Whatever. I call my pops and he's like, what? You're, where? I'm at the ranch. Where? I'm at the canal. What? Look, I'm telling you. Go to grandma's ranch, go to the canal.

[00:13:06] You're gonna find us. We're stuck here. Come get us. I'm just thinking my pops is gonna pull up and he's gonna try to figure it out with us. He comes three trucks deep. It's him, it's my Uncle David, my cousin Kevin. They jump up in the canal, they get all dirty. They throw some chains on it. Somehow, some way all pulls the truck out like it's nothing.

[00:13:26] At this point, like the sun is like setting. Everything's kind of like, a orange-ish golden color. The trees are like casting a shadow. The smell of the air was clean. And you start to hear frogs in the distance and the little crickets, just the natural sounds. I don't wanna say wilderness, but like, creatures and rodents and specimens out there.

[00:13:50] **MATT:** Yeah, that's that rural life.

[00:13:52] **ANTHONY:** Are in the city, you know what I mean? So, and we stayed out there for like two hours. I remember them kind of just looking out at the land. In a lot of ways things did change, but at the same time, a lot of it was still the same.

[00:14:06] You know, it's still the same place, it's still the same canal that I'm sure they swam in, you know, when they were kids. At that point, it was like, the whole family wasn't united, but there was enough of us there. The last time that much of us had been out there was probably like 2006, you know, right before my grandma died.

[00:14:23] I don't know. It's almost like they were grateful that we crashed and they had a reason to go out there. So. And then we took off, man, and just went back to the city. When, uh, I call home and I talked to my brothers because it's been a while that I've been incarcerated now, and sometimes when I call, it'll be like a family get together.

[00:14:45] Before, you know what, I'm on the phone. With one of my uncles or somebody. And sure enough, like it'll get to like my Uncle David or my cousin Kevin. I'm like, Hey man, remember you guys tried to jump the canal? And it's just like, the family like memory now. Like they're, it's like it's their story and they're sticking to it.

[00:14:59] They, and they just like laugh about it now. You know what I mean? It's something to look back on. I believe that a lot of people in my family look back to that specific time as well. When we were kids, when we all lived at the ranch, when all the family was coming together and in some way, shape or form, wish we could go back.

[00:15:29] **GREG:** That was Anthony Gomez telling his story to Matt Sheppard. Our last piece is about another type of family gathering. Thanh Tran was one of the original Uncuffed producers, and while he was at San Quentin, he also learned how to be a filmmaker. Thanh's been home for three years now, and he's making a documentary about his family and his mother.

[00:15:55] **THANH:** She used to always sing the song in Vietnamese and it goes.

[00:16:10] I don't even know all the lyrics, but my mom used to sing it all the time. Basically, it's about a woman. They're comparing her to a bird. And she doesn't wanna marry a husband nearby. She wants to go far off, and she wants to adventure like this spirited, adventurous woman. And I felt like that so accurately captured who my mom was because she, she was a restless spirit.

[00:16:38] She was a musician, she was man, she was a force of nature. And she was one hell of a woman.

[00:16:47] **THANH (FILM):** My name is to Tran. At 18 months old, my entire family was placed into foster care.

[00:16:55] **THANH:** The documentary that I'm filming is called Finding Ma. It's about my family who was separated for over 20 years in the foster care in prison systems.

[00:17:05] **THANH (FILM):** My mom was addicted to drugs and she

[00:17:07] **THANH:** couldn't quit. I got placed into foster care when I was 18 months old. So that's when I got separated from my mom, as a tiny baby

[00:17:15] **THANH (FILM):** Seeking a family, I joined a gang at 12 years old, and I spent most of my childhood from 12 to 18 in juvenile hall. Three weeks after my 18th birthday, I was incarcerated.

[00:17:29] I spent the next 10 and a half years in prison.

[00:17:33] **THANH:** Most of my core memories of my mom as a kid were mostly happy memories of when she got to come visit us at our foster home, and it would be memories of her singing Vietnamese songs and dancing and laughing, and she had this real loud cackling laugh that just made everybody pay attention.

[00:17:55] And at the same time, she was also a deeply hurt and angry person, and a traumatized person, who dealt with their pain through drugs. She's been on drugs since the 90s and she never quit. And so while I was incarcerated, through phone calls with my sisters and letters from my sisters, like they let me know that she was houseless.

[00:18:22] We knew she always was struggling with like having stable housing, but, but this is when she just full on, gave up was during my incarceration. So my relationship to my mom at this point was like, man, like I don't know if I'm gonna ever see her again. I don't know if she's gonna die in the streets before I come home.

[00:18:41] I don't know if she'll even want to see me after being gone so long. I don't know if she's gonna feel abandoned by me, like I feel abandoned by her. One of the big precursors to Finding Ma and even the title of the film Finding Ma, was because of my sister too. Here she is.

[00:19:02] **SISTER (FILM):** Personally, I've spent a few Christmases like, finding Ma, after we found out back in like 2014 that Christmas was her birthday.

[00:19:12] Mm-hmm. I feel really guilty about celebrating that holiday when my mom is out on the streets, and so I spent the past few years, if not every year, just going out there and just

trying to find her some socks, um, a few dollars, you know, see if she wants to get a meal with me and she wants to come home and shower and stuff. And.

[00:19:29] **THANH:** After she told me all of this, I was like, you know what, sis, when I come home from prison, you never have to do this alone again. I'll always have your back. And if that's how you're spending every Christmas, that's how I'm gonna spend my Christmases too. My first Thanksgiving home, I finally got to gather all of my siblings for the first time.

[00:19:52] That's when we invited my family to into this tradition that my sister was carrying all by herself.

[00:20:00] **SISTER (FILM):** He said he'll do anything in his power to be there the next time around. And I wanted to extend the invite to you guys as well. What do you guys think? Of course, yeah, you guys down. Definitely down.

[00:20:14] **THANH:** My very first Christmas home, I was probably out for like six months at this time, and the world still felt shocking. And so in the midst of all of that shock of reentry, I'm packing myself into a van with six of my seven brothers and sisters.

[00:20:33] **THANH (FILM):** How you feeling, Brody?

[00:20:36] **AMBI:** Know it is been an extremely long time coming, but you know it, it is never too late, so I'm glad we're doing it.

[00:20:43] **THANH:** And it's cold outside. It's freezing that day in Sacramento actually. And it's blue and it's gloomy. We pack rice porridge, some hot food, some blankets, a tent. Just anything we can think of that our mom could possibly want or need.

[00:20:59] And we're like, let's go find her.

[00:21:01] **SISTER (FILM):** No, I'm checking over here. 'cause this is where Ma gets her drugs sometimes.

[00:21:06] **AMBI:** Sometimes she's in the uh, Walmart parking lot too.

[00:21:08] **THANH:** And we drove around South Sacramento, and we just started stopping by all of the places that my sister has seen her recently. And we drove for like, an hour or two hours. And eventually we're like, wait a minute.

[00:21:23] **THANH (FILM):** Brown jacket, is that Ma?

[00:21:26] **SISTER (FILM):** It's her. Yes. It's, it's, it's her, y'all.

[00:21:28] **THANH:** And we, we pull up and we're like, oh shit. That's our mom.

[00:21:34] **THANH (FILM):** Ma, happy birthday, Ma. Happy birthday

[00:21:44] **THANH:** And like when we all get out of the car, and I see my mom for the first time in like, 12 years.

[00:21:57] She's shivering visibly. Her skin is like starting to go purple because of how freezing cold it was out there. And I could also tell that she was on drugs in that moment, and she wasn't fully coherent in that moment. Truly, I was just stunned like, this is my mom, this is how she's been living for years.

[00:22:31] I'm, I'm seeing my, my family all start to, to cry and break down.

[00:22:36] **AMBI:** I think I'm just being overwhelmed with all the love I have for her versus all the hate I had for myself for not loving her.

[00:22:43] Yeah, that makes sense. It's just the one time I can only talk to her and show her what I'm now.

[00:22:52] **THANH:** And eventually I was like, you know what? We cannot leave her out here in this cold. Even though she, every time we ever offered her housing in the past, she always said no. But it was so freezing cold that day that when we were like, mom, can we please take you to a hotel? We cannot leave here knowing you're just sleeping outside, turning freaking purple.

[00:23:12] 'cause how freaking cold it is. Like, we can't just leave you here, mom. And that's when she was like, all right. Take me to a hotel. And we, we took her to a hotel. We cranked up the heater, we gave her a bunch of food.

[00:23:28] **AMBI:** Happy birthday.

[00:23:33] **THANH:** We sang her Happy Birthday as a family for the first time ever. We have never celebrated my mom's birthday.

[00:23:41] I didn't know her birthday was on Christmas until I was like, damn, near 30. And so we sang Happy Birthday to her for the first time ever. We left her with some gifts, and we all parted ways after that.

[00:23:57] **AMBI:** Bye. I love you. Love you.

[00:23:59] **THANH:** In spite of her addiction. In spite of her houselessness. In spite of the fact that she lost this all to Child Protective Services in the 90s, and that she was never able to get us back, we still choose to love her, and we still choose to show up for her.

[00:24:20] And I remember how unloved I felt and how unworthy of love I felt all my life. And so what this documentary has taught me and has taught my family through this act of radical love for our mom, is that we can radically love each other.

[00:24:45] **GREG:** That was Thanh Tran talking about his film Finding Ma, which is still in production. He and his family still look for their mom every Christmas. As well as being a filmmaker, Thanh is also a rapper and recording artist, and some of his music is featured in the documentary. To listen to some of those songs, look up Thanh X, T-H-A-N-H-X on all streaming platforms.

[00:25:15] 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 my sound engineer. Eric "Maserati-E" Abercrombie.

[00:25:34] **MASERATI-E:** And what's a bubble bath without the bubbles. Gotta add the bubbles in there thing. And then I like to add Epsom salt to mine, that extra relaxation.

[00:25:48] My name is Eric "Maserati E" Abercrombie, and I'm reporting live from the bathtub. And reason being, 'cause this is my moment of freedom. When I was in prison, one of the things that I couldn't do was take a bath. That's for sure. There was only showers and usually group showers at that. Yeah. So I'm like, man, you know what?

[00:26:12] When I get out, I'm finna take me a nice bubble bath for real. For all the years that I couldn't. So here we are today. That's one of the things, you know, that I don't take for granted.

[00:26:23] So now having the option to be able to, you know, bathe and relax all at the same time in solitude. This really, really makes me feel free. And, uh, definitely take a shower first too.

[00:26:38] You feel what I'm saying? Gotta shower before you get in the bath. Otherwise, your water might be another color. Just saying, though.

[00:26:55] **GREG:** Next time on Uncuffed.

[00:26:57] For the past 30 years, I've thought about this. I relive this day every single day for 30 years. I relive it.

[00:27:08] That's it for another episode of Uncuffed. But before you go. I want to put a word in for the people I left behind in prison. I have seen firsthand how their lives could be changed by the opportunity to tell their stories.

[00:27:23] The Uncuffed program has taught radio and podcasting skills to over 80 men and women. I was one of those people. It helped lead to my freedom and to the job I have now, fighting to make sure all of our voices are heard. We recently lost one of our government grants that kept this program going, so we're turning to you to help. Be a part of this movement. Support this show at [Uncuffed dot org slash donate](https://uncuffed.org/donate).

[00:27:50] That link is also in our show notes. I'm so grateful to you for the love and the trust and the belief that our stories matter. Thank you so much.

[00:28:07] Uncuffed is 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 Uncuffed dot org. The Uncuffed crew at San Quentin is Andre Davis, Matt Sheppard, William Harris, Vincent O'Bannon, Anthony Gomez, Jeremy Strain and Ryan Pagan.

[00:28:35] 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. Our theme music is by David Jassy. And thanks to the staff at San Quentin who make this possible, especially Lieutenant Berry who approves our stories from San Quentin and Lieutenant Guerrero, who approved the story from Solano. Uncuffed gets support from the California Arts Council, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, the Unlikely Collaborators Foundation and donations from listeners like you.

[00:29:21] I'm Greg Eskridge. Thanks for listening.