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Epiphany Series

Host Hillary Larson

THE LAST HUSTLE: FROM IMPOSSIBLE DARKNESS TO UNTHINKABLE LIGHT

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[00:03] INTRODUCTION MUSIC

[00:17] HILLARY LARSON, HOST: Kenny Johnson was a man stuck in an impossible situation. A career criminal, in and out of prison for most of his life, it seemed as though there was no escape. But life had a different plan.

[00:33] KENNY JOHNSON: I had a dream. In this dream, I was searching for freedom. And I came up on this white-haired person who says, 'I can give you freedom'. And I woke up. And I said, 'But what kind of freedom can they give me?'

[00:51] MUSIC

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[01:00] HILLARY: In nineteen-fifty-five, Kenny Dale Johnson's mother Geraldine Scott left Arkansas for Kansas City with two of her three children, looking for a better life. Leaving five-year-old Kenny behind to stay with his grandmother, at the time, he didn't know why he was there or where they had gone. His grandmother, Ollie Ashford, was a strong black woman. She wore a pistol in her waistcoat, remembering the days when white men lynched black men just because they could. Kenny and Ollie lived in a shack that wasn't more than twenty-by-twenty feet. You could see chickens through the floorboards. They caught mice that were runnin' up the wall and drowned them in a bucket. It was a way of life that felt normal to Kenny, until he realized that wasn't the way everybody lived. You might even say that it was that realization that took him into a life of crime, one that he thought he'd never return from.

[02:00] KENNY: Peaches and Pumpkin, they lived up the road. And they, we were school mates, we would catch the bus to school. But on the weekends, I could go up to their house, it's like goin' up to the house on the hill, you know. And I would go there and watch T.V. Oh my God, they got a T.V! I mean, and I'm sitting there watching it and it's like, I said all we got is one straight room in our house, and this, you got, we got newspaper on the wall to keep the air out. You know, they had T.V., they had a sink, they had a bathroom – we had outhouse, you know, like, whoa, man, how did, how come they, where they get this from? That was my first realization that we were poor, we don't have money. We were, we picked cotton. I had to go out into the cotton fields and pick cotton, and all, to make money, you know, for whatever. I never saw the money, I just made it. You know, and I (stuttering) I make five dollars a week.

[02:59] HILLARY: It was problem for Kenny, this chasm between rich and poor. In the mind of a seven-year-old, he asked himself, 'How will I impress the girls at school? How will I fit in?' The answer seemed simple. He started stealing change from his grandmother. He had no idea that decision would change his young life. One day without warning, without discussion, Ollie put Kenny on a bus to Kansas City. Yes, she had found him out; stiff penalty for a young boy just trying to fit in.

[03:37] HILLARY: So, you're seven or eight at the time. And you're a little kid with a little suitcase and your name on your coat, right?

[03:40] KENNY: Yeah, yeah.

[03:42] HILLARY: What's that like?

[03:44] KENNY: I was terrified. I had no idea, I didn't know who, I sat, I got there in that seat, I probably peed on myself and everything 'cause I was so terrified. And, and all I remember is getting to Kansas City, 'It's snowing! It's cold!' And my memory was, like, in and out, hazy like, you know, I just remember the coldness, the snow, and look at that green coat with the fur on it, and whatever in that little suitcase food I had, you know. That was it.

[04:08] MUSIC

[04:22] HILLARY: At the other end of his lonely bus ride was his new home. There would be other lonely bus rides in Kenny's life, but this was the first one. And it was by no means an escape from poverty. He was to share a house with his mother, two siblings, and aunt and uncle, a couple of cousins; also in the mix was a stepfather whose alcohol abuse and violent benders landed squarely onto Kenny's mother.

[04:48] HILLARY: When you describe your mom, it seems to me that she's not a very happy person. But when she gets the Holy Spirit...

[05:02] KENNY: Yes, totally different.

[05:03] HILLARY: ...she can kind of, like, get away from her other life.

[05:06] KENNY: Yeah, yeah. Well, she was a young, she had me when she was seventeen years of age. And my father, you know, was born on the other side of the tracks with money. And he denied me. And said, and so... and the, and the denial of me, that turned her kind of mean, I gotta say, not having faith in me. And so my mother, she found joy in the Lord. And she found joy in the church. And I guess that's why, I guess I was able to have an awakening experience, because I was old enough to see my mother come out of the kitchen, (*sings*) *Amazing grace, amazing grace*. And she was singing while she's cooking in the kitchen, (*sings*) *The Lord save me*. On and on, steady singing, and yet she's cooking, you know. (*sings*) *I once was blind, but now I see*.

[06:23] MUSIC AND SINGING BEGINS AND CONTINUES IN THE BACKGROUND

[06:25] KENNY: And she would hit a place in one of these songs, that she would just hit gratitude. Hit joy. And she was, she'd be singing '*Amazing grace*, praise you, thank you Jesus!' And like, 'Hallelujah Lord!' And so I, look, I'd peek around the corner in the kitchen, and she was going on in there!

[06:55] MUSIC AND SINGING

[07:10] KENNY: I didn't know what it was, but I saw it demonstrated... mmm, mmm, mmm, mmm, mmm! And it'd hit many many many years later, I too would stand in my kitchen, and do the same...(cries) Well my mother was my first guru (cries). My mother was my first teacher. She was my guru, she got, she, she showed me what consciousness looked like. What did it look like? She demonstrated to us kids every single Sunday. Oh gosh (cries). Wow.

[08:07] MUSIC AND SINGING

[08:14] HILLARY: Geraldine Scott's moments of bliss standing in her kitchen were all too temporary. One might say they were the ballast for the times when things weren't so good. Kenny's family had seen their fair share of alcoholism, domestic abuse, and then there was the issue of racism.

[08:33] KENNY: One day I decided to carry a gun to school -- thought to myself, if my, I'm gonna shoot somebody. So I started carrying a gun to school. I got arrested though and went to jail for rioting. And so, racism at that time was normal and I participated, I thought I'd

beat up white boys and they'd chase me around the corner, and they, it was just a free for all.

[08:55] HILLARY: Kenny was just fifteen years old when he was put into a boy's home for stealing a car. Stealing money for candy was one thing; this was different. This was a glimpse into a future where being in prison and figuring out how to survive that would simply be part of his life.

[09:15] KENNY: When I went to little boo, I went to the boy's home, that's where I learned how to fight. Because there, it was nothing but fifteen year olds and fourteen years old and thirteen year olds and sixteen-year-old kids, and all we did was fight fight fight fight fight! And you had to know how to fight. The, the way you stopped getting beat up is that you gotta start beating up somebody. They won't hit you if they know you gonna fight 'em back. I wouldn't fight 'em back, so guess what they do? Knock me out. I said, 'I'm tired of waking up, looking out, what my doing on the ground? And I was walking, I was walking on the sidewalk a few minutes ago, how'd I get down here?' You know, concussions on top of concussions after a while you say, 'I'm tired of concussions. I'm gonna start dishing out some concussions'. So I just turned, I just turned the tables. I had to, I knew I had to, if I wanted to survive in jail.

[10:09] MUSIC

[10:17] HILLARY: There are different kinds of prisons. There are the ones that are made up of metal bars and concrete. And then there's the prison of trying to get out of something you just don't think you can stand. For Kenny it was poverty, and all of the emotions that went with that. It just seemed like every time he tried to do the right thing, he would end up back in the same place. For the next thirty years, he would be in and out of prison, but mostly in. His crimes included robbery, pimping, check fraud; it was an endless cycle of incarceration, stints in solitary confinement, and then there were the fights and beatings that were just part of everyday life in prison. There were periods of deep depression and even thoughts of suicide. On the bus ride to Louisville prison in the early nineteen-eighties, known to inmates as "The Butcher Shop", Kenny described the silence of that eighteen-hour ride: grown men sitting on the bus, shaking in terror on the inside, too dangerous to show that kind of fear on the outside. Sometimes inmates would request solitary confinement at some prisons, rather than face the brutality of being in the regular population. Louisville was one of those.

[11:36] KENNY: When I got to that point in ninety-eighty-two – the judge gave me forty years for writing bad checks, and I realized I had to do ten years before I would even see a parole board – I had come up on what every player and hustler don't want to experience. Getting that sentence, that life sentence, and realize you might die in prison. Once I realized that, I went totally in a state of depression, anger, and rage, and I just didn't wanna face life anymore. I didn't wanna deal with life, I was done dealing with life. Life was no good, life was fair, life wasn't fair, it had cheated me and lied to me, there was no pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. I, all those things was like, this is it. My girlfriend, she had, she got another boyfriend, so she don't love me, and then my mama talking 'bout "Praise Jesus", I said, 'You know what? I'm done.' And when you said you're done, in the mind, the ego, Mr. Fix-It in my head out up here says, 'I got a solution Kenny. Hey let's kill yourself dude. I know exactly how to do it. Follow me.' And so my mind says, 'Come on, let's go'. My mind took me to the doctor, and the doctor says, 'I'll give you some sleeping pills so you can sleep at night.' 'Cause I lied to him I said, 'I can't sleep at night, oh, I'm up all night long.' He said, 'Don't worry, I'll get you some sleeping pills.' So I, I took the little pills, I would stash them, I would stash, I figure, if one could put me to sleep, what would twenty of them do? They would take me out of the game.

[13:01] HILLARY: Unbeknownst to Kenny, a guard had been watching him stash his sleeping pills over those days, hiding them in the cuff of his shirt. One day as he walked by, the guard said to him, 'That light in you ain't gonna die Kenny. You cannot put that out.' Taken totally by surprise, he had no idea what the guard was referring to. What light? But it was in that

moment that he turned his attention inward. It was the very beginning of coming out of a lifetime of darkness. Even if it seemed like just a crack.

[13:37] MUSIC

[13:45] HILLARY: During his last ten-year stint in prison, he started exploring meditation, reading spiritual books, hanging out with inmates who practiced Buddhism. He volunteered at the hospice that was set up in the prison. From another inmate, he discovered what it meant to care for the life of another human being. The question was, would that be enough to keep him from going down the same old road again? After his release from Louisville, Kenny was about to find out.

[14:17] KENNY: All those years in prison I had got, built up a spiritual practice. And my spiritual practice was just a lot of affirmations, a lot of mantras and affirmations and quotations. I would repeat to myself and put on my refrigerator, and write 'em out, and put 'em in my car, on my dashboard, and all that kind of stuff. And at the same time, I started doing little bitty things. I would start, I'd be walking by, a, a, a, a broker's office, and see a stack of newspapers and I would pick up a newspaper, and my buddy was saying, 'You know that's stealing, don't ya'. And I would say, 'Aw, yeah, yeah, yeah'. And then pretty soon I would justify hanging out with some friends at a nightclub, and doing a little cocaine, and drinking. I didn't realize I was slowly slipping back into my old criminal nature. I didn't know I was doing it, it was a, I was slowly sliding back, and then you are going back. And about ninety days, about nine months into my release from federal prison, I'm back into full-blown criminal participation. I'm cashing checks, I'm stealing, I'm stealing jewelry, I'm a, I got a little women working the streets, my girlfriend is putting guns on me, I'm getting, going to jail for domestic abuse, I'm drinking, drinking, drinking like a fish, I'm partying all night long, I'm, I'm just totally crazy wild. And those affirmations, those little prayers, those little mantras, those quotations, they didn't mean nothing to me. I've been out a year now, out of federal prison after serving ten years. You would think after servin' ten years of time you would be done with crime.

[15:50] MUSIC

[16:09] KENNY: It's a, it's a actually sunny afternoon, in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and I call my parole officer and said, 'I'm done.' I said, 'I been busted for five different crimes, I'm on bond, you know, my girlfriend put a gun on me, you know, this is not how I wanted to live my life out here, I don't know what to do, I wanna, I'm gonna come in, I'm gonna turn myself in. I'm tired.' I mean there was no more energy left in me to hustle.

[16:38] HILLARY: They say that disillusionment is the end of one thing and the beginning of another. But that beginning is something that can't be foreseen or planned. For nearly his whole life, Kenny had run from a kind of poverty that seemed to surround him at every turn. After over twenty years of being in prison, he was faced with a deeper poverty that had to do more with his soul than anything else. Prison forced him to surrender over and over. With that came the desire to be free. But it was a kind of freedom that had little to do with prison bars. Deep down inside, this call for freedom had always been a part of him.

[17:22] MUSIC

[17:26] KENNY: Years ago when I was in federal prison, about nineteen-eighty-eight, eighty-nine, I had a dream. It was a big dream. In this dream, I was searching for freedom. I was running here, high and low, looking for freedom. And I was like going from universe to universe, from planet to planet, looking for someone that could give me freedom. And I came up on this white-haired person who says, 'I can give you freedom.' And I woke up. I said, 'Well what kind of freedom can they give me?'

[18:04] MUSIC

[18:12] HILLARY: It was nineteen-ninety-three. One night he walked into the prison chapel. Several men were watching a video of a spiritual teacher. The woman in the video had white hair. 'Who is that?' Kenny said. 'It's Gangaji', they all said in unison.

[18:28] KENNY: And I remember we was in a small chapel and I looked up, I said, 'I know her! But where do I know her from?' Then I listened to the video, I'm like, you know like something familiar, I said, 'I know her. But where?'

[18:44] HILLARY: As the months went by, he realized that Gangaji was the woman who showed up in his dream all those years ago. She had just been there the month prior. Kenny couldn't believe he'd missed her. It would be eight months before she'd return to the prison again, and again the following September. It was during that second meeting with Gangaji when Kenny finally experienced the freedom that he'd been looking for.

[19:10] KENNY: In that meeting with Gangaji, you know, Gangaji said 'Kenny you think you're a black man, you think you're a prisoner, you think you're this, you're none of those things. You think you're a convict, you think you're all of, you're none of those things.' I said, 'Oh, okay. Nice.' And I didn't really know, you know. So she says, she looked at me, she says, 'Lean over here'. So I leaned my head toward her, and she had a little bitty ole mallet, you know a little gong, so she had a little mallet, and she hit me three times in the, in the center of my crown of my head. Bam! Bam! Bam! And it just like, 'Aaaaahhhh'. And I just relax. I just, it was the first time I could actually just relax. I didn't know, I just relaxed that day, the first, I just relaxed. And went quiet. That's the best way to describe that initial moment. I relaxed and went quiet, and I didn't hear nothing else she said in the meeting, 'cause I was so absorbed into this quietness.

[20:09] HILLARY: Had you ever felt quiet before?

[20:10] KENNY: Never. Never. Never. Never, never, never, not like this. Not like this, where there was like no thoughts I could grab onto, nothing. All, all I, I just, I was just staring into empty space. If I look at the chair, the chair was empty. If I look at another person, everything was just empty.

[20:32] MUSIC

[20:33] KENNY: I had never experienced that in my life. Never.

[20:35] MUSIC

[20:51] HILLARY: After that experience with Gangaji, pretty much everything changed for Kenny. Thoughts returned, but he now saw that they were only thoughts. There was a background of peace where he saw that everything arises from. After he was released in nineteen-ninety-seven, he was never to see the inside walls of a prison again, not as a convict anyway. He got to sit with Gangaji many, many times as a free man, a free man in every sense of the word. During a meeting not too long after he was released, Gangaji read one of Kenny's letters he had written to her while he was in prison:

[21:31] GANGAJI'S VOICE: 'Dear Gangaji. Daily I walk around looking into these prisoners' eyes and giving all of myself to them instantly. If I sleep, I am here. If I walk the track, I am here. If I'm talking, I am here. If there's anything to talk about, it is this love, this bliss, this truth. If they put me in the deepest of rooms, where there is no one, I am here, in devotion to that. Love, Kenny.'

[22:04] MUSIC

[22:10] HILLARY: When Kenny reflected on what happened to him, he thought about all the times he had waited for grace to come. He said he thought it might happen at the moment of death, or sitting in church listening to the fiery sermon of a preacher. He thought it was in the

next hustle. Funny how his story turned out. After all the hard roads he'd been down, all of the attempts at trying to escape his life, it was in a prison in Littleton, Colorado, where Kenny Dale Johnson was finally free.

[22:43] MUSIC

[22:48] HILLARY: I have this image in my head from sitting here listening to your story, and the image is you being seven years old on a bus from Arkansas to Kansas City with a, a name on your coat, Kenny, and some food. And then all of the bus rides you took...

[23:11] KENNY: Oh my God.

[23:12] HILLARY: ...to the penitentiary, Kenny...

[23:14] KENNY: Yep, yep, same, tags.

[23:15] HILLARY: ...with the name Kenny.

[23:18] KENNY: Same ... oh my God. Wow!

[23:20] HILLARY: Same old bus ride.

[23:22] KENNY: Same bus ride.

[23:28] HILLARY: And now... bus ride's over. Right?

[23:30] KENNY: Yeah. Bus ride's over. Yeah.

[23:33] HILLARY: Hallelujah.

[23:34] KENNY: Hallelujah.

[23:35] MUSIC

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[23:55] HILLARY: For more than twenty years, Kenny has been going into prisons, helping inmates find the same freedom he found with Gangaji. In two-thousand-eleven, he published his life story, [The Last Hustle](#). The Gangaji Foundation's prison program, which began in nineteen-ninety-four, is going stronger than ever, reaching inmates throughout the U.S. and parts of Canada. If you'd like more information about Kenny Johnson, or the Gangaji Foundation prison program, write to [info@gangaji.org](mailto:info@gangaji.org). If you'd like to hear more *Epiphany* stories, as well as over fifty episodes of *A Conversation With Gangaji*, you can find us on the radio page, at [gangaji.org](http://gangaji.org). Gangaji Radio would not be possible without your donations. We would love to have your help. There's a donation button right on the website, it makes it easy to help us out. And speaking of help, thank you Steven Capper for your musical expertise this time around – couldn't a done it without you. I'm Hillary Larson. This is *Epiphany* on Gangaji Radio.