**Sukey:** A young correctional officer.

**Julie:** He said it was the most dangerous prison in California.

**Sukey:** Forced to make a choice, fulfill his oath or back his fellow officers.

**Academy Ceremony Audio:** Recognize the badge of my office.

**Sukey:** I'm Sukey: from KQED Podcasts comes On Our Watch Season 2, New Folsom, a story about who gets hurt when the system that promises to keep us safe is bent on protecting itself. Find it wherever you listen to podcasts.

**Glynn:** Oh, Snappas. I am so excited. I'm holding lightning in a bottle right now because today we're so proud to feature On Our Watch an explosive, gripping, true life story following the lives of two correctional officers who pay a high price for exposing corruption and abuse from their fellow officers in California's most dangerous prison, New Folsom. This is just the first episode of the new season produced by our friends at KQED, and we can't wait for you to hear it.

**Narrator:** This is a series investigating some of the difficult things that happened to the people who live and work inside California's prisons. So, we wanted to give you a heads up that this episode touches on intense topics, including substance use, state violence, and self-harm. If you need support, we've got links to resources in the episode description. The story begins with a death that is intense and upsetting.

**Mimy:** I park my car, and I walk in the house, and he's not on the couch.

**Sukey:** On October 21st, 2020, Mimy Rodriguez came home from having dinner with her friends and called out to her husband, Valentino Rodriguez.

**Mimy:** So I go, “Val? Val, where are you?” And all the lights are on in the house. And I go into the kitchen. He's not in the kitchen. So, I go into our bedroom, and he's not in our bedroom. And I knew something was wrong. [sobbing] And I go, “Val? Val, where are you?” And I run into the bathroom, and he's on his knees. He's on his knees with his head up against the wall, hunched over, and I just scream. I had my air pods in, so I go, “Siri, call 911.” So, Siri immediately calls 911.

**Automated:** 20:45:26 seconds, October 21, 2020.

[phone dialing sounds]

**Mimy:** Oh, baby. Wake up baby, wake up baby, I love you. I love you.

**911 Operator:** 911, what’s the address of your emergency?

**Female Speaker:** [unintelligible [00:03:07] medical. [crosstalk] ma’am, you have to give her the address, again.

**Mimy:** On the call, she’s like, “Hello,” and I go, “Please help me, I’m scared, I don’t know what to do. This has happened, he’s dead, please.”

**911 Operator:** Can you tell me what happened?

**Mimy:** And I’m screaming and I’m going to grab him, and I pull him back, and I put his head back and he has vomit coming out of his mouth.

**Sukey:** The 911 operator tells Mimy to perform CPR on him.

**911 Operator:** Hard and fast, twice per second, okay, we want to make sure the chest comes up all the way in between pumps. Okay, we’re going to do this 600 times until help can take over. We’re going to count together. Okay? So, it's one, two, three, four, one, two, three, four.

**Sukey:** Valentino's hands were purple and he wasn't breathing.

**911 Operator:** Is that front door open, are they’re going to be able to get in to you?

**Mimy:** It is open.

**911 Operator:** It is open? Okay. Keep going then, keep doing the chest compressions. Is anybody else in the house with you?

**Mimy:** No.

**911 Operator:** Keep going, one, two, three, four.

**Mimy:** Eventually, the police came. I don't know how fast. I think like two minutes or three. But she kept telling me, she's like, “They're outside.”

**911 Operator:** You're doing a great job. You hang in there. one, two, three, four, one, two, three, four. They're parking right now. They're almost to you, one, two, three--

**Mimy:** And I was like, “Just open the door. Just come inside, please.” Like seven officers ran in. [sobbing] I was I was like, I'm in the bathroom, “Help me.” And I said, “Save him, please save him.”

**Sukey:** The police pulled her out of the house and had her sit in the back of a squad car. They told her they needed to ask her some questions.

**Mimy:** The officer was trying to talk to me was this lady. She's like, “What happened?” Then she goes, “How did this happen?” I was like, “I don't know, but it's his job.” And I just kept saying, “It's his job. This is all because of his job.” She goes, “Where does he work?” And I'm like, “He works at CDCR.”

**Sukey:** CDCR, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

**Mimy:** [sobbing]It's this stupid job. It just overtook his life, his thoughts, everything that he stood for.

[prison door opens and shuts]

[background chatter]

**Sukey:** Correctional officer Valentino Rodriguez was 30 years old when he died. He'd worked for the department for about five years. Like a lot officers, that time changed him, especially the time he spent inside the walls of this one prison, New Folsom. This is a story about that place, about broken promises and unwritten rules and who gets hurt when the system that promises to keep us safe is bent on protecting itself. I'm Sukey Lewis. This is On Our Watch, Season 2: New Folsom.

[On Our Watch theme music playing]

**Car GPS Navigator:** Go past these lights. Then at the next set, turn left. Stay in the second lane.

**Sukey:** A little more than two years after Officer Valentino Rodriguez died in December 2022, our reporting team went to go see his family.

**Car GPS Navigator:** In half a mile, turn right.

**Sukey:** We're driving from the Bay Area through rice paddies and apple orchards to West Sacramento, a city on the outskirts of the state capital.

**Julie:** Everything about this case just raises questions.

**Sukey:** That's my co-reporter, Julie Small. The official cause of Valentino's death was fentanyl intoxication. But his family, and especially his father, Val Sr., still aren't satisfied with how it was investigated.

**Julie:** Maybe the answers are benign, but because they're unanswered, I think, you know-

**Sukey:** Yeah.

**Julie:** -makes you think the worst or it certainly, Val keeps going over and over in his head, Val Sr., trying to tie up the loose ends.

**Sukey:** Yeah.

We also think there might be more to the story of Valentino's death. Because he was a whistleblower, he'd reported corruption and abuse by his fellow officers just days before he died.

**Sukey:** But they said no signs of--

**Julie:** No signs of foul play.

**Sukey:** Julie's been talking to Val Sr for the past few months. It's taken a while to gain his trust. Today, Steven Rascón, our producer, is along to record.

**Steven Rascón:** So, today’s, like, an icebreaker?

**Julie:** I think so.

**Sukey:** It’s my first chance to meet Valentino’s parents, Valentino Rodriguez Sr. And his wife, Erma.

**Steven Rascón:** This one.

**Julie:** Are you rolling?

[background chatter]

**Sukey:** Inside, the walls are covered with photos. They’ve got a good-looking family. Five grandchildren, at the time. And their four adult kids.

**Erma Rodriguez:** And one thing about them, all four of them, just sat there and talked, made fun of each other, and laughed.

**Valentino Rodriguez Sr.:** The kids were really close [unintelligible [00:08:28] close kids**.**

**Sukey:** In a couple weeks, the family's planning to get together. But of course, one of them will be missing, Valentino. It'll be their third Christmas without him.

**Erma Rodriguez:** I was in the fog for a good year.

**Valentino Rodriguez Sr.:** It’s a different fog now.

**Sukey:** For his dad, Valentino's death started him on this search to find answers from the police, the FBI, the prison. He wants to understand what happened to his son and why and who's responsible. But instead of finding answers, Val Sr. just keeps finding more questions.

**Valentino Rodriguez Sr.:** This thing is just all tangled. I'm just trying to untangle it.

**Sukey:** Now, Val Sr. says he feels like a stereotype out of a true crime series on TV. The grieving parent on a quest for justice.

**Valentino Rodriguez Sr.:** And here I am in the driver's seat and I couldn't do it any other way, but I never wanted to be that person on TV, just consumed with it.

**Sukey:**  Yeah. Would you be able to tell us your favorite story of your son.

**Erma Rodriguez:** With him, there’s a lot. We have four kids and they're all completely different.

**Sukey:** Valentino was their second child and the oldest boy. As we sit around the dining room table, Erma pulls out some of the stuff she saved over the years. His first communion prayer book, a newspaper clipping from when he made student of the week.

**Erma Rodriguez:** I remember his third-grade teacher said he was a very good writer. She told him one day he was going to be a writer, and she couldn't wait to hear his stories because he used to like to write. I still have all those, his little pictures. I put all their--

**Sukey:** Erma points out Valentino in a Little League team photo. He looks about 11 or 12. She says he wasn't any good at baseball.

**Erma Rodriguez:** He wasn't very good at soccer either. And I had all four kids playing. So, it was like every Saturday I'm driving around all of Sacramento taking them, and I tell him one day, “Why do you run around with your eyes closed”? He's like, “I would pretend I was an airplane flying in the air.” [unintelligible [00:10:42]

[laughter]

**Valentino Rodriguez Sr.:** I remember when I used to watch him go wrestle. He would always lose. But after he was done, he'd be talking to the guy that beat him up.

**Erma Rodriguez:** Yeah.

[laughter]

**Valentino Rodriguez Sr.:** Making friends.

[laughter]

**Erma Rodriguez:** Yeah. He will be talking to him. [laughs]

**Sukey:** They tell us this was typical Valentino. Goofy, dreamy, smart, eager to turn enemies into friends. After college, when he told them he was going to train to be a correctional officer, his parents were surprised. They weren't a law enforcement family. But he'd have job security and good benefits. Val Sr. says he remembers the day his son graduated from the academy. It was May 1st, 2015, and he looked out over this ocean of young faces. His son was among the about 200 cadets sworn in that day.

**Graduation Recording:** Raise your right hand and repeat after me.

**Sukey:** This is tape from a more recent graduation reciting the same oath Valentino took.

**Graduation Recording:** I state your name, recognize the badge of my office, as a symbol of public faith, and I-- [voice fades away]

**Sukey:** Photos from that day show Valentino in his Class A uniform creases sharp, his hair neatly combed. They promise to protect the innocent.

**Graduation Recording:** Dedicating myself before all present.

**Sukey:** To be honest and to hold each other accountable.

**Graduation Recording:** Congratulations, and welcome to the family.

[applause and cheers]

**Sukey:** One of Valentino's first assignments was working on death row at San Quentin State Prison, the oldest prison in California. He'd often carpool to work with a bunch of other correctional officers, and on the way back, they'd get dropped off at In-N-Out Burger.

**Mimy:** I was a cashier, and he’d come in, in his little green suit. He’s so cute, and his little boots.

**Sukey:** That's Mimy again, talking to my colleague Julie. She calls him cute. But Valentino was not a little man. He was five foot seven and at least 200 pounds, clean shaven, with dark hair and big brown eyes.

**Mimy:** So, his order was a three-by-three ketchup only, no salt. The cheese fried, no salt, and then a large 7Up. So, I knew his order from the moment, because, of course, the cute guy comes in, I'm going to memorize his order.

**Sukey:** Mimy recognized Valentino from a party she'd gone to at his house thrown by his brother Greg.

**Mimy:** I was like, “Oh, how are you?” And he's like, “Good.” And I think in his mind, he's like, “Who is this girl?” “I know your brother.” And he's like, “What?” And he was just heck of weirded out. And in my head, it's going great. But he started coming to In-N-Out more often, and I would give him free burgers or shakes when my manager wasn't looking.

**Sukey:** They started messaging on Facebook.

**Mimy:** He's like, “Hey, I haven't seen you. Did you switch jobs?” And I'm like, “Oh, this boy texted me, or this boy messaged me,” and I was like, “Hello. Yes, hi.” It was just me being all excited. He was a kid at heart, very playful.

**Sukey:** They'd play video games together and watch movies, and they liked introducing each other to new things, food, music, or art. This one time, they went out to a sip and paint night at a local spot.

**Mimy:** He was nervous, I think it was a new thing for him. But we had gone to a paint night with one of my coworkers, and we went on a double date, and he painted this really nice picture. It was supposed to be of a pelican at the end of a bridge, but he changed it, and it's a painting of him and his dad.

**Sukey:** The scene is of the two of them from behind, a boy and his father, sitting side by side with their fishing poles in the water, wispy white clouds over the horizon.

**Mimy:** And he gave it to his dad after we got back.

**Sukey:** Mimy says they fell hard for each other, and just two months after they started dating, her roommate moved out, and she needed to find a new place to live.

**Mimy:** I was going to move into my brother's house, but he was like, “No, you should move in with me.” And I'm like, “No, this is kind of soon.” And he's like, “Come on, think about it.”

**Sukey:** Valentino's mom had helped him find a cute little house just about five miles away from their place in West Sacramento. Mimy moved in. And it was right around this time that Valentino got what he saw as a big break, an opportunity to work in a different prison.

**Mimy:** He specifically chose Folsom.

**Sukey:** The official name of New Folsom is California State Prison, Sacramento, or CSP SAC. It's called New Folsom because it was built back in the 80s next to the Old Folsom prison that was made famous by country singer Johnny Cash.

**Johnny Cash:** Okay. Hello, I'm Johnny Cash.

[cheers and applause]

**Sukey:** He wrote a song called *Folsom Prison Blues* and then later recorded this performance live at the prison.

**Johnny Cash:** *I hear the train a-comin', it's rolling 'round the bend. And I ain't seen the sunshine since I don't know when. I'm stuck in Folsom prison, and time keeps draggin'*

**Sukey:** You can actually see the guard towers of Old Folsom from New Folsom Prison. They’ve got a medieval castle kind of look to them. New Folsom, on the other hand, where Valentino was transferring to, has a more industrial, utilitarian look. A lot of razor wire and gray concrete. It’s a high security prison that the state set up to accommodate people with risky medical conditions and mental health needs. It also houses active gang members and people who’ve been convicted of some of the most serious crimes.

**Mimy:** He said he wanted to go there because he said it was the most dangerous prison in California. But he described it as, there was just a lot of activity there with officers, with inmates, and he just wanted to be in there.

**Sukey:** There are a lot of infamous prisons in this country, and a fair number here in California. There's San Quentin with its death row, the state's first supermax, Pelican Bay, Corcoran, where in the 90s, officers allegedly set up gladiator style fights between rival gangs and then shot incarcerated people to stop the fights. But as we dug through a bunch of data and public records, we realized in the past decade, New Folsom has been the most violent prison in the state, and that violence is committed by people who are locked up and officers. We found that in the six years after 2014, New Folsom officers used serious force. Meaning, they either badly injured someone or used deadly force at a rate three times higher than any other prison in the state. This was stunning to us. CDCR declined our multiple requests to comment on this finding.

I've done quite a bit of reporting on prisons, and Julie's been reporting on prisons for even longer. New Folsom just wasn't on our radar in the same way. We'll dig into those numbers more later, but for now, it's important to know that with just a year of experience as a correctional officer, this is the environment Valentino was walking into. Mimy says he was looking forward to it.

**Mimy:** He was excited to go into this prison. He was excited for the work. He was excited for what he was going to learn.

**Sukey:** He wanted to be an investigator in this elite squad called the ISU, or the Investigative Services Unit.

A prison is like its own city, and the ISU squad are like the police force of the prison. They've got a K-9 unit, a gang investigation unit, a prosecution division, and one for internal affairs to look into complaints of excessive force or allegations officer corruption. Walking through New Folsom, the squad stood out. They had special black and green patches on their uniforms, and unlike regular officers, they could bring their cell phones into work. They could also go anywhere in the prison they wanted, total access. Valentino's goal was to earn his patch and get into that squad. But first he had to pay his dues.

Officer Valentino Rodriguez's first assignment was working in the prison's psychiatric unit, guarding one of the most vulnerable and difficult parts of the population, people with severe mental illnesses. I've talked to a number of people incarcerated in this unit, and it sounds like a really tough place to be. It can be very loud and chaotic. Sometimes, the people in this unit are angry and confrontational, while others are simply terrified or heavily medicated. And officers like Valentino are required to get training in how to prevent incarcerated people from hurting each other and themselves. Valentino had been working at New Folsom and in this unit for just a few months when he got caught up in a really bad incident that Val Sr. says was a turning point for him. An incarcerated man ended up in the hospital with broken bones and injuries to his face and head.

So, investigators started looking into how the man got those injuries. We were able to get the tapes and paperwork for that incident. Just a note, we noticed a lot of inconsistencies in what people say happened. The incarcerated man's story changes a bit. One officer contradicts himself, and other officers have slightly different versions of the incident. You'll also hear some places where the department has redacted the audio.

**Investigator:** So, what we’re going to talk about is on the 12th of August, Friday, you were involved in an incident which occurred [beep your cell? Where you were at before?

**C:** Yes, sir.

**Sukey:** They're looking into this incarcerated man's allegations that officers caused his injuries and then lied about it.

**Investigator:** You made the allegation “While trying to hang myself, the COs came in and smashed my face into the wall.” Can you tell me about that what you mean?

**C:** The whole story?

**Investigator:** Mm-hmm.

**Sukey:** Because of some sensitive details about his mental health, we decided not to use this man's name. I'm just going to call him by the initial of his last name, C. So, C tells the investigators that it all started because of the meds he was taking.

**C:** I was having a hard time on medication. When I have a hard time on medication, I have side effects of committing suicide.

**Sukey:** First, C says he put his head in the toilet in his cell to try and drown himself. And then C told a passing officer that he was feeling suicidal.

**C:** He put a sheet like a suicide sheet.

**Sukey:** He says the officer handed him a sheet with a noose already tied in it.

**C:** He threw it into my cell, he said, “Hang yourself.” So, I tried to hang myself in front of him.

**Sukey:** Officers have to follow really strict rules to prevent suicides. They have to check on people in their cells every 30 minutes. When someone says they're suicidal, officers are supposed to call mental health services right away, and that person might even get moved to a different unit or checked into a hospital. To be clear, handing someone a noose would totally violate what officers are meant to do in this situation. No officers admitted giving him a noose. A responding officer tells investigators he was doing his rounds and saw C with the sheet already tied around his neck.

**Officer:** At that time, I opened the food port, gave him multiple orders to stop.

**Sukey:** When C doesn't respond, the officer says he sprays him with pepper spray.

**C:** My intent was to have to save his life from stopping him from actually choking himself and killing himself.

**Sukey:** An officer gets C to come to the door to put handcuffs on him, and he's shackled by his feet and behind his back. And then they escort him to what's called a decontamination cell. It's basically a cage the size of a phone booth that they can spray a hose into to wash the pepper spray off him.

**C:** And they just, boom. They just pushed me in there, and I hit my face against the back of the cell. I went like that, boom. I hit my face against the--

**Investigator:** This injury, that’s right there across your nose?

**C:** [unintelligible [00:23:59] Well, I hit my head and the face, like that. Boom. And then my eye and then my face and then my neck.

**Sukey:** But the officers who were escorting him tell it differently.

**Officer:** He just kept trying to pull away. So, I tightened my grip and counseled him to not pull away from myself.

**Sukey:** The officer says C broke away from them and lunged toward the shower.

**Officer:** And then he ended up tripping over the-- there’s a lip on that shower, tripping over the bottom lip, smashing in the back of the shower. And then I immediately closed the shower, locked it.

**Sukey:** Again, C denies this.

**Investigator:** Were you resisting at all?

**C:** I wasn’t resisting at all.

**Investigator:** You were just walking calmly?

**C:** I was walking calmly, yeah. I mean, I didn’t get the injuries from trying to hang myself. I got the injuries from him pushing me.

**Sukey:** So, to recap, according to C, he was suicidal, an officer gave him a noose, pepper sprayed him, and he was forcibly thrown into a cage and injured really badly. The version officers tell is that C already had the noose. They pepper sprayed him to save his life, and he got hurt first when he fell from his bunk and then again when he pulled away from them and tripped face first into the shower cage. The last account of events I'm going to walk you through is Valentino's because he was one of the officers who responded that day. Here he is introducing himself on tape to an investigator with the internal affairs department.

**Valentino:** Valentino Rodriguez, correctional officer, California Department of Corrections, Sacramento State Prison.

**Sukey:** The agent tells Valentino he’s here as a witness.

**Investigator:** Can you give me your account of that incident?

**Valentino:** Heard on the radio announcement that there was an inmate, hanging inmate, attempted hanging in 2 Block, in D section.

**Sukey:** Valentino says he put on his gloves and rushed to the cell.

**Valentino:** It was apparent that he was sprayed with OC pepper sprayed because he was spitting up mucus and a little bit of blood on his face from being sprayed.

**Sukey:** As the two officers took C to hose off, they walked him past Valentino, who says he saw a little bump on C's forehead.

**Investigator:** Could you see blood on his clothing?

**Valentino:** I don’t remember. I don’t remember if I could at time.

**Investigator:** Can you now?

**Valentino:** No.

**Sukey:** So, C goes to the shower cage with really no major injuries that Valentino could see.

**Investigator:** At what point did you observe an injury on him?

**Valentino:** When the water was turned off and I walked up to the cage to open it up, I observed some injuries onto the top of his head and across his face, I think, I believe it was across his face.

**Investigator:** Can you tell me about describe those injuries?

**Valentino:** They were two gashes, like a large gashes.

**Sukey:** Valentino was asked to photograph C’s injuries and then take him to get medical attention. We got those pictures that he took. The man’s face is partially blacked out, but you can see a five-inch gash across his forehead, and his cheek is split open from his nose to below his cheekbone.

**Investigator:** Is there anything else you’d like to tell me which you have not already discussed during this interview? Before I turn off the recorder, I want to remind you--

**Sukey:** It’s a big deal any time an officer gets pulled into an investigation, even just as a witness. Because lying is a fire-able offense. We know Valentino told the people closest to him about this incident.

**Valentino Rodriguez Sr.:** I remember that when it happened, he was so scared for weeks.

**Sukey:** When we got this recording through a public records request to CDCR, it was one of the things we really wanted to share with Val Sr.

**Julie:** You want to hear it?

**Valentino Rodriguez Sr.:** Yeah.

**Sukey:** My co-reporter Julie Small sat down with him and pressed play on the recording.

**Investigator:** It is December 9th, 2016.

**Sukey:** Val Sr. had never heard this interview with his son before.

**Valentino:** Yeah, he had a bump, about an inch above his eye.

**Investigator:** Okay, do you know which eye?

**Valentino:** I can’t recall.

**Investigator:** Okay.

**Julie:** You’re making a face-- do you think that he’s telling the truth there?

**Valentino Rodriguez Sr.:** I think, because I know my son, he has a really good memory, he is really detail-orientated. And for him not to remember which side the cut was on, and certain things, is just, to me, he sounds like he’s worried right there, scared.

**Sukey:** Valentino told him that what happened during the incident was different than what those officers wrote in their reports and told investigators. But he said he felt like he had to go along with their story.

**Valentino Rodriguez Sr.:** You should have seen his face when he’d come over. That broke my heart, man, because he had a job and he told me, “Dad, you have to tell the same story because you’re on a team.” Yeah, and if you don’t, then you’re the odd man out.”

**Sukey:** Mimy told us something similar.

**Mimy:** He was told, like, “Hey, you know this is what we’re writing. And it’s important that all of us have the same story, and it’s important for all of us to be on the same page.” And he told me how they never really specifically said, “You must do it this way. You must write it this, you must do it that.” It was more of this is what we are doing and this is how we’re going to do it. And this is what’s important for our team, so we can all be on the same page. He felt a lot of pressure, just because he didn’t want to lose his job.

**Sukey:** CDCR did not respond to specific questions about this incident. A spokesperson did write in an email that the agency takes all allegations of employee misconduct seriously, and there is a new process for making sure complaints are, “Properly, fairly, and thoroughly reviewed.” The spokesperson also pointed out that there is a new system of fixed and body cameras at New Folsom. So, we don't know exactly what the truth is about this incident. What we do know is that C was severely injured. Medical reports show he received 27 stitches. His nose was broken, and his spine was fractured in three places. Ultimately, those in charge believed the officer's story that C fractured his back when he slipped and fell off his bunk and injured his face and head when he lunged away from officers and landed on the metal rails of the decontamination shower.

And that's the story that Valentino chose to go along with, even though he told his father it wasn't true. This wouldn't be the last time Valentino felt compromised by his job.

[intriguing music]

**Sukey:** Mimy Rodriguez told my colleague Julie and me that working in the psychiatric unit really took a toll on Valentino.

**Mimy:** He would talk about how draining it was, and he would come home drained.

**Julie:** What did that look like to you?

**Mimy:** I mean, he would just drag his feet. He would drag his feet come in, and he didn’t want to eat. He would shower and just go to sleep. I mean, he was just quiet.

**Sukey:** He worked double shifts so he could get more days off in a row to recharge.

**Mimy:** That’s when he would talk more about work. And be like, “Yeah, it was a little stressful. And I’m dealing with this or I’m talking about this, but I’m happy to go in.” And he was always very enthusiastic.

**Sukey:** About two and a half years after he’d gotten to New Folsom, late 2018, Valentino’s hard work looked like it was paying off. Remember the squad, that detective unit Valentino was aiming for? An officer there went on leave for PTSD, and there was a vacancy on the team. One of the supervisors who knew Valentino thought he’d be good at the job and gave him the chance to fill in.

**Mimy:** He was really excited for that, but he didn’t think he was going to get that opportunity.

**Sukey:** He’d made the squad working in the Security and Investigations Unit, but on a temporary basis. To get the position permanently, he’d have to impress the right people.

**Mimy:** He’s like, “Yes, of course, I’ll do it.” I mean, he was ready.

**Sukey:** Valentino called to let his parents know he got promoted.

**Valentino Rodriguez Sr.:** He called his mom first, and she told me that Val got a promotion.

**Sukey:** He told them it was a really good position, one that a lot of other people wanted, and that he was the youngest on the team.

**Valentino Rodriguez Sr.:** I asked him, “How was your first day?” And he goes, “It’s a bunch of older guys, Dad, that have been there.” He called them OGs. I said, “Well, how did it go?” He goes, “They asked, who the fuck are you?”

**Sukey:** So, from the very beginning, there was tension on the team. Some of the people he worked with felt like he’d skipped the line, that he hadn’t done enough to prove himself.

**Mimy:** There was one time where he had asked me to make little cheesecakes. There’s a little mini pie cheesecakes that I would make, and I made a bunch for the team and like nobody had them, nobody ate them. And they would just tell him like, “No, we don’t want this or we don’t want that.”

**Sukey:** At first, he tried to earn their acceptance by just working really hard, trying to prove that he was up to the job.

**Mimy:** He just continued to just put his head down and work, and I think that’s what really bothered him, that he would just try to do the right thing, and it just didn’t seem like it was enough.

**Sukey:** Valentino was making busts and working cases, but to some of his coworkers, this might have made him seem like even more of a threat because higher ups were noticing his work. Valentino was getting a reputation for being a diligent investigator, thorough, and for writing really good reports. This was a big deal because paperwork, reports, are hugely important in prison. With 115,000 people incarcerated in the state’s prisons at the time, these reports are how the agency kept track of everybody. Officers need to document everything: gang affiliations, medical needs, disability status, history of suicide, fights with staff and so on. And these reports are also the basis for disciplinary action, like sending someone to solitary confinement or charging them with a new crime. These reports hold a lot of power, and it is a crime for an officer to falsify an official report.

Valentino wanted to keep moving up in the system and expanding his skills as an investigator. On the weekends when he wasn’t working, he’d pay out of pocket to go to these training events and seminars. And during these trips, he became friends with a guy named Sergeant Kevin Steele. Steele passed away in 2021, so we couldn’t interview him, but Val Sr. came to know him well.

**Valentino Rodriguez Sr.:** He was about 5’7” my age, maybe a little bit older, he was in good shape. He shaved his head and stood straight up.

**Sukey:** Picture a Bruce Willis type in his 50s, with intense bright blue eyes. He was a military veteran and a straight shooter. Sergeant Steele also worked in the ISU. He was senior to Valentino, but he was in a different division. He was in the prosecution division. It was his job to prepare cases for the district attorney to bring criminal charges.

**Valentino Rodriguez Sr.:** He was very good at speaking and writing. Very passionate about his job, and loyal. He was very, very important to that prison for a good reason.

**Sukey:** The two officers really respected each other. Both of them were law enforcement nerds committed to going the extra mile. Valentino would testify in court for Steele’s cases. All that extra training meant he was a great expert witness. And Steele became one of the few people Valentino trusted, a mentor, and someone he called regularly for advice about criminal case protocol or how to handle evidence. Things with the other guys in his division, however, were getting worse.

**Valentino Rodriguez Sr.:** Sometimes he would text the guys for help and they’d have their own group text and they would like-- they didn’t want to help him.

**Sukey:** Some of these group texts are pretty awful. They mock his weight and call him half-patch to remind him he’s still just a temporary member of the squad.

**Julie:** Are these things that you saw after he died? Only after?

**Valentino Rodriguez Sr.:** Mm-hm. He never said, “Look, Dad, look what they’re sending.” He just never.

**Sukey:** But these messages would escalate even further before they stopped. The brotherhood, the family that Valentino had been promised at his academy graduation was nowhere to be found.

**Valentino Rodriguez Sr.:** And he used to go in on weekends to work, because some of the team wasn’t there to harass him. Nobody was calling him names or anything or intimidate him anyway. So, he liked going there on Saturdays. I know that, he told me. He used to go to work in the mornings, and then he told me he would go into the restroom to vomit because he felt so much anxiety.

**Sukey:** An attorney for these officers declined our request to interview her clients. But she said that any allegations that any of them bullied, hazed or harassed Valentino are false. Val Sr. says he wouldn’t understand until much later, the full scope of what his son was going through, or of the things he was being asked to do in the name of this team. But he did notice a change come over his son. He wasn’t sleeping, and he gained 60 pounds over the course of the year he was in the ISU squad. Sometimes, when they were hanging out, he’d get this blank look on his face.

**Valentino Rodriguez Sr.:** I could tell that he was starting to build this mental mechanism where he knew how to turn things off because I used to see him stare into space and then he’d [snaps finger] snap out of it.

**Sukey:** And this distance was coming between Valentino and Mimy too.

**Mimy:** What really bothered me about his job was that he was never home.

**Sukey:** They were planning to get married and have kids, but more and more she felt like Valentino was always gone. There were the overtime shifts he had to work and the milestones in their life together were passing by without him.

**Mimy:** I understood that it was his job and it was a requirement. But what would frustrate me is that when I would ask him, like, “Why couldn’t you make it?” Or, “Why couldn’t you do this?” He would say, “Well, I asked for help and no one came to help me.” And I would tell him, “Valentino, we’re your family. We love you. If something happens to you, that job is just going to replace you. But we can’t replace you.”

[poignant music]

**Sukey:** She remembers one holiday, maybe Thanksgiving, where she went to his family’s house for dinner.

**Mimy:** I remember just sitting there waiting for him in his grandma’s house. Just waiting. He couldn’t show up.

**Sukey:** Once again, Valentino had to stay late working at the prison.

**Mimy:** Then it, like, it just broke my heart because I just felt alone. I felt really lonely. His family, very nice. I mean, don’t get me wrong, very kind people, but I don’t want to sit next to his grandma, per se, when I can just sit next to him.

**Sukey:** It was in the midst of these pressures Valentino was overworked, the holidays were happening, and he felt ostracized by his team that something major happened at the prison. Val Sr. says he was at the family Christmas party. Everyone was having a good time, eating and drinking. They had a game of white elephant going and they were all laughing a lot. Valentino showed up late, straight from work around 10:00 at night, and as soon as he walked in the door, Val Sr. knew something was wrong.

**Valentino Rodriguez Sr.:** And I could just see his face, just like something really bothering him. I’ve seen that look on his face before, but it was really intense.

**Sukey:** Val Sr. asked him what was going on.

**Valentino Rodriguez Sr.:** And that’s when he took his phone out and he showed me the video.

**Sukey:** The scene that Val Sr. saw on his son’s cell phone was incredibly violent. A video taken by surveillance cameras in one of the most high-security housing units in New Folsom. The camera angle is from inside the control booth, which looks out on two tiers of cells. Right in front of the booth there’s an open area on the ground floor called a dayroom. In this dayroom, there are these metal desks in a semicircle with clear dividers in between them. In the video, Val Sr. saw a man shackled to one of these chairs with two other guys standing over him.

**Valentino Rodriguez Sr.:** This guy, this kid’s being stabbed over and over and over, and he literally would shrug your shoulders and cover his neck when they were trying to stab him in the neck. And then they would go back down on the chest, and then he would try to cover his chest by concaving his chest inward, and then they’d go back to his neck and it was just back and forth. So finally, the kid threw himself on the floor, and they proceeded to just stab him to the point to where the knives were literally hitting the ground, because every time they pulled up, his body would go up with it.

**Sukey:** The man on the floor was now lifeless. Val Sr. watched as two attackers painted his blood across their faces. But Valentino wanted his dad to notice something else.

**Valentino Rodriguez Sr.:** He had said, “Look, dad, the guy in the tower is not even aiming, and they’re using rubber bullets.”

**Sukey:** Valentino was pointing out to his dad that the officer in the control booth didn’t use his rifle to immediately stop the deadly threat. He fired his less lethal weapon that shoots rounds made out of hard foam, and he fired it way too late.

**Valentino Rodriguez Sr.:** He goes, “He’s supposed to use live rounds.” I tried not to emphasize or talk about or look at it. I just wanted to go on to my little Christmas party. So, I told him, to put that thing away. And he just, like, did what he does, he snapped out of it.

**Sukey:** But that wasn’t all. Valentino was also instructed to write up a particular type of confidential report for statewide gang investigators. The report was supposed to lay out how the killing was tied to a dispute between rival gangs. A lot of questions would later be raised about that report and who was really behind the murder. CDCR said it cannot comment on the case because it’s part of an active investigation. Val Sr. wonders about this murder too. His son was found dead by fentanyl intoxication less than a year after this Christmas party, and he was one of the people who suspected there was something really wrong about what happened in that dayroom at New Folsom.

[poignant music]

**Julie:** You have all of the laptop to follow along, I guess. How are we going to do this?

**Sukey:** In Val Sr.’s office, at his swimming pool construction company in Sacramento, hanging on the wall, he’s got that picture that Valentino painted of the two of them sitting side by side on the edge of the dock, fishing. Sometimes, he says he can still feel his son close to him, by his side.

**Valentino Rodriguez Sr.:** He’s holding my hand. He just wants me to find peace. And I find parts of peace, but not completely.

**Sukey:** When Valentino was a kid and Val Sr. would come home from work, he says his son would run up and pull on the sleeve of his shirt.

**Valentino Rodriguez Sr.:** Dad, Dad, Dad, Dad. But I just feel him tugging still. I owe that to him. And I’m going to go as far as I can. And then in the end, if nothing, there’s nothing, I tried. I’ll find my answers when my time comes.

**Sukey:** Since his son’s death, Val Sr. has been pulled into a new role. Now he’s become the investigator.

**Valentino Rodriguez Sr.:** Shows where they got moved to, where is it at, it’s different.

**Sukey:** As our little reporting team, Julie, Steven and I, crowd around the computer in his office, Val Sr. shows us the evidence he’s collected about the killing of that guy in the dayroom. A 29-year-old man named Luis Giovanny Aguilar. He’s still trying to understand how and if that murder connects to his son’s death.

**Valentino Rodriguez Sr.:** There was another--

**Julie:** Where did this come from?

**Valentino Rodriguez Sr.:** Just people were sending me stuff. Look at they’re [crosstalk] jobs.

**Julie:** Your secret source?

**Valentino Rodriguez Sr.:** All these different sources, there are just--

**Sukey:** It’s stuff from his confidential sources who work inside New Folsom. Val Sr. drags and drops the folders on his computer, one by one, onto the hard drive that we’ve brought for just this purpose.

**Sukey:** We’ll do our best to try and keep you informed about our process.

**Valentino Rodriguez Sr.:** Is this one of the bigger stories you’ve done with podcast? Or one of the most confusing or difficult?

**Sukey:** Yeah, yeah. I mean, it’s a very complex story. But at the same time, I think it’s really like, a really important story.

I tell him we’re looking into this because his son’s story is part of something even larger. Since 2019, when a new transparency law went into effect here in California, Julie and I have been trying to get a clear picture of what the consequences are for correctional officers who use excessive force in prison, lie on their reports, or discriminate against their colleagues. That’s been a black box for decades, hidden by laws that were lobbied for by correctional officer and police unions. Now we’ve gotten hundreds and hundreds of documents. Some of them are related to troubling use of force incidents, like the tapes you heard earlier. And as we went through them, we discovered that a really high number of these incidents had taken place at New Folsom. When we heard there was an officer who was blowing the whistle on misconduct there and then died, we knew we had to see if there was a connection, and the answer to that question could be among the evidence Val Sr. was loading onto our hard drive.

**Julie:** What you’re offering, by what you have, or the content that you have, the text messages, combined with all the records that we’ve requested, we’ll be able to see into the prisons and how they function in a way that really hasn’t been done much.

**Sukey:** Or ever.

**Julie:** Ever: [chuckles] Yeah.

**Sukey:** These records were completely secret. And we are the first people to analyze them.

[intriguing music]

**Sukey:** As we walk out of his office, Val Sr. hands us back the hard drive.

[riveting music]

**Sukey:** Really appreciate it.

[riveting music]

**Sukey:** Coming up next time, Valentino reaches a breaking point at work.

**Valentino Rodriguez Sr.:** That was a flat-out threat. And when he got to work, they laughed at him.

**Mimy:** I remember this very clearly. He said, “This is my identity. I feel like I’ve given up on everything.”

**Sukey:** And someone else starts looking into the murder in the dayroom and finding clues. Clues that point the finger not just at the two men with knives, but also at New Folsom itself.

When’s the date on that one? That’s the date day he died.

**Steven Rascón:** Oh, he texted Steele the day he died.

**Julie:** Wow.

**Sukey:** It'sfrom Steele.

[riveting music]

**Sukey:** You’re listening to On Our Watch, Season 2, New Folsom from KQED. If you have any tips or feedback about the series, you can email us at *onourwatch@kqed.org.*You can also leave us a review in Apple Podcasts. The series is reported by me, Sukey Lewis and Julie Small. It’s edited by Victoria Mauleon. It’s produced and scored by Steven Rascón and Chris Agusta. Sound design and mixing by Tarek Fouda. Jen Chien is KQED’s director of podcasts, and she executive produced the series. Meticulous fact checking by Mark Betancourt. Additional research by Cayla Mihalovich and Kathleen Quinn, students in the Investigative Reporting Program at UC Berkeley’s Graduate School of Journalism.

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**Glynn:** Oh, there's more, so much more On Our Watch from KQED Season 2 just getting started. Subscribe to the series however you get your podcast. For more information, *kqed.org/onourwatch*.

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