A&E documentary films emotional year at Angola Penitentiary

When the prestigious Sundance Film Festival recently handed out its Grand Jury Prize for Documentaries, a film about the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola took the trophy home. The film was called "The Farm," and it gained even more critical acclaim as it toured major cities here and in England.

Tonight at 8, local viewers get the chance to see what all the fuss is about. That's when the A&E network debuts "The Farm" as a special two-hour installment of its "Investigative Reports" series with Bill Kurtis. A&E will repeat "The Farm" in two one-hour segments on Sept. 24 and 25 at 8 p.m.

"The Farm," directed by Jonathan Stack and Patricia, and Angola inmate journalist Wilbert Rideau is credited as co-director. Advance praise for the documentary has set high expectations, but it's praise of a very specific and instructive kind. This is the sort of documentary that appeals to movie lovers, since it uses craft and technical brilliance to eloquently express a particular point of view.

That view, as embodied by the makers of "The Farm," is that Louisiana's prison policies emphasize retribution rather than rehabilitation in dealing with convicts. "The Farm" is a cinematic essay rather than straight journalism, and this allows the filmmakers to indulge their emotions without the inconvenient burden of strict balance. If these were more conventional pieces of reporting, then "The Farm" would track down both advocates and critics of Louisiana's prison practices, then give equal time to the victims of the criminals who appear in the documentary.

But this isn't the kind of documentary that Stack and Clarke set out to make. Instead, they chronicle a year at a line of prisoners heads out to work in the fields at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola. The prison is featured in "The Farm," an award-winning documentary making its television debut tonight at 8 on the A&E network.
Angola through the eyes of six prisoners “trying to overcome the odds.”

The odds at Angola, we learn quickly enough, are formidable stacked against prisoners who hope for a future beyond bars. There’s a scene where convicted rapist Vincent Simmons appears before the Parole Board, attempting to discuss evidence that might support his claims of innocence. His claims are quickly dismissed, and his parole is denied. Director Jonathan Stack is now working on a new documentary that focuses specifically on Simmons’ attempt to gain freedom.

At the end of the documentary, we learn of subsequent court decisions that have denied a new trial for Simmons. Warden Burl Cain, who appears frequently in the documentary, says that 85 percent of the convicts in Angola will die there.

In fact, two of the six prisoners profiled in “The Farm” die during the documentary — one by execution, and the other from cancer. Incredibly, Logan “Bones” Theriot, convicted murderer and terminal cancer patient, emerges as one of the film’s most optimistic prisoners.

“Your life’s not finished just because you’re in Angola,” says Theriot. “You might think it is, but it’s not.”

The stories of Theriot and John Brown, a murderer who faces lethal injection, serve as dramatic passages in “The Farm,” but tonight’s documentary is more than a deathbed perspective on convicts breathing their last. While most prison films focus on moments of obvious emotional intensity — gang warfare, bloody riots, midnight executions — “The Farm” attempts to capture not only the raw volatility of prison life, but its interludes of abiding ritual.

Because the story in “The Farm” evolves over a year, we get a telling sense of Angola’s daily and often uneventful grind. It’s not one institution, we discover, but many — an in-house radio station, a magazine, a place of worship, a farm and, on its best days, a place to learn. Taken together, oddly enough, this network of institutions forms a community. An assortment of men locked up for being criminally anti-social has, perhaps by benevolent instinct, attempted to create its own society.

Ashanti Witherspoon, serving a 75-year sentence for shooting a police officer, discusses the irony of his volunteer work within Angola — activity that, outside the penitentiary, would establish him as a celebrated citizen.

“I’ve done everything in prison that I should have done as a leader in the community,” says Witherspoon, who adds that his work at Angola is rewarding nonetheless.

“This is not as terrible a place as you would think it is,” Witherspoon says. “You still have a life. You can learn a trade; you can learn to be a lawyer; and you can help other people.”

Witherspoon is one of several prisoners in “The Farm” who downplay the darker aspects of life at Angola. By focusing on model prisoners, “The Farm” often seems to contradict its description of Angola as “one of the toughest prisons in America.” Though this assessment may be accurate, the film doesn’t give us enough evidence to prove the point.

Are there more instances of violence at Angola than at other prisons? How does its management compare with similar facilities? And how do its health and social programs stack up against prisons elsewhere? “The Farm” falls silent on these points, prompting more questions than it answers.

In the final analysis, “The Farm” is more emotional than empirical, leaving statistical research to others while it focuses on the less quantifiable experiences of prison life. As a chronicle of human feeling, “The Farm” is sometimes transcendent, most notably in a scene involving Eugene Tannehill, a convicted murderer who is now an ordained minister.

When Tannehill preaches to other inmates about his joy in the Lord, the moment soars; you almost forget that all this joy is unfolding within a barbed wire fence.

At its best, “The Farm” gives viewers an engrossing look at an institution that’s long been a part of the Louisiana landscape, and that promises to be for years to come.

We’re reminded of Angola’s durability in an early scene of “The Farm,” in which newly arrived convict George Crawford files through the door with a crowd of other new inmates. “We’re all guaranteed a job,” a guard says, surveying the long line of fresh arrivals. “We all have job security.”