Activist inmate fears he’ll never get out of prison

By The Associated Press

ANGOLA — The inmate who filed a landmark suit against Louisiana’s prison system says he has just about given up hope of ever being released from a life sentence.

Hayes Williams believes that the suit, which resulted in a 1975 order ending such practices as inmate guards and racial segregation, has left him a marked man with prison officials and some convicts.

Williams, 44, has been imprisoned since 1967 for his peripheral role in a 1967 robbery-murder in New Orleans. The gunman was paroled three years ago. Although pardon boards have recommended clemency five times, three governors have refused to grant parole, most recently Gov. Edwin Edwards in 1988.

“There’s no question that I spent more time locked up as a result of the suit,” he said.

Wilbert Rideau, another lifer at the Louisiana State Penitentiary, agreed.

“Hayes Williams has had a greater impact on the system than anyone in history,” Rideau said. “He did this thing to benefit all of these people, and here he is, all alone.”

Convict Hayes Williams, who filed a historic suit against the Louisiana prison system in the 1970s, says he has almost given up hope of being freed from a life prison sentence.
Williams

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Williams said he decided to file the suit with three other inmates in 1970 after he was thrown into solitary confinement after an escape attempt. Each changing shift of guards would beat him, he said.

As the suit moved along slowly, Williams said he became the target of hatred of guards and some inmates.

“The administration was worried,” he said. “The free personnel had been here all of their lives; it was all they had ever known. They belonged to their fathers, their sons. It was their domain. It was untouchable. It was their community.”

As a result, Williams said he has almost given up hope of ever being freed.

“I’ve been confined 25 years for standing there holding a tire and the trigger man has gone free,” he said.

The son of a financially successful New Orleans contractor, Williams was with John Duplessis and Larry Hudson when they held up a service station operator on May 15, 1967.

Williams said he went to the service station to get a flat tire fixed and that he waited outside, unarmed, holding the tire. He said he ran when the firing began.

Williams said he was persuaded to plead guilty by his parents and his court-appointed attorney, who told him he would serve no more than five years. The other two defendants received death sentences that were later commuted to life imprisonment.

Duplessis, the father of professional boxer John Duplessis, was granted a pardon by Edwards on Jan. 20, 1988. Hudson is still in prison.

“A stage of depression has set in,” he said. “You can have so much happen... that you just stop trying.”

Williams’ last hearing before the Pardon Board was in 1985. The panel recommended that his time be cut to 50 years, making him eligible for parole.

Williams said he has no plans to go before the board again.

His mother, who has appeared before the board to speak on his behalf, is too old at age 87 to do it again, he said.

“I haven’t asked for a hearing,” he said. “I’ve stopped.

“You lose hope.”

Williams is one of a dozen inmates who are listed as plaintiffs in a new lawsuit against the prison system. Filed Thursday, the suit claims medical care at Louisiana State Penitentiary is so bad it violates inmates’ constitutional rights.