Angola opens up for documentary

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ANGOLA — The proposal for his radio documentary was titled “Tossing Away the Keys,” but Louisiana State Penitentiary officials have gone to extra lengths to keep the doors wide open for Dave Isay of New York City.

The 24-year-old National Public Radio reporter-producer, carrying a tape recorder slung over his shoulder and a microphone, has had free access to the innermost reaches of the state’s 18,000-acre, maximum security prison for the past two weeks to conduct interviews and record the routine sounds of prison life.

As he composes line after line of cassette tape, Isay is collaborating with inmate journalists Wilbert Rideau and Ron Wikberg to write the script for a 25-minute NPR documentary on the growing number of elderly inmates in U.S. prisons.

The three said the program will be the nation’s first joint radio venture between inmates and a “free person.”

Isay said he has done some short radio programs involving the infamous Rikers Island prison in New York City, but if he had attempted this more ambitious endeavor at Rikers Island “there wouldn’t have been a documentary.”

“The bureaucracy in New York is unbelievable,” Isay said. “The doors have been wide open here.”

After touring the prison’s license plate plant with classification officer Tom Butler earlier this week, Isay wanted to conduct a roaming interview with Moreese “Pops” Bickham while the inmate pruned rose bushes in the main prison’s yard.

After spending 31 years at Angola, Bickham’s age and infirmities limit him to tending a few rose bushes.

But his small shears were too quiet for Isay’s microphone and, at Angola, a 72-year-old convicted murderer does not simply walk up to a tool room and pick out a larger pair of shears that could become a weapon in the wrong hands.

Rideau, the prison’s news magazine editor, made two quick calls as Isay pondered the dilemma and in a few minutes, security Capt. Terry Bordelon walked into the Angolite office holding a large, wicked-looking pair of shears, clacked the blades a couple of times and said, “How’s this?”

Bordelon also accompanied Isay and Bickham to a fenced area of the prison yard, unlocking the necessary access gates and serving as the security officer.

When the interview was finished and the shears safely put away, Isay commented on the contrast between his experiences in the New York prison and at Angola.

“It’s amazing that a captain pulled that together in five minutes,” he said.

Rideau said the complete cooperation of Assistant Warden Gary Frank and “detail-handing by his secretary, Claudell Valentine,” have made the difference.

Although the documentary, scheduled to air first on an “All Things Considered” weekend program “as soon as we get it finished,” focuses on a select group of Angola inmates, the graying of the prison population is a national concern not limited to Louisiana.

“We’re looking at the first crop of people (serving time) without parole getting older,” Isay said.

“People who have been in prison 20 to 30 years. . . Men who never experienced the civil rights movement. They’ve been in suspended animation. They’ve never eaten in an integrated restaurant.

Isay said not all prisoners should be paroled, “but there is no mechanism to determine whether these prisoners deserve parole or not. You have a lot of little, old men puttering around.”

In 1979, 640 men were serving life sentences at Angola. Ten years later, the number had jumped to 2,000, Wikberg said. “That’s just the tip of the iceberg. You have to consider the inmates serving 99-year sentences without benefit of parole.

Wikberg said 3,500 of Angola’s 5,000 are lifers or “practical lifers.”

Isay said many of the inmates he has interviewed mention Point Lookout, the prison’s cemetery. “They have a fear of ending up on Point Lookout. A lot of what drives them is that fear.”

Isay will have about 25 hours of tape to distill for the 25-minute documentary, which Rideau will narrate. A 28-minute version will also air on NPR’s “Sound Prints” program in May, Isay said.