ANGOLA — When young men come to the Louisiana State Penitentiary for the first time they learn quickly the difference between this place, where they may spend the rest of their lives, and the real world outside.

There are 18- to 25-year-old inmates who have killed, robbed or raped people and must now face the public's retribution.

There is no outpouring of sympathy from their fellow inmates, or from a crime-fearing segment of society which contends that these three hot meals and a bed is too good for these young men.

They must go alone and, in many cases, physical strength to navigate through a prison where there are few path markers and where longerines say the abnormal easily becomes the normal.

Some young men arrived here as predators only to become prey for the first time in their lives. It's a mind-boggling experience that often plants the seed of suicide in the minds of some younger inmates.

As one prison employee said, "I have never seen a book or movie that could prepare anyone for this place."

Here are accounts by several young Angola inmates on how they are learning the life of a long-term prison inmate.

Bernis Brown

Penitentiary life has taken some getting used to for Bernis Brown. He has been cited several times for violating prison rules. His problems have kept him in Camp J, where the prison houses its most unruly inmates.

But at 20 years old, and with two life terms to serve, the former gang member from Marrero has a lot of time to get his act together.

Brown has been in prison for nearly two years. The most difficult part for him is thinking about the sentence.

"A lot of people don't like to talk about it. They try to forget it. Just realizing how much time I have just shocks me," he said.

"Some of the time, I'm sitting around here with a long face. I ask myself what the hell have I done? But I never wanted to listen to anyone," he added.

Brown came to the prison straight from the streets of Marrero, where he was a member of a street gang called Busted Down Posse.

"I was on the street for 10 years and what I learned there has helped me here," he said. "You can see things before they happen. You can see people doing things and, knowing the street life, you know what their next move is going to be before they make it."

In the gang, Brown said he won a reputation as a tough guy and earned respect from the older members. For anyone who disagreed, he got his message across with a 9 mm and 45 caliber handgun.

"People were scared of me. Some of the older guys liked that and they protected me. Sometimes the gang would fight for territory. We'd fight for it. Right now it don't make sense," he said.

Brown did not go uncathed during some of those scrapes. He was stabbed once in a gang fight and shot when he was 17 years old. He is quick to show the scar on his chest to prove it.

"A lot of people told me I was going to die on the streets. I thought I couldn't live. I can't be killed. In the streets, I lived out of luck and courage," he said.

"What's different about here and the streets is that you don't have a weapon — a gun. You can't drive away. You can't protect yourself," he said. "Five or six people come for you, there is no place to run."

"On the streets, you might have been good with your fists, but there are people up here who can hit you with one punch and knock you out," he said.

Brown has two life sentences hanging over him, Brown still thinks he will be getting out in about seven years.

"When I went here I decided it was time to start learning about the law and the Bible. I'm getting out here by '20," he said. "The people in the street give me that hope. The people that really love me."

It's going to be a rough road, I know that. I know that I have to do something — the reality is, I'm just trying to make it back home... Some miracle might happen," he said.

"You know, I knew I was coming here. I came to a rodeo once and I told my friend that I was going to be," Brown said. "I have to make it and I have to make it by myself."

Ryan Adams

Prison experts say there are few people who maintain the same humanity they had before they went to prison.

Ryan Adams is optimistic and says he wants to prove them wrong.

"I want to be the person I was before I came here. That takes a strong personality," he said. "21-year-old from Lafayette said.

But he readily admits that his goal is lofty given his circumstances — he is serving two life terms for a double murder.

"Sometimes I'd be out here with a girl and a lot of money and stuff. I'd be in a car... I'd be in a car with a girl and a lot of money and stuff. And I'd be out here with a girl and a lot of money and stuff. And I'd be in a car..."

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