Communication doors open for deaf inmate

By JAMES MINTON
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ANGOLA—After 20 years of obscurity, the Louisiana State Penitentiary’s only deaf inmate is more in touch with the outside world than he ever dreamed possible.

William Johanson, 38, recently made his first telephone call to his parents from prison and now can better understand what he’s seen on television.

Arrested in 1973 for aggravated rape, a crime he says he did not commit, Johanson has lived two decades in a silent world, unable to communicate with most of his fellow inmates or his keepers.

“I felt lonely, bored, all alone,” Johanson said last week during a visit with friends from the Louisiana School for the Deaf.

“My mother and father would sometimes write letters. My parents were worried about me.”

“I had two lawyers who couldn’t sign, so a policeman interpreted for me. I had no idea about the big words they were using.” — William Johanson

“Mr. Johanson would sometimes write letters. My parents were worried about me.”

“This was no one to help me here for most of that 20 years,” Johanson said through interpreter Daniel Burch, who accompanied the teen-age visitors.

Johanson’s outlook began to brighten earlier this year, after inmate writers John Cree and Douglas “Swede” Dennis profiled him in The Angelite, the prison newsletter.

Their article, “Then There Was One,” told of Johanson’s long, but successful, struggle to adapt to the violent world of Angola.

Until 1992, Johanson apparently was the only deaf inmate incarcerated at Angola.

That year, two more deaf inmates entered the penitentiary. Johanson said he tried to help both of them, but he was alone again.

One died and committed suicide by hanging himself with a pair of jeans.

The other, with a short sentence, managed to get pardoned with the help of fellow inmate Ronald Barro, who learned sign language.

Before the article appeared, inmate

legal counselor James West became friends with Johanson through a mutual interest in hobby crafts.

“I met William about three years ago,” West said. “After we became friends, I realized that he didn’t have the things we take for granted.”

West, who learned sign language, estimated he wrote 100 letters in an attempt to help Johanson, but met with little success.

“That was the discouraging part,” West said, “but I made a lot of contacts.”

Meanwhile, an anonymous subscriber sent a copy of The Angelite profile to Les Burke, director of the Deaf Action Center of Baton Rouge.

Burke and interpreter Maria Murray immediately made arrangements to visit Johanson, and provided him with a state-loaned telephone equipped with a teletypewriter.

Later, Burke, Murray and a

representative from the Baton Rouge Advocacy Center for the Elderly and Disabled returned to Angola to present Johanson with a television closed-captioning decoder donated by the Louisiana Association for the Deaf.

Johanson can, at last, really enjoy the broadcast, Burke said.

“I was happy, of course,” Johanson said. “After 20 years, I was finally able to communicate.

“The problem I have now is waiting for interpretative services,” he said, explaining that he often has to wait to talk to a guard or seek medical attention.

He said he also wants to enroll in prison educational programs to improve his fourth-grade reading level.

The Deaf Action Center is looking for other deaf inmates in Louisiana prisons—West believes there are as many as eight—to determine whether they are receiving services required by the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The School for the Deaf set up the field trip to educate the 12 participating teen-agers about the criminal justice system, said Burch and Allen Aldrich, a recreation supervisor.

Inmate Prentice Robinson, the prison radio station manager, led the tour to explain the harsh realities of prison life.

“I want them to understand the rules in school are different than rules in society,” Aldrich said.

Burch said the students must understand that a handicap does not absolve them from violating society’s rules, a fact of which Johanson is living proof.

West, however, questions whether Johanson received a fair trial, because a police officer acted as his interpreter.

“I had two lawyers who couldn’t sign, so a policeman interpreted for me. I had no idea about the big words they were using,” Johanson said.

“They were using such large words, so I quit paying attention. In court, I got a life sentence.

“I’m thinking, ‘Yeah, I’ve got a life.’ All of a sudden, they put the handcuffs on me,” he said.

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