Ted 'Animal' Durbin, an inmate at the Louisiana State Penitentiary, watches his friend David Mackey waste away recently from lung cancer. Durbin, serving 140 years for armed robbery, was Mackey's companion inside the hospice program at the prison. Durbin and other inmates provide company and assistance to hospice patients. Mackey, who was serving a life sentence for second-degree murder, died Nov. 20.

Inmate volunteers help dying fellow prisoners at Angola's prison hospice

By BRETT BARROQUERE

ANGOLA — Ted "Animal" Durbin stood over David Allen Mackey's grave and dropped a yellow wildflower onto the casket.

For Durbin, the act helped provide a final good-bye to his friend.

"I developed a bond with David," said Durbin, an inmate who volunteers at the hospice inside the Louisiana State Penitentiary. "This one was tough."

Mackey, 57, died of lung cancer Nov. 19 while serving a life sentence for second-degree murder, convicted of shooting a man through the neck while trying to get him to play Russian roulette.

Mackey spent the last months of his eight years behind bars in the prison's hospice, where he met Durbin, a career criminal serving 140 years for armed robbery.

Durbin is one of 15 to 20 inmates, mostly prisoners serving extensive sentences for drug offenses, murder or other violent crimes, who help as many as six inmates at a time in the hospice program. The five-year-old hospice, in a place once known as "the bloodiest prison in the South," is one of only three prison hospices in the country licensed by the American Hospital Association.

In the hospice, inmates are given pain medication and comfort by both full-time nurses and inmate volunteers.

Warden Burl Cain said the hospice is necessary in a prison where about 3,200 inmates are serving life sentences and 90 percent will die in custody.

The hospice gives them a place to die with some dignity, Cain said. And giving inmates some dignity and allowing them to assist one another creates a less confrontational and safer atmosphere inside the prison.

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Death and Redemption

Inmate volunteers help dying fellow prisoners at Angola's prison hospice

Percheron horses and a hand-made wooden carriage carry inmate Douglas quickly to his final resting place in the prison cemetery. Fellow inmates and relatives walked along.

Inmate Ted "Animal" Durbin watches as the flag is removed from David Mackey's flagpole at the end of the American flag flying over the prison. Mackey was a U.S. Army veteran and had an inmate-staffed color guard at his funeral.