Angola lifers not forgotten men

By KATHLEEN WARD
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The Rev. Rose Lee Bell's small living room is covered with plaques and photographs commemorating her work with Angola State Penitentiary lifers. The room is bright and filled with the warmth of her presence. She sits in a comfortable chair, her eyes sparkling with a twinkle of mischief.

When Mrs. Bell began working with the inmates, she made them change their name to the Lifers' Association. "I will never forget that day," she said. "I said, 'If you are forgotten, what are we doing here?' I was just fusing the idea that nobody was saying a word. I said, 'We came 60 miles and you're talking about you're forgotten?'

Mrs. Bell has helped numerous parolees find work and a place to live. If they have no where to go, she will take them in herself, place them with friends and relatives. She runs a strict Protestant home and does not allow the men to have women visit them.

"I know life. I'm a woman. They haven't given me any trouble, even from a distance," she said. "I think it might be the constancy of prayer. I have had one man to even see me. Anytime they think they're more man than I am woman, they can take their leave.

"Go on with the Lord's work and He will renew and pour out His strength to you," she tells them. "If you do good, good is going to follow you.

"Love has a lot of control. When the person has love, they won't do anything to disgrace himself."

Although a security officer and an inside inmate observer, the meetings of the Lifers' Association, they have never been required disciplinary measures, Mrs. Bell said.

"I might be wrong, but I believe that all the organizations at Angola, we are the strongest."

Mrs. Bell said she does not associate the men with their crimes.

"With God's help I've only had one return to Angola and he broke parole," she explained. "By associating with what the parole board deemed unsuitable companions, she said.

Some of her old tenants write her every month; others have been silent. She wonders if they have gone to prisons in other states.

"Inmates who come to the penitentiary for life are facing something most people can't even imagine," said Roger Thomas, a psychopath in prison. "Inmates without hope, you've got to do something to make them feel loved."

Mrs. Bell has opened her home to some of the men. Sometimes they help them and sometimes we don't. The character of the person has a lot to do with it.

Over the years, Mrs. Bell has opened her home to over 50 men from the Louisiana State Penitentiary Lifers' Association. She has helped them find work and a place to live, sometimes she helps them with their crimes.

On Dec. 20, the lifers honored her for her work with special tribute marking her 15th anniversary as patron and spokesperson of the group. "They'd had this long banner that said, 'Happy 15th Anniversary Mother Bell.' I got goose bumps. It was a great moment of recognition," she said.

The Angola, the prison's magazine, reported that Mrs. Bell began working with the group at the urging of Lifers' Association chairman, Monroe Green. The group was then known as "the Forgotten Men," a name that was taken from a country at Angola, "The Anl/olite,"

The group also has political aims. The Louisiana State Penitentiary Lifers' Association, they have never associated with the parole board.

"If they are never supposed to go home, the inmates don't really believe that. They have hope. When you've got an inmate without hope, you've got trouble!

Participation in groups such as the Lifers' Association helps inmates stay in control and develop self-esteem, Mrs. Bell said.

Many of the prisoners haven't had a visitor for four or five years. They believe that the lifers have a special gift. "It takes an awful lot for people to stick with the convicts for a long time."

"They call us hardshell, but we are the only hardshells you can't dent," said Mrs. Bell. "We just keep on keeping on."