Former Angolite editor Wikberg dies in Maryland

By JAMES MINTON
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Ron Wikberg, a Louisiana prison journalist who used his personality and writing skills to promote a better public understanding of prison life, died at his home Sunday after a yearlong battle with cancer.

Wikberg, 51 and a resident of Rohrersville, Md., was the only convicted murderer with a life sentence to win parole in the state's history. He left the Louisiana State Penitentiary in June 1992 after serving 23 years for the 1969 death of Lafayette convenience store owner Stanley Melancon, who was killed during an armed robbery.

Wikberg became eligible for parole consideration when the courts ruled his sentencing judge did not exclude that possibility, which was then allowed by law.

When he left Angola, Wikberg was co-editor of The Angolite, the prison's award-winning news magazine.


"Ron is a rare example of someone who made a terrible mistake as a young man, paid for it and managed to make something positive of a life that might have otherwise been wasted," said Anne Butler of St. Francisville, author of two books on the Angola prison.

"He managed to reach a lot of young people, both in and out of prison, in an effort to help them learn from his mistake," she said.

"We're all sad to hear about Ron's death," said Angola Warden John Whitley.

"He had a lot of friends at Angola, both inmates and employees. He was just a model inmate. "Through his books and talks to different groups in Louisiana, I think he helped educate people about life in the penitentiary and things that were needed," the warden said.

Former Warden Murray Henderson said Wikberg "made a great change in his life" after arriving at Angola and served as a role model for younger prisoners.

"I liked him very much, personally," Henderson said.

"He'd always do what he told you he'd do."

Burke Foster, a University of Southwestern Louisiana criminal justice professor, said he was fascinated with the story of Wikberg's evolution from soldier to armed robber and murderer, prison hospital worker, self-taught paralegal, prison journalist and finally, "the conventional role of husband."

Shortly after his release, Wikberg married his wife, Kay, whom he met after she wrote to the prison magazine to inquire about a childhood friend who was executed at Angola.

Rideau said Wikberg was well liked by many Angola employees and brought those relationships to the magazine when he joined the staff in 1987.

"It was something we didn't have at the time. Most inmate organizations are not fused into that world," Rideau said.

The American Bar Association honored Wikberg for a 1988 article on Angola's "long-termers," prisoners who had served such long sentences that they were basically forgotten.

While he was co-editor, the magazine was a finalist several times for a National Magazine Award, Rideau added.

New York radio producer Dave Isay, who recorded a documentary on Angola's long-termers for National Public Radio, said he spent Thursday and Friday with Wikberg at his home, recording an oral history for possible later use.

"He was the same, strong Ron to the end," Isay said.

In addition to his wife, he is survived by his father, five brothers and a sister.

His body was cremated, and no funeral service will be held, friends said.

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