Gov. Roemer still opposes freeing prison journalist

By MARSHA SHULER
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As the state Pardon Board prepares to hear convicted murderer Wilbert Rideau’s request for freedom, Gov. Buddy Roemer — who will make the final decision — said Tuesday he still opposes clemency for the award-winning prison journalist.

Rideau’s attorneys go before the Pardon Board on Wednesday afternoon to plead their client’s case. Roemer will not attend.

Roemer said he had a recent conversation with one of the victims of Rideau’s crime and he was struck by the deliberate brutality of the crime.

“It made quite an impression on me and I offset that with the evidence of (Rideau’s) rehabilitation. It’s a tough, tough call. But honestly at the moment I would not change my decision,” Roemer said at a morning news conference.

Rideau said he still hopes to change the governor’s mind.

“Apparently he is listening to one side and there’s another side to be heard,” said Rideau, in a telephone interview from the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola.

Roemer denied a Pardon Board recommendation for clemency in the Rideau case in December 1988. Other governors before him have done the same.

Roemer said he has given some study in the last couple of weeks in anticipation of a favorable recommendation from his Pardon Board.

A conversation with one of Rideau’s victims left an indelible impression of “the deliberate brutality of the act — beyond passion, beyond a moment of anger or anxiety . . . .” Roemer said.

“It extended for some period of time. There was personal knowledge, a relationship. The fact that the victims worked next door with the culprit. It was not like strangers passing in the night. It was deliberate, systematic, violent, devastating, unbelievable . . . .”

Rideau took the bank manager and two other employees hostage when
he robbed the Gulf National Bank in Lake Charles of more than $14,000 in February 1961.

He later shot and stabbed bank clerk Julia Ferguson to death. He left the two other hostages for dead, but they survived.

Rideau was given the death penalty in the murder of Ferguson, whose throat he cut.

He was 19 at the time to the crime.

Rideau spent 10 years on death row before a Supreme Court voided the death penalty and gave life sentences to him and others waiting to die at the time. He has been incarcerated at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola for 29 years.

Former Gov. Edwin Edwards twice rejected pardons for Rideau because of a promise he made to one of Rideau’s surviving victims, Dora McCain.

Rideau, who edits the prison magazine The Angolite, points to his successful journalistic career behind bars as evidence of his rehabilitation.

"However, to some degree, my success perhaps lies at the heart of my problem — my inability to regain my freedom. In choosing to redeem myself, I’ve perhaps done too well, violating the most sacred unofficial requirement for release: anonymity," he said recently.

"The key to freedom is to lie low, give the public time to forget you, then ease unnoticed out of the prison system," Rideau said.

"I realize I have no right to be free, but when the system has released virtually all those convicted of similar and worse crimes, doesn’t simple justice require a measure of fairness and equity rather than punishment for someone who has distinguished himself by ‘doing good’?" Rideau asked.

Rideau’s clemency petition includes findings of a yearlong investigation of his case by a Loyola University faculty member.

The report notes that all prisoners on death row on the day Rideau arrived in 1962 have long since been returned to society: all new admissions to Death Row during 1962 — who arrived after Rideau — have also been freed; and out of 31 murderers sent to Angola during 1962 all have been given freedom — except Rideau and another man.