The History, Routine, and Terror of a Prison System

By KATHERINE S. MANGAN

When Burk Foster, a police officer turned criminal-justice professor, decided to compile a textbook on the Louisiana corrections system, he joined forces with some unlikely co-editors—two men serving life sentences for murder.

The result is a book that offers students at the University of Southern Louisiana a first-hand, often chilling account of life in a state penitentiary. Mr. Foster's co-editors were writing from experience; between them, they had spent 54 years behind bars.

Separated by 150 miles and seven locked gates, Mr. Burk and the two prisoners had to overcome many logistical hurdles to create a book they hope will improve students' understanding of prisons and the people detained there.

"If the people on the outside are ever going to understand the people who are inside, there has to be a dialogue," says Ron Wikberg, one of the prisoners who edited the textbook and who last month won parole from the Louisiana Board of Parole.

Mr. Wikberg and Wilbert Rideau were given life sentences at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola. There they became co-editors of The Angelole, an uncensored inmate-run magazine that has won awards for its hard-hitting articles on prison life and prison reform.

The Cop and 2 Crooks

The textbook, The Wall Is Strong: Corrections in Louisiana, published by the university's Center for Louisiana Studies, is a compilation of articles on the Louisiana prison system. The three men wrote about two-thirds of the articles in the book; the rest were excerpted from newspapers and other publications. The three conferred mostly by mail, speaking on the telephone in the final weeks of the project. The prisoners jokingly refer to the book's unlikely editorial team as "the cop and two crooks."

Mr. Foster spent five years as a police officer in Oklahoma before becoming a criminal-justice instructor at Western Oklahoma State College, and later a professor at the University of Southern Louisiana. He says he asked the convicts to work with him on the text because they are "highly knowledgeable in their fields and both excellent journalists."

Permitted to Travel

"Both of them, even though they had been in prison for many years, had positive outlooks and were interested in using their work to reach people and inform them about conditions in prison," Mr. Foster says.

Speaking to Mr. Wikberg and Mr. Rideau today, it is hard to reconcile the pleasant, articulate voices on the telephone with the violent crimes that sent them to prison.

Mr. Rideau was 19 when he shot three people, killing one, during a bank robbery. Now 50, he spent 11 years on death row before his sentence was commuted to life in prison. Mr. Wikberg, now 48, was 22 when he fatally shot a storekeeper during a botched armed robbery attempt. Mr. Wikberg expects to be released within the next few weeks and hopes to work eventually as a paralegal in Lafayette, La.

Both say that writing has given them a purpose, as well as an escape from the mind-numbing routine of prison life. In addition to editing The Angelole, Mr. Rideau and Mr. Wikberg have been permitted to travel with a guard to speak to campus and civic groups.

"I've found them just as pleasant and as serious in their intentions as anyone you would work with on the outside world," Mr. Foster says.

"They continually challenge the stereotypes that people have about prisoners as well as the people living in them, by showing that there is good in those people as well as the bad that put them there in the first place."

As they discuss their textbook, the three men sound almost like colleagues from different universities. The Louisiana prison has an extensive library that allowed Mr. Wikberg and Mr. Rideau to keep up with the latest scholarly writings on corrections issues.

'A Mutual Admiration Society'

"I think what we had was a mutual admiration society," Mr. Wikberg says. "Professor Foster has written some very progressive papers concerning criminal justice, and I like to think we have written some pretty progressive material ourselves, and at one point our materials crossed each other's desks."

The first part of the textbook traces the history of the state's corrections system, focusing on the prison at Angola. The second part focuses on the routine of convict life in a state penitentiary, covering such topics as sexual assault, Atkins, growing old in prison, and prison jobs. The last section addresses alternatives to incarceration, including work-release programs and halfway houses.

A. The anger and hopelessness experienced by long-time prisoners is revealed in raw accounts of prison life, including graphic portrayals of sexual violence.

In one article Mr. Rideau, who currently is ineligible for parole, says he has no intention of backing off.

"There's something morally wrong with asking someone who's done a sin against society to sit back and not do anything to atone for their crimes," he says. "We do it largely for ourselves because we have to live with ourselves. It's a redemptive effort on our part."

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