Jerome Price has begun to rebuild his life after his release from the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola.

‘It took me to go to Angola to find myself’

By JAMES MINTON
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Jerome Price walked out of the Louisiana State Penitentiary on June 15. He went from Camp J, the prison’s tough disciplinary unit, to the freedom of his mother and stepfather’s home in a quiet Scotlandville neighborhood.

Gone are the iron bars, fences, guards, strict rules and the sometimes-peculiar codes that convicts impose on themselves. But now Price, 29, must begin rebuilding his life and making his own decisions.

One thing he does know is that the only way he wants to go back to Angola is to visit his father, who is serving a life sentence for murder.

“In the dorm, I had some friends who are never going home,” he said. “It scares the hell out of me (to know) how easy it is to get a life sentence.”

“That’s what woke my thinking ability. I said, ‘Slow down, man, this ain’t it. You come here for the rest of your life, and you’re going to be lost.’”

Now that he’s free, he said his dreams will save him.

“I want a good job, a good job not with that slavery mentality I just came from,” Price said. “I want a man’s job where I can pay for car notes, a house or an apartment, clothes...”

Price said his assets include a prison-earned GED, a supportive family, a willingness to work in a meaningful job, and some basic skills in carpentry and tile and marble work.

“I know how to lay tile, read a ruler and mix ‘thin set’ to lay marble,” he said. “In my early teens, I worked with a community service thing, working with the elderly on their homes, doing carpentry.”

His criminal record is his major liability. He knows he must tell the truth about it when he fills out a job application.

He’s hoping to find an employer who will overlook his past. “I’ve paid my dues to society. I just want to be an original citizen,” he said.

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"They know how we think; they're always ahead of us. You know, if one of them does something (illegal) on the streets, they're going to give him credit for time served.

Sent to the fields to work for 4 cents an hour, Price said he quickly grew tired of "unnecessary work," such as cutting tall grass with hoes. "You're constantly going over these same ditches, week after week, and it's ridiculous."

After going to the "dungeon" for refusing to work on an emergency levee repair project during the Christmas holidays in 1990, Price said he began thinking about getting out of Angola's fields.

He said he thought to himself, "Gee, I go home next year, so the hell with all this. I want to go somewhere to lay out, watch TV, do my exercises and go home."

Price said many short-timers manipulate the system to "take inventory of themselves" in an isolation cell.

"That's our pre-release program, on our own. Unless, of course, you're running dope or you have punks (homosexual) 'wives'. Then you stay in the population."

With extra-duty punishment piling up for refusing to work in the field, Price tried what inmates consider a coward's route: signing yellow "check out" papers or asking for protection.

"I perpetuated to the major that I was a homosexual. Now, I'm 6-8, and he didn't believe me because I laughed and everything."

"He said, 'Now Price, you know I don't believe that.' I said, 'I'm trying to go lay out, man.'"

Price said he finally got his ticket to permanent, non-working isolation by getting a friend to pass him a homemade knife just before a shakedown crew visited his cell. He said he put the knife on his bunk, in open view.

"I got a blue writeup on that, an 'incident report.' It was heavy enough to get me where I was going. They said they were sending me to Camp J, and I said, 'Yeah, you're right.'"

Price said, "There's not a word in the Webster's to describe Camp J, but its isolation cells afford the opportunity to ponder "how you want to regroup when you get back on the streets."

He draws a distinction between his efforts to get out of work in prison and his self-professed willingness to work now.

"I'm not looking for anything free. I want to work, but I want a necessary job. I'm tired of doing unnecessary work the way they work us up there."

Price said he first got into trouble as a teen-ager "looking for easy money" to buy clothes, keep up with "the boys" and show off for girls.

That's behind him now, he said. "Trouble is not even on my agenda. I know how to live with and without, now. I'm taking every day as it comes by."