La. inmates' program offers view behind bars

By JAMES MINTON
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ANGOLA — Viewers of ABC News' "Day One" program will go behind bars tonight for an unprecedented view of life and death inside Louisiana State Penitentiary.

Lifers Michael Glover and Wilbert Rideau videotaped and wrote the entire segment, which airs as part of the weekly news magazine at 7 p.m. on WBRZ-TV.

The program focuses on older inmates and how they confront the prospect of aging and death in prison.

ABC's Paul Slavin, who produced the program, said no other nationally televised program, to his knowledge, has used video footage shot entirely by inmate journalists.

Most prison administrators "would have nightmares" about allowing a prisoner to possess a video camera inside a maximum security prison, said Warden John Whitley, The Angola, Angola's inmate magazine.

"Warden John Whitley's decision to allow the video camera inside the prison continues an experiment in prison press freedom begun in the 1970s by former Warden C. Murray Henderson and endorsed by a succession of wardens, Rideau said.

"Say what you want about Louisiana, this penitentiary has been, in some respects, more progressive than any other prison in the nation," he said.

"The attitude by wardens for the last 20 years is that if something has to be hidden from the public, maybe you shouldn't be doing it," Rideau said.

Whitley said he had few reservations about allowing ABC to furnish the prison magazine staff with a camera and supply of videotapes.

"I knew it was something new, and I always like to feel that I'm right when I do something," Whitley said. "I knew the inmates were reliable, so I said, 'Let's try it.'"

"The only bad thing they could film was something that's not supposed to be happening, and then I'd want to see that... maybe not on national television, but I'd want to see it."

"You'd think a video camera in a maximum security prison would really make security (guards) nervous, but that wasn't the case," Glover said. "Riding on The Angolite makes a difference."

"There's a mutual respect," Whitley added. "I know they're not going to set me up, and they know I'm going to back them up."

Glover shot 47 hours of tape for the program over a year, following the activities of a group of elderly prisoners.

"The saddest thing was going on (prison hospital) Ward 1," Glover said. "They call it the temporary ward because everybody on there is going to die. Panning across dying men is probably the most dismal experience I've ever had."

The Angola staffers attended a parole board hearing for one terminally ill prisoner, who would have gone home to die except for a last-minute mix-up in the arrangements for his post-release care.

"At the hour he was supposed to leave, they buried him at Point Lookout," said Glover, referring to Angola's cemetery.

"It was a happy day for various reasons," Rideau said. "I was happy to see him go home, but he was happy to get there."

"We watch 28 prisoners die here last year, just from old age. I think we could have saved ourselves a lot of expense by doing something else with them," he said.

Louisiana State Penitentiary inmate Wilbert Rideau, seated, records voice-overs for an ABC 'Day One' program airing tonight, while Michael Glover videotapes the work.

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"People don't know what you mean when you say, 'old prisoner.' Well, you'll see," he added.

Whitley said Louisiana basically has had a "one strike and you're out" philosophy toward violent crime for the last 20 years, but with little effect on violence.

At some point, after years of incarceration, the costs of holding some criminals may far outweigh the benefit to society, said Whitley, who hastens to add he's not a bleeding heart liberal.

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