Pardon me, Ms. McKissack

LOUISIANA STATE PARDON BOARD MEMBER SALLY MCKISSACK HAS HEARD IT ALL

By Richard Baudouin  Photos by Robin May

The atmosphere was thick with religion as the Louisiana State Pardon Board heard the case of a man

serving a life sentence for accessory to murder. Three beery preachers testified that the prisoner had undergone a change of life at Angola and was ready to come back to society. "He wants to keep other young people from making the mistake he did," insisted one of the reverends.

The brother-in-law of the murdered man was not quite so convinced that mercy was in order. "My sister still misses her husband very much," he said. "I feel like justice was served."

One Pardon Board member asked him how long the man should stay in jail before being forgiven. Speaking hesitantly and with pain, the victim's relative talked about God's compassion and the need to accept Jesus. But he refused to be pinned down on when, or even whether, the inmate deserved a second chance.

"Seeing the man's obvious discomfort, Pardon Board member Sally McKissack jumped in and made the man's point for him. "What I think I hear you saying is that as Christ forgave, you too can forgive, but you would just as soon have him in prison."

The remark was quintessential McKissack: clever, compassionate and just humorous enough to defuse a tense situation. It got a laugh out of the victim's brother-in-law and the prisoner's friends and family. After the hearing, the two sides chatted amicably in the hallway outside the Pardon Board's meeting room.

For McKissack, a sense of humor is indispensable to maintaining sanity in the face of the critical choices she must make every day. But these are no laughing matters.

For 10 days a month, she sits on the state Pardon Board, which recommends to the governor whether prisoners should have their sentences reduced or their records cleared. In some cases, she must determine whether a man facing capital punishment lives or dies.

Back in Lafayette she runs the Lafayette Community Correctional Center, a halfway house for prisoners who are serving the remainder of their terms in a work release program. She must attend to the 3,001 conflicts and 1,001 grievances that arise when 50 convicted men congregate under one roof.

Still, she maintains an optimistic attitude about the basic goodness of human nature, even though she has seen "people who have sunk to the depths."

Says Burk Foster, a friend and former criminal justice professor: "She believes that people can change. That point of view serves her well."

What's a nice, upper middle-class, Republican girl like Sally McKissack doing in a ramshackle halfway house in a seedy section of Lafayette?

Several incidents during her 56 years brought her to a career in criminal justice:

• As a young girl growing up on a cotton farm in rural Mississippi, she was practically raised by an older black man who worked for her family. When McKissack was 10, the man went on a drunken rampage and killed his wife, whom he suspected was cheating on him. He was convicted of the crime and sent off to the state penitentiary. "I couldn't understand Parker being sent to prison," she says.

• Many years later, the mother of five and wife of an oil executive living in Texas, she was asked by her youngest daughter, "When I grow up, what are you going to do?" She investigated courses at a branch of Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, Texas, and was attracted to the criminal justice department. She
For McKissack, the pardon process is another way to reduce inmate populations, thus cutting back on soaring state outlays for corrections. "It's really very conservative," she says. But she acknowledges that reducing prison sentences and letting people out on the street is an emotional issue that stirs up strong feelings in society.

"The public has an impression of us throwing open the doors, throwing holy water on people and saying, 'you are forgiven'," says McKissack. In reality, the Pardon Board intensively reviews the cases that come before it, scrutinizing the inmate's record in prison, the type of crime he committed and the prospects for finding a stable living and working arrangement when he returns to society. McKissack also puts a lot of emphasis on the feelings of the individual victimized during the crime. If she considers the applicant a threat to that victim, or if the victim would suffer psychological harm because of a release, she votes to deny pardon. "If I get a feeling here," she says, "pointing to her stomach, "I don't vote to commute."

After an all-day session in which she tried to balance the need for showing mercy to a prisoner with the horror stories of someone he has victimized, McKissack often returns to her hotel room and just sits at the walls. "We'll just be wrong out at the end of the day," says McKissack.

The issue of pardoning prisoners has often been fought out in the public arena in Louisiana. It was a major point of contention in the 1983 gubernatorial election between Treen and Edwin Edwards, and the two governors clearly had different approaches to the process. Treen doled out pardons very sparingly—only 127 in four years. Edwards was more liberal with the procedure, approving more than 1,000 during his second term. (The process was an area of scandal during the Edwards administration when McKissack's successor as chairwoman, Howard Marselus, was found guilty of selling pardons.) Interestingly, notes McKissack, the rate of re-conviction—2 percent—was the same for prisoners pardoned under both Treen and Edwards.

In retrospect, she says, "[Treen] could have loosened up a little bit." Edwards, on the other hand, "understood the process." Roemer is "cautious" about using his pardon power, says McKissack, and she doesn't fault him for that.
The halfway house has been somewhat successful while avoiding embarrassing incidents. Pictured are residents Andrew Williams (left) and Scott Hebert.

Books are one of McKissack's passions: She is a voracious reader. Currently on her nightstand is *Chaos*, which attempts to explain that "even in chaos there is a natural process and order." (A good example of that might be the often chaotic world of criminal justice.) She is also a fan of the novels of Tony Hillerman, which center around the Navajo tribal police and weave together elements of intrigue and traditional Indian religions.

She describes her own religious beliefs as eclectic. She was raised Methodist, admires the Catholic Church and is also attracted to various Eastern beliefs. But at her core, she is a people person, not an ideologue. "She is not a doctrinaire sort of person. She doesn't have a particular ideology that she's trying to pitch or that she's trying to fit people into," says Foster.

When you are dealing with people's lives, when you are negotiating between competing sides, both of whom call upon the Lord Almighty to bolster their case, you'd better be a bit pragmatic. And a sense of humor sure doesn't hurt either.