Prison Christmas a mixture of joy, gloom, bitterness

By JAMES MINTON
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ANGOLA — Santa Claus passed out candy canes to kids and adults alike. Family members visited, posed for pictures around the Christmas tree and enjoyed a holiday feast.

Were it not for the setting, it would have been almost like any other family's Christmas celebration.

But this was the Louisiana State Penitentiary, and the wives, parents, children, grandchildren and girlfriedoes of several hundred warehouse men passed building surrounded by high, razor-wire-topped fences.

Robert Saltzman's fifth Christmas in Angola was a special day. His mother, Lou Bordelon of Lafayette, and her husband came to visit. Bordelon hopes it's her last holiday visit.

"I want my son home for Christmas next year," she said. "I believe in the power of prayer, so I know he's going to come home."

Kevin Ray Smith Sr.'s family — his mother, wife and three children — drive from Baton Rouge to visit twice a month.

However, their time together Wednesday was different "because it's Christmas," said Kandice, the 17-year-old spokeswoman for the inmate's other children, Kevin Ray Jr., 14, and Kelly, 12.

Kelly was in diapers when she first visited her father at Angola. Saltzman Smith and other prisoners called to the "visiting sheds" at Angola's Main Prison or outcamps on Christmas Day are the lucky ones, according to several inmates.

The vast majority of Angola's 9,200 inmates seldom, if ever, have visitors.

"Most guys don't look forward to Christmas," said Jim Miller, who's seen 23 Christmases come and go at Angola.

"It's not a special day. If anything, it's the most depressing day of the year. You try harder to get over the day."

Inmate William H. Cribs, 64, sits on the edge of his bunk.

Advocate staff photos by Tim Mueller

"The only description to use is gloom," added Danny Hyorth, president of an Alcoholics Anonymous group.

The visiting area's hubbub contrasted sharply with the subdued mood of the prison hospital, where 64-year-old heart patient William Cribbs — with legal papers spread across his bed — pondered his next move.

After serving 13 years for murder and armed robbery, including five years in the prison hospital, Cribbs got a favorable Pardon Board recommendation for executive clemency but Gov. Buddy Roemer recently denied his request.

"The old guys in the hospital are not getting them," said inmate counselor Choco Yancy, "I don't know of a guy in the hospital who's gotten a pardon.

Roemer's pre-Christmas announcement that he would not rubber-stamp the backlog of pardon recommendations on his desk caused an undercurrent of tension among Angola's long-term population, according to Hyorth and Danny Sermon, another inmate who has been in Angola for 14 years.

The governor recently commuted both men's pardon recommendations. Sermon's denial letter came two days before Christmas.

"Roemer lends new meaning to the term "face deck,"" Hyorth said.

"He's not going by a prisoner's merits," Sermon said. "Nobody understands the reason he does what he does."

Sermon said Roemer appointed the best Pardon Board the state has ever had "but he doesn't even listen to them."

Despite their bitterness, Hyorth and Sermon joined others in inmate leadership positions in an attempt to brighten Christmas Day for those fortunate to have loved ones who still care enough to visit.

The Main Prison inmate organizations raise operating money with concessions in the visiting area, but every Christmas Day the food, beverages and snacks are on the house.
The Smith family has its portrait taken Christmas Day in the Main Prison visitor's area. From left, standing, are Claudette Smith; her husband, inmate Kelvin Smith; and Kelvin Smith Jr., 14. Seated, from left, are Kelly Smith, 12, and Kandice Smith, 17.

Inmate Roy Chenier looks through the bars at the entrance to the Main Prison visitor's area.

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Angola

CONTINUED FROM 1B

The clubs are giving something back to the people who support them, Hyest explained.

Visiting area supervisor L.L. Mary Smith has got into the holiday spirit early, having herself been a club member for several years. She has a Christmas present for the inmates and sent the money to the club to help buy it. She has a Christmas card for the inmates and sent the money to the club to help buy it.

Estate Class, he was not going to wear that regalia and not again," she said.

Martha is philosophical about working on Christmas, realizing the man who died because he had no shoes until he met a man with no feet.

"With so many people out of work, I'm happy to have a job," she said.

Homemade Christmas cards made by inmate Grover Bendor communicato a Christmas message to his wife. Josie. Bendor also made a purse, wallet, picture frames and a jewelry box for his wife and two children.