The Angolite's Ron Wikberg receives approval for parole

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The state Parole Board granted parole Monday for prison journalist Ron Wikberg, who has served nearly 23 years for the 1969 slaying of a Lafayette Parish man during a robbery.

Wikberg, 48, is co-editor of The Angolite, the Louisiana State Penitentiary's inmate-produced news magazine.

The Parole Board's decision was unanimous, Angela Warden John Whitley said, adding that Wikberg could be freed in one to two weeks.

"The board told me I have had an excellent prison record for 23 years," Wikberg said Monday. "In granting me parole, the board told me to continue my work in talking to kids about drugs and crime and to help prevent them from following in my former footsteps."

Since 1975, second-degree murder convictions have carried a mandatory life sentence without parole, probation or suspension of sentence, although the governor may commute a life sentence.

Wikberg argued in a suit filed in December that the trial judge in his 1973 resentencing hearing did not exercise the option — then in effect — of imposing a life term without the benefit of parole, probation, commutation or suspension of sentence.

Wikberg originally pleaded guilty in 1970 to the murder of Stanley Melancon, but was resentenced in 1973 because of a sentencing error.

Nineteenth Judicial District Court Commissioner Kay Bates ruled in February that Wikberg received a "simple life sentence" and was immediately eligible for parole, according to court records.

"This court is not saying by means of this ruling that Mr. Wikberg shall be released on parole," Bates said, but she ordered the Parole Board to expedite Wikberg's case if he filed a parole application.

Wikberg was resentenced under the provisions of a 1972 legislative act, which gave judges the option in sentencing murder defendants of imposing life sentences with or without parole eligibility. The act later was repealed.

Bates' ruling said the decision does not apply to inmates who were specifically sentenced to life without parole or those whose final sentences were imposed before the 1972 legislative act.