St. Martin students get a taste of prison

ANGOLA (AP) — “I’ll be here until the day I die,” a 22-year-old inmate told the touring group of teenagers at Louisiana State Penitentiary.

“I thought I had the juice,” he said. “But it wasn’t worth it. ... I didn’t know Louisiana had life sentences.”

Ron Hicks talked to the group of 165 visiting teens from St. Martin Parish about his life of extravagance after dropping out of school in his senior year.

He was a drug dealer and he had an apartment, a car and plenty of money.

And he went to prison at age 19, sentenced to spend the rest of his life behind bars.

John Czere, president of the Angola Lifers Association, came to prison with two life terms for murder at age 16. He’s now 31.

“I’m not just an exception. They’ve got too many others like me in here,” Czere told the group.

“I’ve done more time than some of you are old.”

“This state doesn’t play. Life is life,” he said.

The trip was arranged through state Parole Board Chairman Ronnie Bonvillian, who heads Communities Against Drugs, a citizens’ group organized in St. Martinville that he hopes to expand across the state.

CAD will take many different approaches to educating young people about the dangers of drug abuse, and periodic field trips to the state prison are among them.

Angola’s United Methodist Men joined the lifers in presenting speakers and anti-crime skits in the Main Prison chapel.

Bonvillian, who is still arranging the Angola program, also recruited Wilbert Rideau and Leonard Pourciau of the prison magazine staff.

“I was the guy our mother said don’t hang out with,” Pourciau said, recalling how he worked his way through high school by selling drugs and burglarizing drugstores.

Pourciau said he “graduated” to robbing drugstores at gunpoint.

“I steamrolled after I picked up that pistol,” he said.

Caught in a shootout with police, he arrived at Angola at age 19 to start an 86-year sentence.

“I can tell you how bad it will be if you come to Angola. And it can happen. All you have to do is be in the wrong place at the wrong time,” said Pourciau.

“You know what I miss the most?” asked lifer Larry Benoist. “I miss the ability to reach out, grab my mother and tell her I love her.”

Benoit said he’d trade his prison bed and three daily meals “for a park bench and a newspaper to cover up with — because that’s freedom.”

Bonvillian said he organized CAD after hearing a parole plea from a young drug addict whose parents framed him with false charges to get him away from the drug scene.

The Parole Board voted to place the offender in a drug treatment program, but Bonvillian said an addict has a slim chance of going straight after prison.

“It has to start in the schools. We’re looking for ideas.”

“I think it’s sinking in,” said Luke Theriot, one of the visitors.