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Louisiana prison's hospice program eases the dying

by Cheryl Wittenauer

ANGOLA, LA — Warden Burl Cain has said prison is for predators, not dying old men, but Louisiana's tough sentencing laws mean a lot of old men die while incarcerated.

In Louisiana, rape, armed robbery and murder warrant life without parole, so in a maximum-security prison like the one Cain runs at Angola, the result is that 95 percent of inmates die in prison.

That sobering reality led Cain to launch a hospice program that trains specially screened inmates at the Louisiana State Penitentiary to care for their dying "brothers" and be with them in their final journey.

"The warden saw an article in the local newspaper about hospice and thought, 'We have dying inmates here,'" assistant warden Cathy Fontenot explained. "He knew that available staff and most importantly, lifers and long-termers could make it so that no inmate would die alone."

The program, she said, teaches compassion through serving others and promotes purpose and morale. It also eliminates fear, frustration and depression, which has led to less violence.

The hospice program, now in its 14th year, uses 32 hospice volunteers who are overseen by a nurse and a social worker. They receive 40 hours of training to prepare them for such things as changing diapers, treating bedsores, dealing with grief, keeping vigil and preparing the body for burial.

Hospice volunteer Justin Granier of Gonzales, La., is a graduate of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary's prison extension program who once dreamed of being a nurse. Instead, the 30-year-old is serving a life sentence without the possibility of parole for second-degree murder. Unless his sentence is overturned on appeal, he knows he'll be on the receiving end of prison hospice care one day.

But on a recent morning, he focused on his patient, 62-year-old George English, a Vietnam veteran with

lung cancer. A "madman" in an earlier time who said he "deserved to be here," English had mellowed with age and illness. Granier sat with him every day and they talked about the afterlife and feeling lonely.

"I'd like to see your face" when the day comes, he told Granier.

English died on April 26, but not alone.

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