

inside angola

The long riders

First annual NOLA to Angola project produces unexpected discoveries

HIS MOTHER WAS INCARCERATED when he was only seven years old, sending Ronnell and his sister to a group home. At first, Ronnell thought he had been arrested and sent to a jail for children. He did not know his mom was locked up, nor why she had suddenly disappeared from his life, nor what the future might hold. Nor did he understand the tremendous impact his unfortunate situation would have on Noelle Deltufo, who brought light to a dark place when she came to visit.

family and societal relationships despite being incarcerated.”

On the third Sunday in October, under a near-perfect azure blue sky, a group of 23 dedicated young activists completed their 160-mile cycling trip from New Orleans to the Louisiana State Penitentiary to raise money to help family members visit their loved ones incarcerated in five state prisons. Riding on behalf of the Cornerstone Builders’ Bus Project out



Photo courtesy of Scott Eustis

Ronnell’s story is the driving force behind Deltufo’s decision to do something to help invisible victims by plugging a hole in a justice system chocked full of shortcomings. “I think we as a society need to educate our children and our peers that incarceration should not tear a family apart and that many things can be done to prevent that from happening,” Deltufo said. “The long and short of my participation is the preservation of

of Second Zion Baptist Church in Marrero, the group and its small support team collected per-mile sponsorship from friends, family and community advocates, aimed at raising enough money to keep



Photo courtesy of Scott Eustis

Opposite page: NOLA To Angola riders begin their three-day ride from a levee in New Orleans. **Above:** Having arrived, cyclists ride down Angola’s main road from the front gate to the rodeo grounds

the buses rolling for six months, and maybe have a little left over to provide light refreshments.

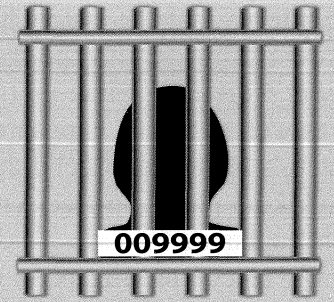
Each month, the bus project rents a 55-seat motor coach to provide free transportation to family members who cannot afford the cost of the long drives to remote prison locations. It costs about \$1,000 per rental to ferry visitors to Angola, Avoyelles Correctional Center, Dixon Correctional Center, Rayburn Correctional Center and Tallulah Transitional Center for Women.

Former Angola inmate Leo Jackson heads up Cornerstone Builders, a Catholic Charities initiative that mentors children, works to place former inmates in AmeriCorps Vista vocational training, offers re-entry counseling and networking between employers willing to hire ex-prisoners, and conducts an annual

symposium. He estimates that since the bus project started in 2007, some 3,000 people have utilized the service to visit family members or friends. “Some months when our funding is good, we sometimes double up and send two buses. Around the holidays like Christmas or Mother’s Day, we go to two different institutions on those days,” Jackson said, adding that the more a family remains intact, the more positive change can be. “We want to keep lines of communication open between prisoners and their families.”

In addition to raising money through the bike ride, christened “NOLA (for New Orleans, Louisiana) to Angola,” participants hoped to draw public attention to criminal justice and environmental issues in Louisiana. Some of the riders, including nurses, EMTs and students, are associated with the Justice Center in New Orleans. Project organizers Scott Eustis, Elizabeth Lew, Steve Merlan and Matt Toups said in a

Prison Numbers



of lifers at the Louisiana State Penitentiary in 1996 — 2,348

Lifers as a percentage of the prisoner population in 1996 — 49.4

of prisoners serving sentences of 20 years or more in 1996 — 1,602

Prisoners serving 20 years or more as a percentage of the total population in 1996 — 33.7

Average length of sentence for prisoners serving 20 years or more in 1996 — 44.28

Average age of prisoners at the Louisiana State Penitentiary in 1996 — 35.5

of lifers at the Louisiana State Penitentiary as of December 1, 2011 — 4,004

Lifers as a percentage of the prisoner population as of December 1, 2011 — 74.5

of prisoners serving sentences of 20 years or more as of December 1, 2011 — 1,142

Prisoners serving 20 years or more as a percentage of the total population as of December 1, 2011 — 20

Average length of sentence for prisoners serving 20 years or more as of December 1, 2011 — 92.7

Average age of prisoners at the Louisiana State Penitentiary as of December 1, 2011 — 42

Source: Louisiana State Penitentiary, Louisiana Dept. of Corrections

press release that the state's high incarceration rate and the environment were two prime motivators, as well as riders' exposure to the state's history and geography while biking pollution-free across South Louisiana.

"We're connecting New Orleans to the levee of the Mississippi River, the cypress of Maurepas Swamp, the refineries of Cancer Alley, and the Tunica Hills," Touns said. "We'll also find out how far prisoners' families travel to maintain precious family connections."

A coastal environmental scientist with the Gulf Restoration Network, Eustis shared his knowledge during the long ride of both human and natural elements at work, such as the wharfs and whys of levee positioning, sugar cane fields and refineries that are iconic symbols of historic and present-day Louisiana. A cyclist himself, Eustis added that one at-

traction of the project is its simplicity and the human connection it provides. "I hope the ride is a way for people outside to connect with people inside."

Lew said she did not realize how many people in her community have incarcerated loved ones until she began working with Louisiana Books 2 Prisoners a few years ago. "Then people started talking to us about sending books to their friends and families, and I started reading up a little bit more about Louisiana's incarceration rate. The numbers are staggering, and getting worse."

No other state imprisons more of its people than Louisiana, with roughly 1 in 55 persons in prisons and jails and 1 in 26 under some

form of correctional supervision, including probation and parole, at a cost of more than \$800 million per year.

At least one rider was motivated by a personal connection to the prison system. Courtney Ann Miller's uncle was on death row at San Quentin State Prison in California, where she and her family would visit him once a year. "I hope this project brings some public awareness to our demoralizing and counterproductive prison system and achieves it[s] goal of facilitating transportation for family members and loved ones to visit those who need them."

The three-day trip took participants north along the Mississippi River to a campsite roughly halfway between Laplace and Gonzales, where the group spent the night. The second leg wound through the countryside and the capital city of

Arriving at the entrance gate just after noon on Sunday, October 17, NOLA To Angola riders enter the Angola Rodeo with a satisfied feeling of accomplishing their goal



Photo courtesy of Scott Eustis

CORNERSTONE BUILDERS 2012 PRISON BUS SCHEDULE

Trip Date	Origin	Destination	Sponsors
01-21-2012	West Bank	Dixon Correctional Center	NOLA to Angola
02-18-2012	West Bank	Avoyelles Correctional Center	Jefferson Parish Sheriff
03-17-2012	West Bank	Louisiana State Penitentiary	NOLA to Angola
04-21-2012	West Bank	Rayburn Correctional Center	Jefferson Parish Sheriff
05-19-2012	West Bank	Dixon Correctional Center	NOLA to Angola
06-16-2012	West Bank	Avoyelles Correctional Center	Jefferson Parish Sheriff
07-21-2012	West Bank	Louisiana State Penitentiary	2nd Zion Baptist Church
08-18-2012	West Bank	Rayburn Correctional Center	NOLA to Angola
09-15-2012	West Bank	Dixon Correctional Center	2nd Zion Baptist Church
10-20-2012	West Bank	Avoyelles Correctional Center	NOLA to Angola
11-17-2012	West Bank	Louisiana State Penitentiary	Jefferson Parish Sheriff
12-22-2012	West Bank	Louisiana State Penitentiary	Jefferson Parish Sheriff
12-22-2012	West Bank	Tallulah Transitional Center for Women	Sisters of the Holy Family

Baton Rouge, north through Baker, Zachary and Slaughter, to a second campsite just south of Jackson. The final and shortest leg of the route ended with riders parking their bikes in the heart of the country's largest maximum security prison, just in time to experience the South's wildest show, the annual Angola Prison Rodeo. There, the group mingled with the crowd, talked to inmates and prison staff, and stopped by *The Angolite* concession booth to describe their long journey, their thoughts and lessons learned along the way.

"I rode to Angola because I wanted to understand the distance between New Orleans and the place where thousands of its residents spend their lives," said Ariella Cohen. "Their absence is felt every day in our city. I rode in support of the work Leo Jackson does to connect people to their incarcerated loves and ease that absence."

Co-organizer Matt Touns, too, had his reasons for riding. "In November 2009 I attended an event called 'Voices of Innocence' at

Loyola University in New Orleans. At that event, John Thompson, Gregory Bright and Douglas Dilosa told their stories; each man served many years at Angola before proving his innocence and being released. Hearing those powerful stories stuck with me, and I wanted to do something about it."

The preservation of family and societal relationships is NOLA to Angola's admirable crusade to effect change and some goals were undeniably met. The ride raised \$11,400, ensuring that the buses will roll on monthly, helping to nourish family ties that represent hope for both the incarcerated and those on the outside who care for them. The riders communed with the history and natural wonders of the state they live in, and they witnessed firsthand a slice of the workings of the state penitentiary that remains a great mystery to so many on the outside. As for public awareness of the need for family preservation in the shadow of imprisonment, and penal rethinking overall, time, the ultimate reformer, will tell.

—John Corley

Outside the WIRE

NEW ORLEANS –

An investigation by the Department of Homeland Security resulted in the arrest of a Nicaraguan man and New York woman for conspiracy to smuggle heroin into the United States. Ernesto Ramon Ali Valles, 41, was a crew member on a Colombian ship that docked in Reserve, Louisiana. Aura Herodia Martinez, 37, allegedly traveled from New York to New Orleans to purchase the three kilograms of heroin found hidden in Valles' clothing when he was arrested. Both defendants face life in prison.

NEW ORLEANS –

Police officers confiscated 347 illegal guns during a two-month period. From September 1, 2011, through November 3, 2011, New Orleans police seized 296 handguns, 33 rifles and 18 shotguns. One gun, an AK-47, was taken from two boys, aged 13 and 15, after residents reported the teenagers carrying the gun on an area playground.

TORONTO –

A 71-year-old Roman Catholic bishop was released after serving 15 months for possessing child pornography. Canadian Bishop Raymond Lahey was arrested at an Ottawa airport in 2009 with 600 photos of young teenage boys, including adolescent males engaged in sex acts while wearing crucifixes and rosary beads.

LOS ANGELES –

The California Supreme Court overturned the conviction and death sentence of Los Angeles gang leader Cleamon "Big Evil" Johnson. He was convicted in 1997 of ordering the killings of two rival gang members. Johnson led the 89 Family Bloods during the 1980s and early 1990s, and authorities said he was linked to dozens of murders. The justices reversed the conviction because the trial judge erred in removing a juror accused of deciding the case before deliberations began. Prosecutors have the option of retrying him.

VERACRUZ, Mexico –

The Veracruz state government laid off 800 police officers and 300 administrative employees in an attempt to stop police corruption in the major Gulf Coast port city. The Mexican navy was sent in to patrol the state's largest city and navy helicopters flew overhead as armed marines barricaded police headquarters. Mexican officials had been contemplating the action since September, when 35 bodies were found dumped in the city.