



Saving souls on the inside, saving lives on the outside

MyFoxHouston

Deep in the heart of a hard Texas prison, there is an emerging light.

Convicts by the dozen with many, many more years to serve, each traveling by choice, a long and sometimes treacherous road to reckoning and redemption.

“The change that has occurred in their lives is because of the transformative power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ,” said Grover Norwood of the Heart of Texas Foundation.

Within the walls of Darrington Unit, lies a genuine seminary, where those who’ve committed terrible crimes endeavor through earnest study and deepening faith to earn the privilege of pastoring others.

They are emissaries of peace, bound soon for a hundred Texas penitentiaries. It is a mission that draws inspiration from the triumph of belief at a place called Angola.

Once the most violent, most forsaken places of punishment in the country the story of Angola’s transformation begins 19 years ago with a roll of the dice by Warden Burl Cain.



“We got real non- traditional here and got a non-traditional outcome that we didn’t know we were going to get,” said Cain.

To plant the seeds of hope and morality, Warden Cain welcomed into the Louisiana State Penitentiary a Baptist seminary whose professors of theology educated with rigor those of all faiths willing and able to answer the call.

“They become the source of love and guidance and personal relationships. Any place in this world is a lonely place to be without friendship,” said Rev. John Robson, Director of Angola’s seminary.

And they are Godly men, confined to this prison farm for the duration of the life they have left, each choosing to ease the suffering of others by sharing the peace they’ve found in the Lord.



“We realize one thing. If you want to see a community grow than

you have to put the hope into these people that we live around, because once you take the hope out of the equation than there is nothing left to look forward to,” said Jerome Derricks, an inmate pastor serving life who ministers to the men of Louisiana’s death row.

“I’m doing the same thing here that I should have been doing in my community. I’m just in a different community now,” said Michael Vancherie, a seminary graduate with a life sentence.

Over time it has evolved into a community where faith prevails over fear in a place where all that’s private are a man’s thoughts.

“I realized that the very thing that I had been rejecting about God was the very love that I had always wanted in my life,” said Paul Will, an inmate pastor serving life who leads an Angola congregation.

It is a culture of civility and spiritual virtue embraced in equal measure by non-Christians. Among the graduates of Angola’s seminary is Muslim Robert Juarbe.

“It must start from the inside out and that’s what changed us. When we decided to change in here, in this heart and allow God to work in our life, I think everything changed around us. everything,”

(Over, Please)

said Juarbe whose served 21 years at Angola. While many of Angola's seminary graduates pastor expanding church congregations, others have found an equally critical means of mending lives.

Onto this prison where most inmates are destined to die has come a different kind of convict - felons convicted of lesser crimes soon to face the challenge of freedom.

Seminary graduate and lifer John Sheehan is teaching these "short-timers" how to service cars - from brakes to engine blocks, steering to suspension.

"You can help change a life that is going to be able to stay on the outside, you're giving back. That gives me something to feel good about. That's what God has helped me to understand. It's not about me, it's about helping others," said Sheehan.

80 percent of Sheehan's mentees earn ASE certification, a genuine free world credential that can keep them on a pay-roll and away from crime.

"With all of the mentors that we have in the vocational program we are probably saving the state \$3 to \$4 million dollars in salary and benefits," said Sheehan.

And it's not just job skills. Seminary trained mentors, who will never be paroled, deliver the kind of clear eyed guidance that's keeping short timers from coming back for good.

"You have a choice. You can be whatever man you want to be. You can reinvent yourself. You're at a crossroads, but it's up to you. You have to make the hard choice," says Michael Vancherie, a "re-entry mentor" and graduate of the seminary.

And the message is piercing through.

Cory Odom spent the last several months of

his drug sentence at Angola and he'll soon be walking through it's gates.

Odom says the training and the faith will keep him from re-offending. Angola, he says, leaves a powerful impression.

"If I am to ever commit a crime again this is where I'm going to end up at, you know. This is the end of the road," said Odom.

But it doesn't have to be.

Walking at ease and unarmed among Angola's condemned, Warden Burl Cain believes these men of faith on the inside are preserving lives on the outside.



"There is going to be some Momma, there's going to be some daughter that's not going to have a gun at their head, knife at their throat, and somebody ravage their body because of what we are doing in prison and what they are doing in Texas and if you save one just one from that trauma and that pain, it's worth everything we do. I promise you, you will save many with what Texas is doing and that's where the rubber meets the road," said Cain.

Prison reform from the inside out. Morality born of religion. Religion inspired by the healing of a higher power.

Within Angola, hearts changed and all involved say God did the changing.

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