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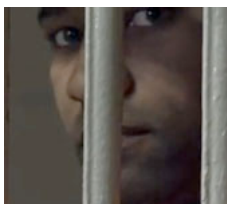
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## IN LOUISIANA, AMERICA'S TOUGHEST INMATES PRODUCE COMPELLING TELEVISION

January 27, 2010

By Eric Easter

In 1998, documentary filmmaker Jonathan Stack produced a never before seen glimpse into the American prison complex with the Oscar nominated film, *The Farm: Life Inside Angola Prison*, the notorious Louisiana state detention facility. The stories he found there, about the prison itself, the prisoners and their victims exposed a world in known to most of us – stories of alienation, separation, isolation, painful and profound experiences.



In the years since, Stack has made giving voice to the voiceless his mission. In 2008, he co-founded Highest Common Denominator Media Group, along with producing partners Mara Michele Batlin and David Deniger, an organization designed to give an outlet to communities who have been traditionally left out of our national and global dialogue.

The controversial **LSPTv** (Louisiana State Prison TV), the first and only closed-circuit television station run and produced by the inmates is one of those outlets.

We met Stack and Batlin recently in New York and asked them to shed light on the project and their most recent mission to build LSPTv into a formal broadcast public television station.



### **EbonyJet.com: Why Angola prison in particular? And why a prison where most of he people in it will never see a future outside?**

Jonathan originally went to Angola in 1997 to tell the story of a man who was about to be executed. The film was to be about the death penalty. But he became intrigued by the stories and the depth of the many men he met there. Angola itself was notorious at the time as "America's Bloodiest Prison" for its high rates of violence. It was a former slave plantation, and has an iconic and deeply storied place in American history.

He went on to produce the film, "**THE FARM: Life Inside Angola**", that received many accolades, including the Sundance Grand Jury Prize, an Oscar nomination for Best Doc, Best Documentary feature from the NY Film Critics, 4 Emmy nominations and 2 Emmys, among others. It's been viewed as a seminal piece on prisons, in part for the way in which the inmates were portrayed, in very human and relatable terms. It also displayed racism in the criminal justice system but didn't judge anyone - correctional officers, parole board members, victims, or inmates. Finally, and to your point about the fact that 95% will die there, the story is one of hope; of how these men create a community and take care of one another.

Fascinated by the stories there, Jonathan returned time and again and produced several films at and about Angola prison, including winner of Best Doc Short, "**The Wildest Show in the South**" about the prison rodeo held there annually. He was also able to follow 2 of the characters from our original film who have been subsequently released, in no small measure because their stories were featured in the film and they were adopted by advocates who fought for their release. So again, the story is one of finding hope and redemption in the darkest of places, but also one of the role of

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storytelling in healing, in the individuals capacity to change their own narrative.

**EbonyJet.com: Why the need to hear their voices?**

These men's voices must be heard because they ARE us, they are a part of the American community and the American experience. A stunning one in 31 Americans is under the supervision of the criminal justice system. America has the highest rate of incarceration in the world, far outstripping China, Iran, Russia, and many other countries that we see as severe in their punishments. And Americans do not, by and large, know that. These men represent a vast portion of American society and yet they are largely invisible - and silent in the political discourse.

The extent to which they are portrayed in the media is either for dramatic (The Wire, etc) or prurient (Lockdown) purposes, neither of which serves to inform the roughly 35 million Americans with a family member in jail or prison that their loved ones are not the mere prey of predators.

Their voices must be heard because, despite the fact that we spend extraordinary amounts of state, federal, and municipal budgets to incarcerate them, they are legally disenfranchised, and unable to participate in policy decisions. Criminal justice policy is driven by purely political forces - our judges, prosecutors, and lawmakers are all elected and hone to the popular "tough on crime" rhetoric without being held to account for the unintended consequences of mass incarcerating - the destruction of entire communities and the bankruptcy of states whose growth rates for spending on prisons far outstrips that for spending on education.

Indeed, the most powerful lobbies in many states are those of the correctional officers, leading to vastly disproportionate spending on incarceration instead of community or other alternative sentencing, often more effective on multiple levels. Finally, we believe that giving them a voice allows them, their families, and our society an opportunity to realize their innate humanity, and that they are both capable of and worthy of redemption.

**EbonyJet.com: You've said that the programming was determined in part by what the inmates want to see. How does that process play out?**

Part of it is simply that programming is by, for, and relevant to those who live in prison. So, for example, the programs help them to better understand how to live, remain healthy, pursue spiritual and intellectual growth, find their role in their community, and pursue justice while living in prison. It was the inmates who repeatedly told us that learning more about health and aging was of great importance to them. They don't have access to the web, so concerns such as these, particularly from the perspective of other inmates, are deep and common. Many of them suffer from various chronic illnesses and the average life expectancy at Angola is 43 years old. So they have raised this and other issues that they want to learn more about.

**EbonyJet.com: So what form does the programming take? How do the inmates' concerns get translated into actual program concepts?**

Some of the proposed programming includes oral histories; Parenting Behind Bars; Interfaith Dialogue, "Jailhouse Lawyering", religious programming, "Angola's Got Talent", Reading Club, a "Siskel and Ebert" style program on films, particularly prison films, Victim/Inmate Dialogue, Health and Aging, "JailBirds" - a nature program about The Farm itself, which is surrounded by the Mississippi River and was once the home to John James Audubon; "The Greening of Angola" - about efforts to improve the carbon footprint of Angola.

**EbonyJet.com: What's been the reaction to the concept of moving beyond the prison walls into a formal public television station? What are the politics involved with that? And what do you expect the reaction to be from the people impacted by the crimes of the inmates who, perhaps, expected never to have to see or hear from these people again?**

This is a very important issue, of course, and one to which both the warden and we are extremely sensitive. In the first instance, the content will not be publicly broadcast. What is to be broadcast will be broadcast through us as we follow the process of building the studio and training the inmates in the material that will be the subject of programming. The inmates at LSPTV will also produce educational content for other prisons as well as Public Service Announcements as a means of "giving back".

We're working to link the station to the fiberoptic lightrail, and then begin to forge a public consensus about additional broadcasts. There are several angles being explored. A victim is featured telling her own story in our film and we are launching a section on the GabrielCity website for "victims voices". The message is that victims can only heal from the imprisonment of their own pain and anger through engaging in a restorative process. The program on inmate/victim reconciliation will help to illustrate the way in which victims are served by engaging in a healing process - of course, under certain circumstances. The fact that victims are given a voice in the film and other content is meant to illustrate that a guilty verdict does not heal the victim; the victim themselves, however, can find support for healing through reconciliation, restitution, and storytelling.

The overarching framework is that we're seeking ways to reduce crime and improve public safety. But we do not ignore the suffering of victims, and hope to tell stories that will help them. Once this positioning has taken place, we'll begin to explore additional public broadcasts.

Finally, we're examining ways in which LSPTV could broadcast certain programming on a pay-per-view basis (the popular rodeo, boxing...) with revenues going to offset the state budget and saving taxpayers the burden of the expense of incarceration.

Find out more about the Gabriel City prison storytelling project and Highest Common Denominator Media Group.

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