

inside angola



Hundley (left) and a smiling Mitchell welcome Grippen to the world outside the prison gate

Forgotten no more

Locked behind bars for decades after the state Legislature removed their parole eligibility, some of Louisiana's 10-6 lifers are finally being given what they were sentenced to

TWO OF LOUISIANA'S LONGEST-SERVING INMATES WERE RELEASED FROM THE STATE PENITENTIARY IN EARLY OCTOBER under new plea agreements offered through New Orleans District Attorney Jason Williams' office. Louis Mitchell, 74, and Leroy Grippen, 73, served a combined 103 years in prison prior to release orders issued by Criminal District Judge Nandi Campbell. Both men pled guilty to criminal charges in 1966 and 1970, respectively, to avoid the death penalty, with the understanding that, with good behavior, they would be eligible for parole after serving 10 years and six months.

Louisiana's 10-6 rule for people sentenced to life in prison was born under statutory revisions in 1926 and lasted until it was officially repealed by Act 490 of the 1979 Legislature. Unofficially, it had already been dead in practice for several years. By 1973, at the direction of Corrections Secretary Elayn Hunt, the warden of the penitentiary stopped making the necessary recommendations for release to the pardon board and, absent his needed support, the release process died.

Lifers who came to the penitentiary under the 10-6 rule found themselves in a precarious position when that rule was replaced—first with a minimum parole eligibility 20-year life, then a 40-year life, and finally with mandatory life without parole. Known as “forgotten men” (because the change had been applied to them, in effect, *ex post facto*), when they applied for release on the grounds that they had been sentenced under 10-6 they were told that the old release system was administrative rather than a legal requirement. If the warden's influence to recommend had been supplanted, the courts could not force a return to a dissolved prerequisite, nor could they release lifers who had served longer than 10 and a half years. The only route available to the forgotten men was through the newly created clemency process.

Mitchell, Grippen, and many others were essentially sentenced under a promise that was later retracted, trapping them in a system increasingly hostile toward crime and criminals.

Mitchell was 19 when he pled guilty to two counts of aggravated rape. Grippen was 22 when

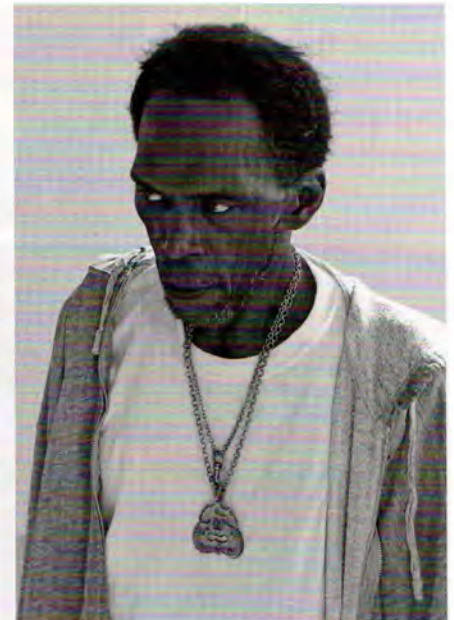
he pled guilty to armed robbery and aggravated rape. At the time, murder and rape were potentially capital crimes with life as an alternative sentence. “If they would have known that they would have been in prison for the rest of their lives,” said Jane Hogan, an attorney hired by the Louisiana Parole Project (LPP) to represent both men, “I don't think any of these people would have pled guilty.”

More than 60 10-6 lifers are still incarcerated statewide, with



portant as a contract when you're buying a house or a car. The promises made to these men were absolutely broken by the state.”

Williams is a former city councilman who has already demonstrated a progressive agenda by resentencing prisoners convicted by split verdicts, withdrawing opposition to pardon and parole applications, and shelving the use of multibills to enhance defendants' sentences. He recently established a civil rights division within his



Between them, Mitchell (left) and Grippen served more than a century under sentences that, according to the practice at the time of their convictions, should have concluded after 10 and a half years

at least 30 serving time at Angola. Some have found freedom through the clemency process. Others have died waiting.

In a late September interview with *The New York Times*, Williams, who took office in January 2021 and is the first Louisiana district attorney to address the remaining 10-6 lifers as a class, said that renegeing on the parole terms was “just one example in a very long line of a betrayal of promises to black folks in this country. Every word in a plea deal is as im-

office, headed by former Innocence Project New Orleans director Emily Maw, whose focus includes 10-6 cases from Orleans Parish.

Williams said the division is “reviewing cases of more than 10 defendants who pleaded guilty before 1973 on the expectation, consistent with the law at the time, that they would be released after 10 and a half years if they maintained a good record of conduct in prison. In 1973, this law was changed, but these defendants remained in prison.”

According to the Parole Project, 18 of the incarcerated 10-6 lifers—ranging in age from 66 to 86—were sentenced in Orleans Parish. More than 50 are black; most were convicted of murder, the rest of rape. Other districts have thus far been hesitant to follow Williams’ initiative.

“There’s no one who’s served longer than this group,” LPP Executive Director Andrew Hundley told *The Advocate* in Baton Rouge, “because anyone who was serving at that time, if they had a life sentence, they were 10-6 lifers. That’s what everyone expected, and the people who went to prison had confidence

that would happen, because they would see people in prison with them go home after 10 years and six months.”

Mitchell, who recently received a pardon board recommendation for sentence commutation from life to 99 years with parole eligibility after 61 years, was grateful that Williams helped expedite his release. “I am just happy to be given the chance to go home. All these years I have been hoping and waiting for a chance and you are never sure it will happen. Sometimes the laws seem like they will help, or you hope a governor will come along that will sign pardons. Things just seem

to have worked out right now so that the laws, the Orleans district attorney, and the governor are all trying to help people. I came here thinking I would go home in 10 or 11 years, and instead it took 54 years. But now I am finally going home. Ain’t nothing better to say than that.”

Only one 10-6 lifer is a woman. Gloria Williams, convicted of murder in St. Landry Parish in 1971, is the state’s longest-serving female prisoner. Gov. John Bel Edwards granted Williams’ clemency application in August, and she is scheduled to meet the Committee on Parole in December.

—John Corley



Helping hands at work

Angola inmates fill sandbags to help recovery efforts following Hurricane Ida’s impact

HURRICANE IDA’S IMPACT ON THE SOUTHEASTERN coast of Louisiana in August 2021 was more serious than expected. Forecast as a Category 4 storm, expectations of wind damage from what could be 140 mph winds and a possible 15-foot high storm surge compelled mandatory evacuation orders in place, and state and parish officials struggled on

all fronts to find room for people when COVID protocols reduced capacities for facilities used as evacuation shelters.

Although it did not suffer a direct hit, the tiny, low-lying island community of Grand Isle on the eastern side of Ida’s landfall at Port Fourchon was severely battered by the storm surge. The temporary “burrito levees”—es-

entially large, sand-filled tubes used to channel water for drainage—that protected the community proved inadequate. Ida’s surge carved a channel the entire length of the island. Powerful waves washed some buildings completely away as if they never existed. Water remained standing in many places for days, hindering search and cleanup efforts.