

Angola Prison Hospice: Opening the Door

Edgar Barens

My initial foray into documenting the criminal justice system began soon after my brother and his wife moved to a small town in Minnesota. I was a graduate student and eager to make socially relevant documentaries. Having been raised in a politically active family I ventured into film to direct documentaries that, with any luck, would cause positive change in the world.

The town my brother's family moved to was known for its state-of-the-art agricultural campus. They enjoyed the small town hustle and bustle bolstered by the diversity of the student body and bought a nice home to raise their family. Unbeknownst to the townsfolk, however, plans were being made by the University of Minnesota to sell the campus off to the Minnesota Department of Corrections (MDOC) to create a medium security prison.

Seeing the urgency to document the process of a rural community being transformed suddenly into a prison town, a small group of prison-opposing folks asked me to film the emotional community meetings and to document the underhanded practices of some of the town fathers and correctional officials. Once it became evident that the conversion from institution of higher learning to medium security prison was a "done deal", I was also at hand to document the final graduation ceremony at the closing campus.

The documentary that emerged, *Final Graduation*, attested to efforts to combat the sale of this cherished educational institution to the Department of Corrections and became an organizing tool for the prison-opposing folks in town. Sadly, despite their efforts, the people lost their battle against the MDOC, and the once bustling agricultural campus became a medium security prison within a stone's throw from a residential neighborhood. A few years later in New York City this experience of film-making would open doors allowing me to continue my work with the criminal justice system.

Of the many temporary jobs I had while living in New York City the best one was with the Open Society Institute (OSI), an organization founded by philanthropist George Soros. OSI implements a range of initiatives to advance justice, education, public health and independent media, and I was fortunate to have landed an entry-level position with OSI's Center on Crime, Communities, and Culture.

Partly because of my work on *Final Graduation*, OSI gave me the opportunity to direct a short documentary for the First National Conference

on Death and Dying in Prisons and Jails. The Center on Crime, Communities, and Culture, and OSI's Project on Death in America co-sponsored the conference to begin a dialog on how jails and prisons address end-of-life issues.

My task was to create a nuts and bolts documentary on establishing a prison hospice. At that time (1999), only a handful of prison-based hospices were up and running. The Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola (LSP-Angola) was chosen as the model prison hospice mostly because it is historically one of the worst prisons in the United States, but also, despite its checkered past, Warden Burl Cain had established a hospice worthy of replication throughout the correctional system. At Cain's request, the University Hospital Community Hospice in New Orleans created a program for Angola that met the criteria of the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization. Services were delivered without additional cost to the prison.

Angola Prison Hospice: Opening the Door, the documentary I made for the conference, introduced this highly successful prison-based hospice program. What made this program exceptional was the decision to train prisoners as hospice volunteers so that they could serve as companions for their dying peers.

Gaining entry into LSP-Angola was relatively simple with the backing of a progressive foundation like OSI, and after the usual background check, I was given considerable freedom to film throughout the infirmary where the prison hospice was being run. Because of the conference deadline I had a 3-week production schedule and had to work 10 to 12 hour days. I spent my evenings off-site at a local motel to rest, repair, and prepare for the next day of shooting.

Since I was producing a promotional video of sorts for LSP-Angola I was met with very little opposition. The medical staff along with the correctional officers who were on-board with the program were willing to be interviewed and readily offered their insights on the fledgling program. The prisoner hospice volunteers, who were a large and unique facet of the hospice program, were overjoyed to praise a program responsible for instilling a pride they had never felt in all their years of incarceration.

Additionally, because the film was about a hospice I also needed to document a terminally ill prisoner who was participating in the hospice program – a difficult situation to film in the free world let alone in a

maximum-security prison. I was fortunate to have met a prisoner patient who was amenable to have his final days documented. His visiting family members were also very supportive of the project and of the prison hospice program that allowed them to visit their incarcerated loved-one through his dying days.

Many heartfelt moments of care between the prisoner hospice volunteers and their patients were documented. For most of the prisoners it was the first time they were allowed to offer and accept love and compassion from one another – not a trivial experience for men behind bars.

During my 3-week stay at LSP-Angola I also documented other integral aspects of the hospice program: the Inter-Disciplinary Team (IDT) meetings, the mandatory hospice training classes for security and medical staff, and prospective prisoner hospice volunteers, as well as the bereavement and burial ceremonies.

It should be noted that while most of the medical, security and administrative staff were supportive of the prisoner hospice program, there was also a palpable resentment of the program and of the filmmaker among some of the other staff members. Many of the disgruntled folks asked why additional measures were taken to provide the prisoners with a dignified death when their victims never had that choice. To the dissenters, the hospice program represented a coddling of the prisoner and there was no way the program could ever be justified in their eyes.

As a documentarian, I believe that all aspects of an issue, positive and negative, need to be explored and presented. Consequently I need to be friendly to everyone involved, even those who would rather see me kicked out of the facility!

To soften the shock of having a camera present, when I set out on a verité documentary project, I usually build in a 3 to 4 week period at the beginning to simply get to know the people I am going to film. This period lets the subjects and director build a bond of trust that is critical if we are going to work effectively for an extended period of time. I make observations, ask questions, and answer those the subjects may have about me or the filming process.

In the second phase, I shoot for brief periods throughout the day allowing the subjects to become accustomed to the presence of the camera as well my shooting style. I consider myself to be an “in your face” kind of shooter, so I need my subjects to get used to having the camera a few feet away from their faces or right behind their heads for an intimate over the shoulder shot.

I feel the human face in close-up reveals emotions a medium or long shot simply cannot express. Additionally, since I usually work alone and do not have a sound person with an obtrusive microphone boom pole, I need to be closer to the human voice, in order to clearly record what is being said. And I move in close to the face to capture the telltale emotions. I tend to shoot hand-held instead of being locked-down to a tripod, so I can freely move throughout the scene capturing the action from various angles – mindful of how scenes will fit together in the final editing of the film. Even when conducting a formal interview I tend to hand hold the camera to maintain the organic “hands on” feel I’ve established with the rest of the footage shot.

While my shooting method may sound intrusive, most people become accustomed to the presence and proximity of the camera especially over an extended period of time. Most of the prisoners I have filmed over the years quickly adapt to having a camera nearby; perhaps because they are constantly under surveillance or rarely have the kind of privacy we have in the free world. Whatever the reason, I have consistently found the prisoner population to be absolutely open to being filmed. The same cannot be said for some of the health care and correctional staff I have filmed over the years. In Angola in particular, some staff members felt obligated to participate in the documentary because it was focusing on a program they had a hand in creating. Despite the dread they had of being interviewed on camera or filmed in action they usually rose to the occasion and performed well. But people are good on camera or they are not, and the latter usually end up on the editing room floor.

Sometimes staff members fear that the camera will “catch them” performing a medical procedure without proper protection, or on duty with their feet up on a desk. These fears must be appeased at the outset in order to build a trusting bond – otherwise a negative and antagonistic atmosphere will develop. If the prison administration grants me permission to enter a facility, it’s usually not to create an exposé on the inevitable irregularities of the system.

Meetings with the subjects prior to the production of the documentary are also needed to put people at ease as they learn about how they will be portrayed, where the documentary will be shown, and how much is expected from them during the filmmaking process. I’ve started projects where I was simply dropped into a location – my reception was far from ideal and took weeks to repair.

While shooting a documentary about the correctional system can be extremely taxing, the feeling of accomplishment when the project is completed and put out into the world always overshadows memories of difficult times. If your film actually causes change to a system in need of transformation – then so much the better. Since the film was released the number of prison hospices that use prisoner volunteers has greatly increased. Now approximately 55 of the 75 known prison hospice programs use prisoner volunteers as hospice workers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Edgar Barens was born in Aurora, Illinois. For the past ten years Barens' documentary work has explored the many issues at play in the American criminal justice system. Before *Prison Terminal*, he directed *Angola Prison Hospice: Opening the Door* and *A Sentence of Their Own*, which chronicles one family's annual pilgrimage to a New Hampshire State Prison, making visible the gradual descent of a family "doing time" on the outside. Barens is producer, director and sometimes editor of his documentary films. He prefers to work solo, believing that a deeper trust is gained with his subjects by working in this manner. Visit <http://prisonterminal.com>.