

# Inmates' film carries message

'Hard Times' targets youth

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Tears slid down LaMonica Thomas' face Tuesday as she watched the premiere of a film at the Old State Capitol designed to send a message to young people that crime has consequences.

Thomas, 37, a Baton Rouge mother of seven children, said she knows about paying the consequences for crime — she's been an inmate at Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women at St. Gabriel for 12 years on an armed robbery conviction.

About seven months ago, violence struck again in her life when Thomas was notified that her son Kreglan Gaines Jr., 18, was shot and killed after an argument with a friend, she said.

"The film reached me," Thomas said. "I just sat here and cried. I hope it reaches not only the kids, but their parents, too. Parents really need to see this film."

Thomas was one of four inmates brought to the Old State Capitol to not only watch the film, but also to talk to the audience for the premiere.



Patrick Dennis/The Advocate

The film, "Hard Times," was written, filmed, acted, directed and edited by inmates from three of Louisiana's prisons, said Pam LaBorde, a spokeswoman for the state Department of Public Safety and Corrections.

The three prisons are: Dixon Correctional Institute at Baker, Louisiana State Prison at Angola, and Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women.

While Thomas was not one of the actors in the film, inmates Rekesha Fulton, 35, and Serey Kong, 31, both from the institute in St. Gabriel, and Wilfred Jones, 50, from Dixon, were all in the film and were on hand Tuesday to watch it.

The film was the idea of 100 Black Men, Baton Rouge Middle District Chapter, and the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives.

Maj. Reginald R. Brown Sr., Baton Rouge constable and a member of the organizations, said members last year began trying to find a way to show young people how severe the consequences are when they commit a crime.

"We thought a film would be a good idea. It's something that appeals to young people," he said.

The organizations met in May with Public Safety and Corrections Secretary James LeBlanc, who said he supported the plan.

"When they came to us, they pretty much knew what they wanted in the video," LaBorde said.

Inmates have long been involved in skits in which they act out experiences that either led them to prison or that happened to them while they've been in prison, LaBorde said.

There is an inmate film crew at Angola that shot the film on the grounds of Dixon.

"It really didn't cost us anything to make," LaBorde said. "Making copies of the DVD was paid for by the two organizations and that's a minimal cost."

Brown said the film's targets are young people 21 years old and younger.

"We just can't sit by and do nothing while these kids are ruining their lives," Brown said.

At first, the film had only male inmates acting in it.

"We decided we needed a woman's perspective in the video," LaBorde said. "Many times, these guys don't have a dad in their lives. It's women, their mothers and grandmothers, who end up playing a major role in their upbringing."

So women from the St. Gabriel institute were brought into the production.

“The men really had to step up after the women came on board,” LaBorde said. “The women have drama club and they knew what they were doing.”

The film follows two brothers: one dies in a shooting and the other is sent to prison with three life sentences. The film shows the brothers interacting with their friends, mother and grandmother, a judge and prosecutor and other inmates.

“That’s the most powerful tool I’ve seen,” East Baton Rouge Parish Sheriff Sid Gautreaux said after watching the film at the premiere. “This is the message kids need to see.”

Hillar Moore III, East Baton Rouge Parish district attorney, was also at the premiere and said he would like to see the film shown in Juvenile Court, Drug Court or while offenders are providing urine samples for drug tests.

Brown said the organizations are trying to get the film shown in houses of worship, schools and anywhere else they can get it shown to young people.

“We’ve made the first 200 copies,” Brown said. “And we’ll pump up as many as we need.”

Brown said he and others are ready to go “knocking on doors.”

“We have a job to do,” he said, “and we’re going to get it done.”