

2008 Hopeful Sees Beyond the Votes

by Zoe Sandvig

Presidential hopeful Sam Brownback knew his recent trip to the heart of bayou country wouldn't necessarily secure him any votes, but that didn't keep him from curling up in a 7-by-10-foot cell at Louisiana State Penitentiary, Angola. Brownback, a senior U.S. senator from Kansas, doesn't shy away from the tough issues. He firmly opposes abortion, embryonic stem-cell research, and rising recidivism rates.

"We've got this huge problem with prisoner violence, and we need to break the cycle," he told *Inside Journal*. This past December, he traveled to Angola to walk the corridors of a prison that has gained a reputation for its success in helping to break the cycle through its faith-based initiatives.

"The reason I went there was because of the successes they've been having on reducing prisoner violence," Brownback said of the 18,000-acre plantation that is home to more than 5,000 of Louisiana's toughest criminals. "They've had an amazing transformation at that prison. They've done it through a moral transformation program." Angola leads the state, and the nation, in its emphasis on faith-based rehabilitation through its six chapels, several prayer services, a seminary program, and several thousand lay volunteers.

"What they're bringing is God back into the prison," Brownback said. "We've run God out of the public square in so many institutions, and it shows. [Angola's] brought it back in, and it shows."

Before speaking with the inmates, Brownback changed from his business suit into blue jeans and a Kansas State sweatshirt. Then he dined with Warden Burl Cain, a Christian whose influence has made "Ameri-

ca's bloodiest prison" into one of the nation's most respected correctional institutions.

Like Cain, Brownback, 50, is a committed Christian who uses his position of influence to transform legislation. But his road to godly leadership has not been without its potholes. In 1995 the young congressman was diagnosed with cancer. After nine months of uncertainty, he pulled through, only to find



Sam Brownback, a senior U.S. senator from Kansas and a Republican presidential candidate, heads to a prayer service at the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola.

himself lagging far behind in his run for Senate. Through these trials, he learned the secret to true statesmanship—to view God as his only constituent. This perspective has led him to serve as an advocate for the voiceless: the victims of the genocide in Sudan, the homeless, and the unborn. And it has led him to places like Angola.

"I believe all life is beautiful and sacred. I believe that for all human life. I believe that for the man or woman in prison. They have a debt to society to serve, but that doesn't say their souls aren't beautiful and unique."

At the prison's main chapel, an inmate introduced Brownback to his 700-prisoner audience: "He grew up on a farm. He understands what it's like to smell manure all day long. He's a bold man. He's running on a platform of reform."

Brownback jumped on stage and belted out, "God is good." His audience responded, "All the time." He then began talking

about the nation's incarceration plague: "Two million people in prisons and we're building more prisons. How do we break the cycle?" He praised Angola (and Warden Cain) for its successful faith-based rehabilitation model. "That's why I'm here. Good programs have this in common: They're dealing with the heart." He said he couldn't solicit their votes, but he could ask them to pray.

After that, he made his way to his sleeping quarters—a cell in solitary confinement situated between the cells of a serial rapist and a drug cartel killer. He passed the night

with a stainless steel sink and toilet, a thin mattress, and a hard pillow, and woke at 6 A.M. "I didn't sleep the best," he told Fox News. "But to go and feel and smell it, I think it gives you a feel for something you just can't read about."

Although the political rising star doesn't opt to sleep in SHU on a regular basis, the senator's hands-on approach to policy making has led to several such sleepovers. In the past, he's spent the night at a homeless shelter in Washington, D.C., and at the faith-based unit at Ellsworth Correctional Facility in his home state of Kansas. In fact, he's worked with USP Leavenworth, helping it launch its own faith-based programs.

On a larger scale, Brownback has been a major player in trying to pass the Second Chance Act, a bill aimed at curbing recidivism by funding programs—job training, housing, substance-abuse treatment, and mental health—that will help prisoners make a more successful transition back into society. He also hopes to incorporate efforts toward reconciliation between perpetrators and victims into future legislation.

Before Brownback left "The Farm," he visited Angola's infamous death row—perhaps best known from Sister Helen Prejean's provocative narrative *Dead Man Walking*. As he passed through the long corridors, one prisoner handed him a poem—an expression of God's blessing in the midst of pending mortality. Brownback tucked it away and pulled it out again on January 20—the day he announced his run for president.

As he waited anxiously to deliver his speech, the senator began reading through the poem again. It gave him courage, he said. "If this prisoner on death row can talk about how God's blessed him, I can talk about how God's blessed me."

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