Bios for MVFHR Board of Directors

Bill Babbitt

Bill Babbitt was present at San Quentin prison when at one minute after midnight on May 4th, 1999 the state of California executed his brother, Manny Babbitt.

Manny, the recipient of a Purple Heart for his service in Vietnam, was a paranoid schizophrenic who suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. He had been tried and convicted for the murder of an elderly woman who had died of a heart attack after a break-in and beating. When Bill realized that his brother could possibly be involved in the woman's death, he contacted the police and helped them arrest his brother. In return, the police promised Bill that Manny would receive the psychological help that he needed and that they would help see that Manny would not receive the death penalty. Bill felt certain that when confronted with the reality of Manny's mental illness, the justice system would hand down a fair sentence but avoid death. He was wrong.

The Babbitt family was too poor to afford good counsel. Manny's first lawyer took their money and then dropped the case. The second, a court-appointed attorney, refused to allow blacks on the jury, drank heavily during the trial and was later disbarred and sued for racism.

Today Bill speaks out regularly against the death penalty. He is often alongside David Kaczynski, who led federal investigators to his brother, Ted Kaczynski, known as the "Unabomber," in 1996. Kaczynski, the executive director of New Yorkers Against the Death Penalty, has repeatedly said that if it were not for his family's financial ability to hire competent counsel, his brother, like Manny Babbitt, most likely would have received the death penalty. Instead, Ted Kaczynski received life in prison without the possibility of parole. Bill and Manny's story has been told in the documentaries, "And Then One Night: The Making of Dead Man Walking" with Sister Helen Prejean and Mike Farrell and "A Question of Justice" with David Kaczynski, Bud Welch, whose daughter was killed in the Oklahoma City bombing and Gary Wright, who himself was almost killed by Ted Kaczynski. Bill has been interviewed on "Good Morning America," the "Today Show", ABC's "World News Tonight", the John Walsh show and the "Sally Jessy Raphael" show and on major radio stations in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Berkley. He has been profiled in publications including the New York Times, the Boston Globe, the Los Angeles Times, the Christian Science Monitor, Jet, and the New York Times Magazine. His story is in books including "Capital Consequences, Families tell their Stories," by Rachel King and "The Thirteenth Step" by Swedish author Carolina Koivisto. He has spoken on campuses across the country and at the Massachusetts statehouse on a bill to reinstate the death penalty.

For many years Bill believed that being the family member of someone who was executed made him unwelcome in the abolition movement. But MVFHR changed his mind. "People like Renny Cushing extended that hand of mercy and brought me onboard the bus of the anti-Death Penalty movement. They told me that I need not take a seat in the back for Manny's life was just as worthy as their murdered loved ones'," he says.