

ARTICLE 3

"Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person."

- Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 10, 1948



Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights

Newsletter 2 • Spring/Summer 2006

Sister of Murdered Correctional Officer Opposes the Death Penalty

At a rally at the state capitol in Austin, Texas in December 1999, Correctional Officer Daniel Nagle, who had long been advocating for improvements in Texas prisons, said, "Someone will have to be killed before the Texas Department of Criminal Justice does anything about the shortage of staff in Texas prisons." Just two weeks later, Officer Nagle was stabbed to death by a prisoner after the two argued about a rule forbidding prisoners to take food into the recreation yard. The 20-year-old prisoner, Robert Lynn Pruett, was already serving a life sentence for another murder conviction.

When opponents of the death penalty argue that life without parole is a sufficient sentence for murder, supporters of the death penalty often cite the potential for

just this kind of tragedy, arguing that a sentence of life in prison does not guarantee that the individual will not commit another violent crime. For Robert Nagle's sister Della, this is not a theoretical argument; these were exactly the circumstances of her brother's murder.

"If you had asked me before this happened what I thought about the death penalty," Della says, "I would've said I was in favor of it." Della explains that she only began to think seriously about the issue after Robert Pruett had been convicted of her brother's murder and the prosecutor was preparing Daniel Nagle's family for the sentencing phase of the trial.

"The prosecutor asked us what our views were on the death penalty," Della remembers, "and I realized I had to ask myself, how *do* I

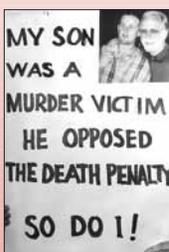
really feel about this? If I'm going to go on record about it, I'd better figure it out. I thought about my kids. Children may not listen to what you say, but they always look at what you do. I'm thinking, what message do I want to send to my kids? What kind of world do I want them to live in? I decided that the death penalty wasn't the message I wanted to send."

When the prosecutor learned that Della opposed the death penalty, he refused to allow her to deliver a victim impact statement during the sentencing phase of the trial. Della's sister, who supported the death penalty, was allowed to deliver a statement, and the conflict within the family was more painful to Della than the prosecutor's refusal to grant both sisters an equal right to speak. "According to

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Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights

Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights is an international, non-governmental organization of family members of victims of criminal murder, terrorist killings, state executions, extrajudicial assassinations, and "disappearances" working to oppose the death penalty from a human rights perspective.

Membership is open to all victims' family members who oppose the death penalty in all cases. "Friend of MVFHR" membership is open to all those interested in joining our efforts.

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Sister of Murdered Correctional Officer Opposes the Death Penalty *continued from page 1*

my sister, if I didn't want this man dead, I didn't love my brother," Della remembers. "But of course I love my brother very much. We were very close in age, and for me his death was a very big deal."

Robert Pruett did receive a death sentence and is now on death row in Texas. "If I could stop them from killing him, I would," Della says firmly. "He's a human being, and to me that's the bottom line. How can I call myself a Catholic and support the death penalty when one of the main tenets of Christianity is 'Thou shalt not kill'? It was easier to support the death penalty when it was abstract, but when it hit me directly, it was very different."

Della joined Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights after meeting members who were speaking at her church in San Antonio during the Journey of Hope speaking tour last October. She also belongs to the national organization Concerns of Police Survivors (COPS), and she attends their annual retreat for siblings of fallen officers. She says she values the support that the organization provides but recognizes that her opposition to the death penalty differs from the group's official position. "I'm very unpopular when the issue comes up," she acknowledges. "They don't like it, but that doesn't stop me."

Della acknowledges, as well, that the possibility of a prisoner committing a murder is one of the chief arguments against the suitability of the life without parole sentence. "Yes, an inmate can kill," she says, "but another killing would then make it right? How can I say that?"

Della says she believes her brother recognized the risk of violence that came with the job. At the same time, as head of the local correctional officers' union, he was a staunch advocate for changes that might have lowered that risk, not only for himself but for others. Like other MVFHR members, Della now asserts that resources should go toward violence prevention, rather than toward the death penalty.

Visit www.murdervictimsfamilies.org to view MVFHR's 2005 annual report and to see other news and updates.

We are now registered with Network for Good and able to receive donations online. Thank you for your support of MVFHR's work!

U.S. Senate Examines the Death Penalty

MVFHR board member Vicki Schieber spoke to United States Senators about the perspective of victims' family members who oppose the death penalty at a February hearing, "Examination of the Death Penalty in the United States." The hearing was initiated by Senator Sam Brownback, a Republican from Kansas and Chair of the Senate Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Property Rights, and Senator Russell Feingold, a Democrat from Wisconsin and ranking member of that subcommittee. Both Senators had expressed concerns about the death penalty and a desire to hear testimony from victims' family members and from experts on deterrence, as well as from speakers who could give an overview of the issue. The hearing was well attended both by lawmakers and by members of the press.

Vicki's testimony described her reasons for opposing the death penalty following the murder of her 23-year-old daughter Shannon, discussed victim opposition to the death penalty in general, and offered several recommendations. She said, in part:

"Linking closure for victims' families with the execution of the offender is problematic for two reasons: first, the death penalty is currently applied to only about one percent of convicted murderers in this country. If imposition of that penalty is really necessary for victims' families, then what of

the 99% who are not offered it? Second, and even more critical from a policy perspective, a vague focus on executions as the potential source of closure for families too often shifts the focus away from other steps that could be taken to honor victims and to help victims' families in the aftermath of murder. ...

"We must move beyond vague sentiments about being tough on crime and seeking justice for victims and look closely at what actions would truly prevent violence or help victims heal in the aftermath of violence. Among the policy changes that Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights recommends in this arena are: Remove time limits on victims' access to resources, such as victim's support and victim's compensation. End discrimination against victims' family members who have lost loved ones to murder and oppose the death penalty. The Victims of Crime Act should be amended to recognize and validate the position of survivors of murder victims who oppose the death penalty. Current federal and state statutes that predicate the rights and privileges of victims upon the approval of prosecuting authorities lead to a two-tiered system of victims — those who support the death penalty are good victims; those who do not are suspect.

"Finally, we need to create a new paradigm about crime that

establishes as a goal an aspiration for healing, for both individuals and society.

When the focus is on healing for the victims, instead of blind retribution against the perpetrators, we truly honor the meaning of justice."

In addition, Connecticut MVFHR member Toni Bosco was asked to submit written testimony for the hearing. Toni's testimony said, in part, "I've heard all the arguments for the death penalty and I don't dismiss these lightly. You can't arrive at opposition to this form of punishment with blinders on. When it hits you personally, the anger and pain of your loss makes you want to tear apart that person who stole your loved one and your happiness. But does this do any good in the long run? And should we be in the business of killing people? ... I have long reflected on what Supreme Court Justice Harry A. Blackmun wrote in the mid-90's, that nearly 'twenty years have passed since this Court declared that the death penalty must be imposed fairly, and with reasonable consistency, or not at all, and despite the effort of the states and courts to devise legal formulas and procedural rules to meet this daunting challenge, the death penalty remains fraught with arbitrariness, discriminations, caprice and mistake."



Vicki Schieber

Opposing the Death Penalty in Taiwan and Japan

For the past several years, MVFHR board member Toshi Kazama has been working on a photo documentary called “Youth on Death Row.” The documentary includes photos of youth (21 and younger) on death row, the prisoners’ family members, the victims’ family members, the prison, the prison cemetery, and the crime scene or the location where the crime took place. “Instead of focusing only on any one individual,” Toshi explains, “the documentary embraces the experience of all the major groups affected, even when those experiences might seem to be at odds with one another.” In his presentations, Toshi describes his encounters with the people he has photographed and invites the audience to consider multiple perspectives on violence and the death penalty. He has given the presentation many times in the U.S. and has observed that news coverage is often particularly strong in pro-death penalty states.

Last spring, the Taiwan Association for Human Rights, the Taiwan Alliance to End the Death Penalty, the Taiwan Bar Association, and several other organizations invited Toshi to present the documentary in several Taiwanese cities. During the question-and-answer session after one of the presentations, a member of the audience identified himself as the advisor to Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian and invited Toshi to return to the country.



Toshi Kazama delivers his presentation to members of the Japanese Federation of Bar Associations.

In September, Toshi returned to Taiwan and met with President Chen Shui-bian, along with members of the International Federation of Human Rights Leagues (FIDH). During the meeting, the president said that he was proud that the number of executions in Taiwan had declined from 32 in 1998 to 17 in 2000 to only 1 in 2005. During the question period, Toshi expressed his respect for the president and added that he nevertheless believed that one execution was still one too many.

The following day, the president released a statement vowing to abolish the death penalty in Taiwan. He said, “Abolishing the death penalty has become a world

trend. Almost every year there is one country abolishing the death penalty. . . . Since I became president in 2000, Taiwan launched the campaign to abolish the death penalty by reducing the handing down and execution of capital punishment, and by making it harder for inmates to receive parole and forcing them to pay more compensation to victims.”

Toshi reports that the president and his cabinet are now arranging for him to return to deliver another series of presentations, with the hope that that will influence public opinion toward opposing the death penalty. Toshi has expanded his documentary project to include Taiwanese photos. In meeting



Toshi Kazama (2nd from left) with the President of Taiwan (6th from left) and members of human rights organizations.

with victims' family members in Taiwan and also in Japan, Toshi has observed the powerful social pressure against publicly opposing the death penalty as a victim's family member. Victims' family members have told Toshi privately that they oppose the death penalty but fear the ostracism they will face if they make that view known.

In Japan, victim's family member Masaharu Harada, who is the only family member of a murder victim to oppose the death penalty publicly in that country, joined

MVFHR board member Robert Meeropol and exonerated U.S. death row inmate Kirk Bloodsworth on a panel that was part of the International Leadership Conference on Human Rights and the Death Penalty, held in Tokyo in December. Robert Meeropol reports on the conference: "It was jointly sponsored by the death penalty moratorium committee of the American Bar Association, the Japanese Bar Association, and the Council of Europe. People came from over 20 countries. About half the partici-

pants were Japanese, with people from the U.S. comprising the second largest grouping, and Europeans the third largest. But there were also participants from a number of Asian countries including Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea, Malaysia, and Australia. The Japanese planned this conference primarily to learn from the American experience and they listened very carefully to how we were involving victims' family members and the families of executed in the struggle to abolish the death penalty."

Anti-Death Penalty Alternative Spring Break

In March, MVFHR member Audrey Lamm, a student at the University of Oregon, participated in the Anti-Death Penalty Alternative Spring Break organized by Texas Students Against the Death Penalty. The five days of anti-death penalty activism and education included a lobby day at the state capitol and workshops offered by a variety of people involved with abolition work.

Audrey helped to bring the victims' perspective to the other student participants by speaking on a panel with MVFHR Executive Director Renny Cushing and Tina Lawson, whose husband David Martinez was executed in Texas and who founded the group Victims of Texas. Audrey described her family's story: when she was 2 years old, her mother Victoria Zessin and friend Janet Mesner were murdered

in Nebraska. Years later, Audrey and her father Gus Lamm joined the Mesner family in opposing the execution of Randy Reeves, who had been sentenced to death for the murders. The Lamms also filed suit when the Nebraska Pardon Board forbade them from testifying at a hearing regarding Reeves's commutation but allowed a relative who supported the death penalty to present testimony. Reeves's sentence was eventually commuted to life in prison.

Though Audrey was outspoken in her opposition to Randy Reeves's death sentence, until her participation in Alternative Spring Break she had mostly kept her story to herself. Yet she believes it's important to let people know what she and her family have gone through. "If there is anything I can do to pre-

vent other families from having to fight a similar battle, I will always be willing to volunteer," Audrey says now. "I wanted to participate in Alternative Spring Break because I feel it is important for young people to come together and share their experiences and knowledge of capital punishment in order to create a strong, cohesive, and powerful statement that can be shared with others."

MVFHR co-sponsored this Anti-Death Penalty Alternative Spring Break to show our support for youth organizing within the abolition movement. The event was also co-sponsored by the Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty, Texas Moratorium Network, the Austin Chapter of the Campaign to End the Death Penalty, and Victims of Texas.

Foreign Press Briefing about Human Rights and the Death Penalty

Last July, MVFHR Executive Director Renny Cushing was invited to address members of the foreign press at a special briefing on the death penalty organized by the U.S. State Department. Over 30 print and broadcast journalists from European, Asian, and Latin American countries toured several sites (including death row) and heard several speakers on both sides of the issue. At the briefing held at the offices of Amnesty International, the journalists heard comments from representatives from Amnesty, the Death Penalty Information Center, the National

Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty, Equal Justice USA, and Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights. Renny Cushing talked about victims' family members' emergence as an increasingly powerful voice in the death penalty debate, challenging the common assumption that all victims' family members support the death penalty, and the emergence of the death penalty as a human rights issue. He also described the discrimination that victims' family members who oppose the death penalty can face within the criminal justice system.

After the briefing, Renny gave

several interviews to individual journalists. "They were fascinated by the existence of victim opposition to the death penalty in the U.S.," he says. "The European journalists, in particular, asked questions about how the U.S. reconciles a belief in the death penalty with a belief in human rights." The representative from the State Department who had organized the tour later thanked Renny for bringing the MVFHR perspective to the briefing and said that he knew the United States' use of the death penalty undermines our human rights record in the eyes of the world.

The Death Penalty and Mental Illness

On February 1, Amnesty International released a report on *The Death Penalty and Mentally Ill Offenders* that was immediately praised by the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, who also issued their own press release opposing death sentences for people suffering from serious mental illnesses. The report marks an important step in the emerging campaign to end death sentences for mentally ill offenders, which was initiated in 2004 by Amnesty International, the American Bar Association, the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty, and other groups.

At the request of these colleague organizations, MVFHR is working with the campaign to provide the voices of victims. We are identifying and reaching out to family members of victims who were killed by persons identified as mentally ill at the time of the crime and family members of executed persons who were similarly identified. The perspective of both groups is important as we draw public attention to the issue.

Nick and Amanda Wilcox, for example, have spoken out on the issue of mental illness and the death penalty in legislative testimony, radio interviews, and speeches. They say, "A severely mentally ill gunman murdered our daughter Laura while she was filling in as receptionist at our local mental health clinic. We have always been opponents of the death penalty; we have not wavered in our conviction

because of Laura's death. We believe that responding to violence with more violence leads society into a downward spiral of anger and more killing. Laura, bright and beautiful at age nineteen, embraced life and nonviolence fully; a death sentence for her murderer would not honor her memory.

"Laura's murderer suffered from severe paranoid schizophrenia. We came to recognize soon after the shooting that this man was very ill with little or no insight into his condition or the consequence of his actions. In order to protect society, institutionalization of this man is both necessary and appropriate. To execute him for an act he committed while delusional with a severe disease is, to us, simply wrong.

"Our prisons are now filled with the mentally ill and in many instances the only way a person can receive proper mental health care is by committing a crime. The financial resources now spent on implementing the death penalty would be better spent if redirected to treatment of those with serious mental illness, thereby preventing future acts of violence."

Since Laura's murder, the Wilcoxes have not only worked against the death penalty but have also advocated *for* improved mental health care in California. "Laura's Law" (which allows for court-ordered outpatient treatment for the severely mentally ill) was enacted in 2002.

Our message is doubly strong



Amanda and Nick Wilcox

when family members of mentally ill offenders who have been executed join murder victims' family members in advocating for treatment rather than executions. MVFHR board member Bill Babbitt has testified several times about the fact that his mentally ill brother Manny was sentenced to death rather than given the help that the police had promised Bill his brother would receive. Similarly, Ken and Lois Robison have spoken out in numerous forums about their inability to get treatment for their son Larry, who was diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic at the age of 21. "We were told that if he became violent, he could get the long-term treatment that everyone agreed he needed," Lois says. "Our son's first and only act of violence was to kill five people. Despite his well-documented history of mental illness, he was found sane and sentenced to die. The state of Texas executed him in 2000. How can a modern, civilized society choose to exterminate its ill citizens rather than treat them?"

To read Amnesty International's report on *The Death Penalty and Mentally Ill Offenders*, visit <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENAMR510032006>

“No Silence, No Shame” Brings Families of the Executed Together

To get time off from work when the execution was taking place, I had to lie and say I had a death in the family,” says Melanie Hebert, who was 22 when her uncle, Spencer Goodman, was executed in Texas. “In fact, I had not yet had that death.”

Melanie’s comment is one example of the unique challenges faced by family members of people who are executed. For the most part, families confront these challenges alone and deal with the impact of the execution on their families alone. On October 27th, Murder Victims’ Families for

Human Rights held a gathering in Austin, Texas of 18 relatives of people who had been executed. They included survivors who had lost parents, children, uncles, husbands, and brothers. They came from Illinois, Missouri, North Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, Rhode Island, California, Massachusetts, Virginia, Alberta, Canada, and Texas for some, it was their first time meeting another family who had gone through a similar nightmare.

During this two-hour private gathering, relatives talked about how they learned that their loved

one was charged with capital murder and sentenced to death, what it was like to witness or to wait for news of the execution, how they were treated by others in their community, and what the ongoing effects on their family have been. They described various kinds of shame and isolation: changing the name on a driver’s license, for example, to avoid the taunts that came from holding the same name as the executed relative. Struggling to answer the questions of young children in the family. Watching a son try to say goodbye to his child before being executed. The horror of witnessing the execution

itself. The suffering of the rest of the family.

After this sharing of experiences, the group held a public ceremony and press conference marking the official launch of the “No Silence, No Shame” project. Three members of the group gave public statements: Robert Meeropol, whose parents Ethel and Julius Rosenberg were executed by the U.S. government in 1953, talked about society’s failure to consider the effect of executions on surviving children, Bill Babbitt, whose mentally ill brother Manny Babbitt was executed in



Photo by Abe Bonowitz

“No Silence, No Shame” participants after the public ceremony.

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Photo by Scott Langley

Ida Reid places a rose in the vase in memory of her brother James, who was executed in Virginia.

California in 1999, challenged society to offer treatment, rather than death sentences, to mentally ill offenders, and Celia Diaz McWee, whose son Jerry was executed in South Carolina in 2004, described her experience witnessing the execution of her son.

Following these statements, all the participants held a ceremony in which each placed two roses in a vase: one in memory of their relative who was executed, and one in memory of the victim. While holding the roses, participants took a moment to name the person being remembered and to say a few words.

The event received much favor-

able press coverage, including an editorial in the *Austin American-Statesman* titled "The Families Left Behind." The editorial said, in part, "We hardly give them a second thought — if we notice them at all. But the family members of people who have been executed are no longer willing to suffer in silence. Their stories of survival after their parents, children or siblings were executed should give the public yet another reason to abolish the death penalty. At the very least, it should spur debate about whether executions are creating a class of victims who are being traumatized by state killing machines."

MVFHR is now working on the next steps of the project. In the coming months, we will be preparing a document based on interviews with family members of people who have been executed, and we will be working with state and local abolition groups to arrange public speaking opportunities for participants in the "No Silence, No Shame" project.

To read the full text of the statements given at the public ceremony in Austin, and to read more about the project, visit www.murdervictimfamilies.org. To support or become involved in the project, contact us at nosilence@murdervictimfamilies.org or 617-491-9600.

Victims' Family Member Lawmakers Oppose the Death Penalty

Publicly opposing the death penalty as a lawmaker can be politically challenging, and publicly opposing the death penalty as a victim's family member can be personally challenging. In recent months, several lawmakers who are relatives of murder victims have spoken against the death penalty during legislative debates on the issue. We have seen that such statements have a powerful effect on fellow lawmakers, and we want to recognize and thank those who have taken this kind of public stand.

During the debate about the bill that would have reinstated the death penalty in Massachusetts last year, Representative James Welch delivered these remarks: "This is an issue that has caused me a great deal of uncertainty. Capital punishment is something I knew I would have to take a stance on. For me and my family, this is a personal issue. I wish it wasn't. But it is. In 1983, my cousin was murdered by her former boyfriend. It was something I didn't truly understand then. We gathered around the television set to watch in disbelief. The next few years I remember the trial that consumed my family's life. As I approached my 10th birthday, the person convicted of this crime was let out of jail because of a technicality. I thought this person was going to come after me. My father began to sleep downstairs to protect me. Time went on and there was a new trial and this person was eventually convicted. I was older

though and was better able to understand. But I was angry and sad. My aunt, uncle, and cousins did not deserve this pain. The pain of losing a daughter and sister, but having to go through a trial twice. As I learned that we would be taking up this issue, I was reminded of that pain. I knew I could not vote until I spoke to my uncle. We spoke for several minutes and it became clear that he lives every day with pain. It does not go away. He told me that he would support whatever decision I made. I wish I could take away his pain. If I felt being in favor of the death penalty will make the pain go away, then I would support it. But it won't. Mr. Speaker, I ask that you support accepting the committee's report [against the reinstatement bill] because reinstating the death penalty will not make the pain go away."

Last March, when Connecticut Representatives were debating a bill that would have abolished the death penalty in that state, Representative Minnie Gonzalez argued that the death penalty does not deter crime, and then concluded by saying, "My stepson was murdered twelve years ago. He got off from work at 11:00 p.m., and he went to pick up his wife. And a car passed by, and they shot him. Twelve years later, my husband



Senator Marsh



Rep. Welch



Rep. Gonzalez

cries and misses his son. We discussed the issue of the death penalty, and he told me, if they ever catch those guys, I don't want the death penalty."

Most recently, when the Virginia Senate was holding a hearing on a bill to impose a moratorium on executions, two Senators said that their opposition to the death penalty was rooted in their experience of losing a family member to murder. According to a *Washington Post* article, Senator Henry Marsh III, whose brother was murdered, briefly questioned his opposition to the death penalty, but the murder and the events that followed convinced him that innocent people could be sentenced to death. Senator Janet Howell, whose father-in-law was murdered, said during the debate on the moratorium bill, "Up until then, I was in favor of the death penalty. But when my father-in-law was murdered, I discovered that the possibility of a death sentence on someone did not unify my family; it splintered my family. One of the reasons that I had always supported the death penalty was suddenly not there anymore."

The Journey of Hope in Texas and Virginia

After a successful two-week speaking tour through Texas last October, the Journey of Hope ... from Violence to Healing plans to come to Virginia October 30-November 5, 2006. Journey participants address audiences at high schools, colleges, churches, civic clubs, and rallies, always speaking in teams that include a murder victim's family member, a family member of someone who is on death row or has been executed or an exonerated death row inmate, and a local anti-death penalty activist who can talk about the political situation in that state.

Jack Payden-Travers, director of Virginians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty (VADP), believes that the time is right for bringing the Journey's message to Virginia.

"The last time the Journey came to Virginia was in 1996," Jack recalls. "Unfortunately, Virginia has executed over 60 people in the ten years since then. But we are at a point now where the situation is changing rapidly. 2005 was the first year since 1983 that Virginia did not have an execution, and the Senate just passed and sent on to the governor a bill to abolish the juvenile death penalty here. Now, obviously the juvenile death penalty has already been ruled unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court, but for us to update our statute on an issue as controversial as this one is significant. Historically, Virginia has been very slow to take that step. When the U.S. Supreme Court ruled

in 1999 that the age of eligibility for the death penalty should be 16, not 15, it took Virginia ten years to pass a law bringing our statute in line with that ruling. This time, the bill passed overwhelmingly, which I believe signals a new climate."

The 2005 election of an anti-death penalty governor also signals a major shift in Virginians' thinking on the issue, Jack believes. "Tim Kane is the first southern politician to come out against the death penalty, and he was elected here. We view this as a new era and a window of opportunity in which to educate the public in this state and move toward moratorium and eventually abolition. This is why we are excited about bringing the Journey of Hope here now. When you bring murder victims' family members, families of the executed, and exonerates together on one platform, you change minds and hearts. I saw it on the Texas Journey this past October; these are the stories that reach people."

People who participate in the Journey also find themselves deeply affected by the experience. Liz Brancato, who traveled from Connecticut to speak at several events on the Texas Journey, says, "I came to have such respect for all the volunteers in Texas, that they are able to carry on with their abolition



Journey of Hope participants march to the Texas state capitol.

work in the face of the regular executions and apparent support by Texans for the death penalty. I was terrifically impressed that they aren't overwhelmed by despair. Secondly, I was moved by the family members of death row prisoners and the family members of the executed. In spite of my opposition to the death penalty, I had never allowed myself to think of the family members of the man who murdered my mother, except in terms of what they had compared to what I didn't have – that is, why were they allowed to have their father /grandfather (he was never in danger of execution), and my children and I no longer had my mother. I learned, again, that it is impossible to hate any group of people, when you put a real, individual, face on them. I hadn't really thought about how victimized the families of death row and executed prisoners are, not until I actually met and spoke with some of them."

For more information or to participate in the Virginia Journey of Hope, contact president and co-founder Bill Pelke at 877-924-4483 or Bill@JourneyofHope.org

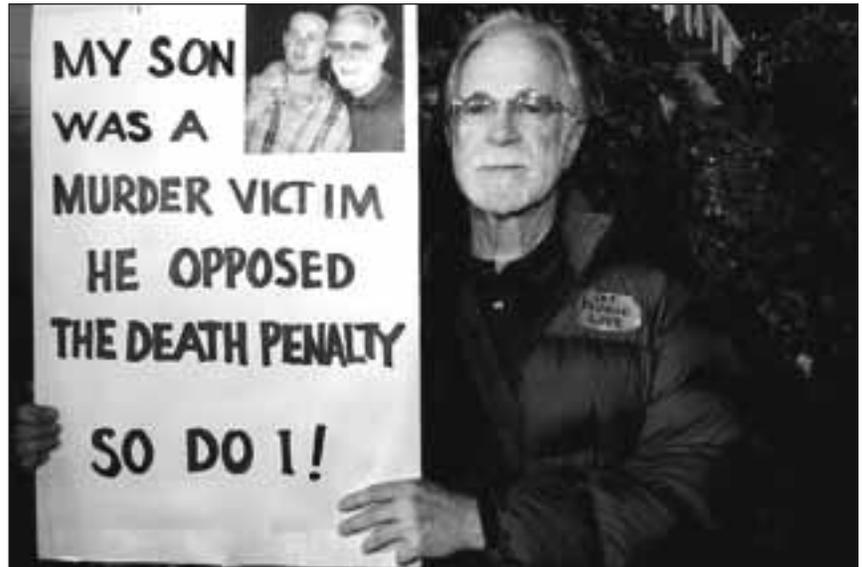
Victims' Voices: News from Around the U.S.

Members of MVFHR regularly engage in activism and public education about victim opposition to the death penalty. Here is a sampling of recent news from around the United States.

California:

In December, at the request of the state group Death Penalty Focus, MVFHR wrote a statement in support of the "California Moratorium on Executions Act," and Walt Everett traveled from Pennsylvania to testify at a hearing on the bill along with California members Bill Babbitt and Derrel Myers. Also in December, MVFHR joined with the U.S. Human Rights Network in issuing a statement regarding the highly publicized execution of Stanley "Tookie" Williams. At the same time, California victims' family members participated in protest events around the state: Amanda and Nick Wilcox (see p. 7), for example, spoke at a protest outside Sacramento City Hall, and Derrel Myers took part in a protest walk from San Francisco to San Quentin and then spoke to the crowd that had gathered outside the prison. Derrel's 23-year-old son JoJo was murdered in 1996, and he and his wife Naomi White frequently speak against the death penalty, arguing that it is connected to the larger societal problems of poverty and racism.

Additionally, Bill Babbitt released a statement to the media



Derrel Myers on the protest walk from San Francisco to San Quentin.

correcting the assertion that Williams was the first African-American executed by California since reinstatement of the death penalty; in fact, Bill's brother, Manny Babbitt, executed in California in 1999, was the first. "We are outraged by news reports stating incorrectly that all eleven men executed before Stanley Williams were white," the Babbitt family's statement read. "We cannot imagine why reporters would be so irresponsible in failing to check this simple factual assertion. We do not know where these reporters are getting their information but we are shocked by these inaccuracies and this apparent attempt to white-wash California's death row."

Connecticut:

Toni Bosco, author of the book *Choosing Mercy: A Mother of Murder*

Victims Pleads to End the Death Penalty, writes that she spoke to the November meeting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, as part of their Campaign to End the Use of the Death Penalty. In her address, Toni described some of the challenges she has received: "Some Catholics have berated me for not wanting death, and for working hard in prison ministry and seeking restorative justice, saying, 'You couldn't have loved your children if you don't want to even the score and have the killer killed.'"

Liz Brancato, who joined MVFHR during the "Dissent with Dignity" walk that took place last May in the days preceding Connecticut's first execution in 45 years, writes that she has spoken against the death penalty to several audiences around the state and that she and others in the Connecticut Network to Abolish

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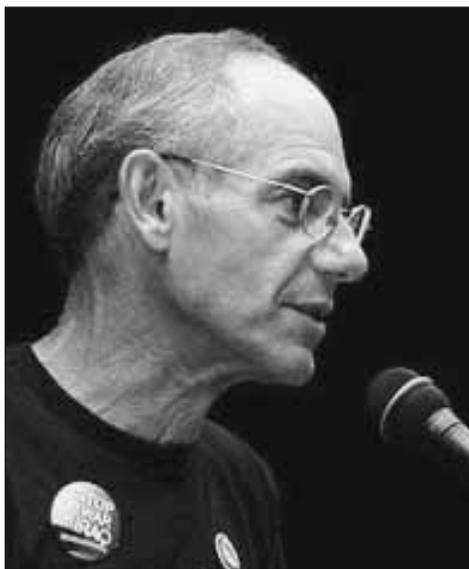
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the Death Penalty (CNADP) have been staffing information tables at performances of the play *The Exonerated* in Hartford. In January and February MVFHR Executive Director Renny Cushing, board member Robert Meeropol, and Connecticut member Gail Canzano did "talk backs" after performances of the play, and in March, Texas member Kerry Cook, who is one of the exonerated death row inmates featured in the play and is also the brother of a murder victim, traveled to Connecticut to speak at a press conference organized by CNADP.

Delaware:

In November, MVFHR board member Walt Everett traveled from Pennsylvania to speak at vigil and protest of the execution of Brian Steckel, along with Delaware victims' family members. At the vigil, Walt met Michael Berg, whose 26-year-old son Nicholas Berg was



Michael Berg

beheaded in Iraq in 2004 and who was also speaking out against the execution. Michael joined MVFHR soon afterward, saying, "Having lost my son in Iraq, I've become even more sensitized to the awfulness of the waste of human life, and I've become far more active against the idea of using violence to solve problems that should be solved in other ways."

Illinois:

Jennifer Bishop-Jenkins and Bill Jenkins report that they and several other victims' family members have spoken to a wide range of audiences over the past several months, including many student groups. Jennifer and Bill have also spoken on victim impact panels organized by the Cook County Juvenile Probation Department, and Bill has held trainings and given presentations that educate victims' service professionals about victim opposition to the death penalty, including a speech at the first conference of the National Center for Victims of Crime.

Maryland:

Bonnita Spikes and Vicki Schieber have been actively working to protest executions in Maryland and have spoken to university and church groups around the state. Bonnita works with Maryland Citizens Against State Executions to reach out to victims' and prisoners' family members and to educate the public about the effects of the death penalty, particularly its effect on African-American communities. She has made efforts to engage in dialogue

and encourage leadership within the Black churches, and in August she addressed the Teamsters National Black Caucus and the National Black Police Association. Ron Hampton, director of the National Black Police Association, told MVFHR that the association has officially opposed the death penalty since 1986. "One of our goals is to evaluate the criminal justice system and its negative impact on communities of color," he explained, "and we see the death penalty as part of that." Ron said it was valuable to have a victim's family member address the conference. "People believe the death penalty has something to do with fighting crime. We decided we had to train and educate people regarding the truth of the death penalty. Bonnita's presentation was an opportunity for face-to-face conversation with someone who could articulate another view. The audience received the talk quite well. From the evaluations afterwards, we saw that people who had been in favor of the death penalty before they attended the talk now changed their minds."

Massachusetts:

In July, nine victims' family members and family members of the executed attended a hearing on a bill that would have reinstated the death penalty in Massachusetts, and several gave testimony. Loretta Filipov, whose husband Alexander Filipov was killed when he was a passenger on American Airlines Flight #11 on September 11, 2001, told the law-

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makers, "We need to stop the cycle of violence. We can see from the present course we are following in this country that violence only begets more violence and killing only leads to more killing. It is possible to have justice without revenge and hate." Jamie Bissonnette of the American Friends Service Committee Criminal Justice Program said in her testimony, "In 1974, two of my cousins were killed. My cousin Pedro Bissonnette ... believed that civil rights extended to Native people and founded the Oglala Sioux Civil Rights Organization (OSCRO). ... I have done dedicated criminal justice work in my own communities, the tribes in New England. I do this work because I believe we have to be about solving problems, building peace, and establishing balance. These three things are justice. The death penalty is not."

New York:

After the state Supreme Court ruled in 2004 that New York's death penalty statute was unconstitutional, the state has been effectively without a death penalty, and abolitionists have been actively working to prevent a legislative or judicial reinstatement. New Yorkers Against the Death Penalty Director of Organizing Laura Porter says that victims' families have been an important part of that effort. "Particularly when we reach out to new audiences, the voice of victims' family members

opposing the death penalty is an unexpected one, and it provokes thought and opens up ideas," Laura says. In December, when the murder of two police officers prompted the governor to call a special legislative session with the goal of bringing back the death penalty, several murder victims' family members contacted their legislators and published letters to the editor arguing that the death penalty should not be reinstated.

North Carolina:

Many victims' family members joined other abolitionists in protesting the 1000th United States execution since 1977, which took place in North Carolina on December 2nd. MVFHR and The Journey of Hope collaborated on a victims' statement opposing the execution, which was read aloud at several protest events around the country. At the prison in Raleigh, 17 people were arrested for an act of civil disobedience (entering the prison grounds) at the time of the execution. Renny Cushing delivered a statement outside the prison that said, in part, "Human Rights involve responsibilities. A fundamental responsibility of us all is to be vigilant in protecting the human rights of others. Tonight, my personal conscience accepts the human responsibility to oppose the violation of human rights that is the death penalty. Acting with the power of nonviolence in the face of violence, I enter the grounds of the Central Prison to defend human rights, bear witness against killing in my name, killing in the name of vic-

tims, killing in the name of society." Charges against the protesters were eventually dropped.

North Dakota:

Marietta Jaeger Lane, whose daughter Susie was kidnapped and murdered in 1973, writes that she has been speaking to university groups in North Dakota as well as in her home state of Montana. When she and Sister Helen Prejean addressed a group at the University of Mary in Bismarck after a performance of the *Dead Man Walking* play, Marietta reports that she "had the gratifying occasion of a number of students and locals telling me that they'd changed their position on the death penalty as a result of hearing Helen and me speak and seeing the play and were now opposed to capital punishment."

Oklahoma:

Ann and Jim Fowler write that they have been visiting state legislators about the three abolition bills that were introduced this session. The Fowlers' son Mark was executed in 2001; Jim's mother, Goldie, had been murdered years earlier in a separate crime. "We have learned that legislators have not been truly informed regarding the failure of the death penalty system," Jim told MVFHR. "Almost every letter we write is published in the 'Sooner Catholic' newspaper here in Oklahoma City. This newspaper reaches approximately 50,000 homes in the western half of the state. In addition to this, we hand-carry 140 copies to each and every legislator's office at the state capitol. This gives us the feeling

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that we are accomplishing small steps in a long journey.”

In December, MVFHR member Johnnie Carter was a guest on the Mitch Albom Show, a national radio program, discussing her experience witnessing the execution of the man who murdered her 7-year-old granddaughter. “I did not get closure from watching someone else get killed,” Johnnie said.

South Carolina:

SueZann Bosler, daughter of a murder victim and herself a survivor of attempted murder, was one of the featured speakers on the “Death Penalty: Voices of Experience” tour that Abe Bonowitz, the South Carolina Equal Justice Alliance, the Center for Capital Litigation and several other groups organized in the days prior to the 1000th execution in the United States (see North Carolina, above). Other speakers on the tour



Celia McWee protesting in South Carolina.



SueZann Bosler speaks at a press conference at the South Carolina state capitol.

Photo by Abe Bonowitz

were exonerated death row inmate Shujaa Graham, attorney Teresa Norris, and Kathleen Hawk Norman of Jurors for Justice. The group held a press conference at the State House and traveled to several South Carolina cities to deliver public presentations against the death penalty. Many abolitionists, including victims' family members and family members of the executed, also participated in a public protest of the 1001st execution, which took place in South Carolina the following day.

Tennessee:

Hector Black writes that he and his wife Susie have spoken to several groups around the state in recent months, and have begun meeting with lawmakers to lay the groundwork for a moratorium and study bill that will likely be introduced in 2008. The Blacks' daughter Patricia Nuckles was murdered in 2000. Another outspoken vic-

tim's family member in Tennessee, Regina Hockett, whose daughter Adriane Dickerson was murdered in 1995, also reports several recent speaking engagements, including a panel at Vanderbilt University where she spoke along with Bonnie DeShields, whose brother Robert Coe was executed in Tennessee in 2000.

Randy Tatel, Director of the Tennessee Coalition to Abolish State Killing (TCASK), believes that this kind of public education is critical to anti-death penalty work in Tennessee. “The voices of families of the executed are so marginalized in the entire discussion of the death penalty,” Randy says, “that it’s essential to include those voices in our abolition efforts. And I believe it’s impossible to have a meaningful policy discussion if you don’t include murder victims’ family members. The death penalty is part of a larger discussion about what society

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needs to do in response to murder, and a victim's family member opposing the death penalty jars people from their set position on the issue." Each year on National Crime Victims' Rights Week, TCASK issues a statement saying that they believe it is important to recognize all victims: "What many people, including many good-hearted victim's rights advocates, fail to acknowledge is that an execution creates an entirely new set, an unnecessary set, of victims' family members."

Texas:

In October, several victims' family members and family members of the executed, from Texas

and from several states around the country, participated in the Journey of Hope's two-week speaking tour throughout the state and then spoke on several panels at the annual conference of the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty, which was held in Austin this year. These activities resulted in a great deal of press coverage, including an article in the *Austin American-Statesman* that carried the headline, "Victims' family members crusade against the death penalty; vengeance not the answer, say relatives of those killed." In January, MVFHR provided a training on victims' issues at the annual conference of the Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty.

Virginia:

In November, Vicki Schieber

(see p. 3) and Ida Reid spoke at the annual conference of Virginians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty (VADP). Ida, whose brother James Reid was executed in Virginia in 2004, had just participated in the "No Silence, No Shame" gathering that MVFHR organized in Texas, and she concluded her statement at the VADP conference by saying, "We have been hidden, we have been silent, we have been ashamed to speak out, but now, with this project bringing us together, we are prepared to talk about the effect of executions on surviving family members. I know that ending our silence and moving away from our shame will help us heal ourselves and help us bring about a better world."



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