

ARTICLE 3

Murder
Victims'
Families for
MVFR
Human
Rights

“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

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The Making of a Victim Advocate: Interview with Jeffrey Dion

Jeffrey Dion was 14 in 1982 when his 23-year-old sister Paulette was murdered by a serial killer. A nationally recognized expert in victim advocacy and victim services, Jeff now serves as the Deputy Director of the National Center for Victims of Crime and as the Director of the National Crime Victim Bar Association. When we spoke with Jeff in February, we began by asking him to trace the early roots of his victim advocacy.



Within six weeks of my sister's murder, I was writing to the Chief of Police asking for copies of the police report. He wouldn't send them to me. Two years later, when they contacted us to let us know that my sister's killer had confessed, I wanted more information. I was smart enough by then to know that

I needed a lawyer, and I had a Boy Scout leader who was a lawyer, so I had him call the police for me. They talked to him and he was able to get more information that I had had before. So, from the very beginning I was pushing for more information and for us to be more involved in our case.

I knew I wanted to do something because of all of this, but I wasn't quite sure what it was that I was supposed to do. I thought I wanted to be a prosecutor. In my third year of law school, I interned in the prosecutor's office and prosecuted misdemeanors, but I learned that sometimes prosecutors and I had different views of what a victim's role should be. In the office, there was a very strong feeling that this is our case; it's not the victim's case, and sometimes I had different views about the value of consulting with victims and asking what they think – just to get their input – and also sharing information with them to help them understand why you're doing what you're doing.

I remember in law school watching on the news when the National Center for Victims of Crime opened up an office near where I lived. I thought, “That's interesting, maybe some day at some point in my career I'll work specifically for victims.” But it came about much sooner than I ever would have thought. Just a couple of years later, I went to a homicide survivors support group that was sponsored by the local police department. At that point, it had been thirteen years since Paulette was murdered, but it was the first time I had ever met another person who had lost a loved one to homicide.

As we sat around the table and people told their

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MVFHR**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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Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights is a member of the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty, the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty, the U.S. Human Rights Network, Anti-Death Penalty Asia Network, the National Center for Victims of Crime, and the National Organization for Victim Assistance

Article 3

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stories, they also talked about their grievances with the criminal justice system. Sometimes as a lawyer I could tell them why things were the way they were, and other times I couldn't. When I couldn't come up with a good reason for why it had to be that way, I said why don't we change the law – and that's what we went and did, thirteen times. As a group of victims, we were able to get thirteen victims' rights bills enacted into law in Virginia.

What are some of the policy changes that you're particularly proud of?

One is giving victims the right to offer oral impact testimony. Virginia had been one of only two states that limited victim impact statements to a written statement, so it was really important to make that change. A couple of years after we got that law passed, I was speaking with an Episcopal priest whose 16-year-old son had been murdered. He told me that at the time of the trial of his son's killer, the law allowing oral testimony wasn't going to take effect for another two weeks, but the judge took notice of the fact that it had just passed, and let the mother offer oral testimony, during the sentencing phase, about the impact of the crime. The father told me that this was the first time they were able to fight for their son. He said it just made all the difference, and he said that not even knowing that I had helped to push that law through.

How did he mean it when he said "fight for him"? Did he mean it in terms of trying for stiffer sentencing, or in terms of getting to speak about him?

Speaking about him and about what it was that they'd lost. Showing that the boy was more than just a statistic. They couldn't save him from being killed but they could save him from being forgotten or overlooked in the process.

Would you like to talk a bit more about the effect of your sister's murder on you as a child?

I was one of four kids, and in our family, you could see that everybody reacted differently. Not surprisingly, I was the one that wanted to talk about it, but there wasn't really anybody else who wanted to.

I remember we were working at the church carnival when my father came to tell us what happened. I can remember the emotions coming over me in waves. At first it was shock and disbelief, and then it was intense grief and sadness, but then also really quickly after that came anger: that this didn't just happen; *someone did this to her*. I sat there in a chair staring out into space and I was literally growling. I thought, "I'm going to do something about this." So I think early on, I was looking for a place to put those feelings.

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The drive for information was so powerful for you from the beginning. Can you say more about why that matters so much, why it's so important to victims?

I think people think that the more information they have, the more they're going to kind of be able to get their mind around what happened. I mean, at first we had almost no information. All I knew was that she was dead and that somebody had killed her. I actually found out *how* she was killed a couple of days later, when I read it in the newspaper. It didn't seem like my sister they were talking about; it was like any other article you read about something like that. And then all of a sudden it hit me that for every one of those articles that I'd read without a second thought, there was an entire family left behind whose world had been destroyed.

How is the death penalty abolition movement viewed by the organized victims' community? What might it be useful for abolitionists to know or to be aware of?

I think there's a risk that the movement may be viewed as not supporting accountability or as excusing criminal behavior. Regardless of where victims stand on capital punishment, I think they all have a very basic desire to be able to go through some kind of adjudicative process and to have a judge or jury say: "What happened to your loved one was wrong, and this is what we're going to do about it." I think the fear is that nothing will be done or that people are advocating nothing being

done. I think focusing on some type of accountability gives victims the permission to be honest with themselves and open themselves up to examining how they really feel about capital punishment. Because some people feel that they're supposed to support it, that they're acquiescing to the murder of their loved one if they *don't* support capital punishment. If victims can see that there's a way to be in support of accountability without resorting to capital punishment, I think they can still feel that they're honoring the memory of their loved one.

How are victims who oppose the death penalty regarded within the victim advocacy community?

In the victim advocacy community, I think their views are honored and respected and accepted. I don't know that I could say the same thing about the law enforcement or prosecutorial communities, but I think from people who are truly victim advocates and support the empowerment of victims, most of us in the field support the empowerment of victims to be heard for what they think, not just to be a tool of the prosecution.

Has NCVC or the Crime Victim Bar Association ever represented victims who were challenging their right to give impact statements when their views were different from the prosecutor's?

We haven't had occasion to do that, but our position has always been to support victims and for victims' voices to be heard on that subject, whatever their views are.

One of the biggest problems with victims' rights as they've been enacted in most places is that there's no remedy for a violation of them. So where do you go when you've been denied your right to offer oral impact testimony, for example? And sometimes even victims' rights laws themselves are worded in a way that leaves the decision up to the prosecutor: the law may say that victims have the right to offer testimony *when called by the prosecutor*. But what if the prosecutor doesn't call them because they don't agree?

How has your thinking in any of these areas evolved or changed over time?

I think I've developed a broader appreciation for the diversity of victims' views, and I've also learned that some victims have grown disenchanted with our process of capital punishment mostly because of how it's carried out, that victims don't get any of the resolution that they think they will have because the court process, the appeals process, goes on so long that victims find themselves caught in limbo. I remember when victims came forward in New Jersey to argue for abolition of the death penalty on the grounds that no one's actually being executed and it's offering false expectations to victims who are then subjected to a lifetime of litigation.

Interacting with the death penalty abolition movement has been a great opportunity for me to meet other victims and find other ways, other groups that we can collaborate with on issues where we share common ground.

Victim Opposition to the Death Penalty in the News

A recent sampling of words from or about victims' families in articles and opinion pieces

From an op-ed by Ziggy Ziegler in the 10/02/10 Billings (Montana) Gazette:

... In 1973, my 78-year-old father was murdered in a foiled robbery attempt. He was sitting in his car in a grocery store parking lot reading his evening newspaper when he was shot and left for dead in the front seat of his car. The perpetrators fled to a waiting automobile. My mother finished her shopping and was returning to her car when she witnessed the ambulance attendants removing my father's body from the vehicle. Witnesses were able to identify two teenage youth who were apprehended within a matter of hours and charged accordingly.

No words can adequately describe the emotions and trauma when one receives "that" telephone call. There is first disbelief, then sheer physical grief of a loss, then reality, then hatred. Three days earlier I had spent the holiday with my father. I had not realized that I would never see him alive again nor would I be able to tell him I loved him or to say goodbye. I became angrier.

I addressed the hate issue for some time. It was only with the gift of my family, my faith and my friends that I was able to overcome that consumption and release it before it destroyed my life and that of my family. You can forgive the sinner but not the sin.

... Nothing yesterday, today, or tomorrow will bring my father back. I accept that. Taking the lives

of the two minors who murdered my father will satisfy nothing. I believe perpetrators should be held responsible for their actions with a sentence of life in prison, no years of pleadings or hearings or extensions – simply life without parole.

Today and every day, I wear my father's wedding band as a reminder of the many fond memories of him in our 40 years together. He lived life to the fullest and set many a good example as a man of deep faith. By his death he would not seek vengeance to those who took him from us. I seek to honor my father's legacy by supporting the abolition of Montana's death penalty.

From an op-ed by Linda Owens in the 12/12/10 Sacramento Bee:

Five years ago Monday, the man convicted of murdering my husband, Albert Lewis Owens, and three others was executed at San Quentin State Prison. His name was Stanley "Tookie" Williams. Just as I felt the night of the execution, I still don't believe that the community, my family or I gained anything from Williams' execution. ...

Like many victims, I hadn't thought much about the death penalty before Albert was killed. However, Albert had, which I learned after we saw a news story about a local death penalty case. Albert said that the death penalty was wrong; there were too many problems with the system, the risk of executing the innocent was too high, and he didn't

believe we had the right to take another human being's life – it was God's decision, not ours.

I agreed with my husband, but when I learned of Williams' sentence, I didn't object. I was more concerned with the loss of my husband and having to raise our children without him.

I did not know anything about the death penalty, and nobody explained the process to me, so I believed that Williams was executed shortly after sentencing. My children grew up and grandchildren began to arrive. They all knew how Albert had died but didn't know the details, and they believed that a man had been executed for the crime.

Twenty years later, however, the state of California contacted us and we learned that Williams had not been executed, but that he would be on Dec. 13, 2005. My entire world changed again in that instant.

I kept hearing death penalty proponents argue that Williams needed to be executed "for the victims." Knowing that my husband opposed the death penalty, I knew that Williams' execution was certainly not being done for Albert. Death penalty proponents also argued that the execution would bring closure to the victims' families. What they failed to realize is that there is no closure for victims. The only closure after an execution is the closure of government files.

In my case, the execution actually reopened old wounds.

After 20 years of healing, all of a sudden I had to relive the horrible details of the case. With the media blitz surrounding the impending execution, I could no longer hide the details from my children and grandchildren. We were a family in crisis.

The death penalty has a domino effect – once it starts it doesn't stop. It hurts everyone. It re-traumatizes victims' families, precludes healing for decades after the crime and creates a second group of innocent victims: the offender's family.

... There is no punishment that can ever make victims whole again. We can never get what we really want: our loved ones at our sides, sharing our lives. But with permanent imprisonment, at least we can put our resources toward improving the quality of victims' lives.

From an op-ed by Charisse Colseman in the 12/17/10 Charlotte (North Carolina) Observer:

... Every time we talk about ending the death penalty in North Carolina, someone throws out the old question: What if someone in your family were murdered? How would you feel then?

For most people, that ends the discussion. Not for me.

In 1995, a man walked into the liquor store where my brother worked as a stock clerk and shot him to death. The killer wanted the contents of the cash drawer. For reasons we will never understand, the man launched the robbery by shooting Russell three times in the back, while leaving two other employees unharmed. He now

awaits execution in Louisiana.

It was a senseless crime, and it has sometimes been hard over the last 15 years to keep this single event from turning me into someone I don't want to be. Someone more interested in vengeance than justice, for instance.

Precisely because I refuse to let a murderer sour my soul and embitter my life, because I refuse to let him dictate to me the limits of my capacity to heal and thrive, I stand firmly with the growing number of North Carolinians who believe that we must stop looking to a deeply flawed capital punishment system to soothe our anger and grief over violent crime.

One senseless killing need not beget another.

We absolutely must deal with violent crime in this country, an epidemic that needs to be addressed with forceful, creative energy. But I can't help recognizing: Russell died because a man saw killing him as the answer to a problem. What sense can there be to society using a murderer's methods to solve our problems? ...

From a longer article by Joseph Goldstein in the 1/22/11 New York Times:

... "At first, you feel like you're the only person this has ever happened to," said Lois Robison, whose mentally ill son was executed in Texas in 2000 for the murder of five people. "You're no longer Ken and Lois Robison, the two schoolteachers. You're Ken and Lois Robison, the parents of a mass murderer."

Ms. Robison, 77, now regularly

speaks with the families of other men the state has executed.

Reflecting on the Tucson shootings, Ms. Robison was reminded of her reaction to learning about her son's rampage: she could not stop sobbing until she was given sedatives. She said she expected the Loughners now felt like "pariahs"; she, too, struggled with the feeling. After her son's crimes, some parents sought to have their children transferred out of her class.

... In fact, the relatives of perpetrators are such pariahs that it was a crime victims' group that first organized a formal meeting of them. In 2005, a group of relatives of murder victims, all opposed to the death penalty, held a conference for the relatives of some 20 people who had been executed for capital crimes.

It was "the first time in the modern era there was ever assembled in a room a couple of dozen people who had all shared the experience of having a family member executed, and found a little empathy and solidarity for a group that has had none," said Renny Cushing, the executive director of Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights, which organized the meeting.

MVFHR in Action



MVFHR members Cathy Crino (left) and Gail Rice pose with Jeremy Schroeder (far right), director of the Illinois Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty, and Senator Kwame Raoul, sponsor of the Senate Bill, just after the Senate voted in January to pass legislation that would repeal the state's death penalty. As victims' family members, both Gail and Cathy were actively involved in the effort to pass this repeal legislation. When Governor Quinn signed the bill into law in March, Cathy was at the press conference along with MVFHR members Jeanne Bishop and Jennifer Bishop-Jenkins.

In her testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee, Cathy said, in part,

"My sister Stephanie was murdered almost sixteen years ago in Texas. Before she was killed, I was an opponent of the death penalty. I spoke about it, on occasion, as part of my work. And I would get the criticism that 'You would feel differently if it happened to you.'

"When Stephanie was killed, I did indeed learn many things. What I learned is that the death of the perpetrator was gruesome, and grisly. And that it didn't fix a thing. It didn't make us feel better. It didn't solve anything. A murder leaves a void that never goes away, is never completely healed. The death of the perpetrator doesn't bring closure. It doesn't fill the void."

In recent weeks, victims' family members have also been active in repeal efforts in Connecticut, Montana, and Maryland and efforts to oppose expansion of the death penalty in New Hampshire. Working closely with our colleagues in these states, several MVFHR members have been active in testifying, giving media interviews, and delivering educational presentations.



Photo by Scott Langley courtesy of People of Faith Against the Death Penalty.

Marietta Jaeger Lane, Bonnita Spikes, and Renny Cushing speak on a panel, "Healing and Restoration After Loss: Murder Victims' Family Members & How Faith Communities Can Foster Restorative Justice," at the Kairos Conference: Discerning Justice &

Taking Action on America's Death Penalty, held in Atlanta in November.

Also coming together for a panel presentation in October were Reverend Cathy Harrington, whose daughter, Leslie Ann Mazzara, was murdered, Barbara Lewis, whose son, Robert Gattis, is on death row, Anne Coleman, whose daughter, Frances, was murdered, and MVFHR Director Renny Cushing, whose father Robert was murdered. These four panelists spoke at an event called "No Human Way to Kill," sponsored by New York City's White Box Gallery, Firstsite Contemporary Visual Arts, and the Human Rights Centre at the University of Essex (England). The discussion was streamed live to universities throughout the U.S.



Participants gather at the end of the second Regional Conference on the Death Penalty in the Middle East and North Africa, titled "Death Penalty: Risks, Opportunities, Proposed Tools and Strategies," held in September in Alexandria, Egypt. The conference was sponsored by Penal Reform International, the Swedish Institute Alexandria, and the Arab Centre for the Independence of the Judiciary and Legal Profession. Renny Cushing represented MVFHR.

Photo by Paul Ruffins



MVFHR Board Chair Vicki Schieber, with her husband Syl, accepts the Abolitionist of the Year Award at the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty (NCADP) conference in Chicago in January. In her remarks, Vicki thanked all those in the movement who give her strength and energy to work against the death penalty – work that she does in honor of her daughter Shannon, who was murdered in 1998.

At the NCADP conference, MVFHR speakers contributed to a variety of workshops and panel presentations. Bill Jenkins led a workshop on “The Impact of Homicide on Families of Murder Victims”; Kate Lowenstein, Bob Curley, and Vicki Schieber spoke on a panel titled “Families of Murder Victims as Speakers: How to Support them when you ask them to speak,” moderated by NCADP’s Rachel’s Fund director Mary Achilles; Renny Cushing spoke on a panel about the History of the Victims’ Rights Movement; Bob Curley and Brian MacQuarrie were the focus on a morning plenary session. (Brian’s book *The Ride* chronicles Bob Curley’s journey from supporter of the death penalty to opponent, in the aftermath of the murder of his son Jeffrey.)

In addition to bringing the perspective of victims to the death penalty abolition movement, MVFHR focuses on educating the organized victims’ community about the perspective of victims who oppose the death penalty, and in August, Renny Cushing and Marie Verzulli represented MVFHR at the National Organization for Victim Assistance (NOVA) conference in Salt Lake City. They presented a workshop on “Working with Victims Who Oppose the Death Penalty” to an audience of victim advocates, police officers, prosecutors, researchers, and corrections workers.

MVFHR’s Asia Liaison Toshi Kazama addresses several hundred students at a police academy in Mongolia’s capital city, Ulaanbaatar. During his November trip to Mongolia, Toshi gave several public presentations and met with public officials, including Judge Saranttuya, who presides over capital trials. Below, Toshi poses with the judge after a productive meeting.

We were pleased to see that when, in December, the United Nations once again adopted a resolution calling for a worldwide moratorium on the death penalty, Mongolia voted in favor of the resolution – a change from the country’s 2007 vote. Mongolia’s president has publicly announced his opposition to the death penalty, but over 80% of the country’s people are believed to be in favor of it, and in the coming months MVFHR will be working with others in the international community to support the president’s efforts to move toward full abolition of the death penalty before his term is up in 2012.



A Voice I Would Never Have Chosen

Adapted from testimony that Margaret Hawthorn delivered to New Hampshire lawmakers in February:

My daughter Molly Hawthorn MacDougal was murdered in her home in Henniker, New Hampshire on April 29, 2010. Molly was two weeks from graduating from nursing school at New Hampshire Technological Institute. She was a beloved wife, daughter, sister, niece, auntie, and friend to many. She was an avid gardener, a dancer, a potter, a gracious hostess, a fisherwoman, and so much more. Molly was a lover of life and a lover of people.

As tragic and senseless as Molly's death is, I am relieved that this is not a capital case. Another death would only increase my family's trauma, and would not bring Molly back.

As a child I came to my own conclusion that the death penalty was wrong. But, like anyone who believes the death penalty is wrong, I later had to consider the question, "Easy for you to talk of non-violence, but what if it were your loved one?"

Now it is my loved one. As a grieving mother, I have a voice I would never have chosen.

One day last fall I ran into someone I hadn't seen in a while. She asked how I was doing, and said how sorry she was to hear about Molly. She added, "I hope he gets what he deserves."

I must have looked confused. She said, "He doesn't deserve to live."

I explained that it's not a capital murder case, and that I'm relieved because I wouldn't want to think

about the death penalty.

Whoever killed Molly (there has been no trial, so I can't speak in specifics) now bears a responsibility for two lives: his own and the life he stole from our daughter. The most positive outcome I can imagine is to see that person put his life to good use in whatever circumstances he is to live it out. That could bring a little light into this most awful situation. I wouldn't want such a possibility eliminated through an execution.

My friend said, "You're a better person than I am."

I am not. I am self-protective. Revenge is tricky, self-destructive. It doesn't turn out sweet, seldom plays out the way one thinks it will. Too often family members find that the execution of their loved one's murderer doesn't bring the hoped-for closure. I don't want to allow room for revenge to impose its disappointment on me.

When Molly died, our family sensed the potential destruction that hatred could wreak in our lives, especially in this time of vulnerability. We made a conscious, public decision not to yield to hatred. As murder victims' families know, it is impossible to stay entirely out of the public eye, so we invited the public to join us from the outset to find another way to honor Molly.

None of this is to say we aren't angry. I am angry every single day when I wake up and have to struggle all over again with the fact of Molly's death. Nothing can make up for losing her. I just don't want to succumb to the desire for revenge, which is how I understand hatred. I



Margaret and Molly.

believe that revenge would lead me to obsessive thinking, which would get in the way of whatever healing might be possible.

I can't begin to describe how painful it is to learn to live in a world devoid of Molly's physical presence. I haven't begun to approach forgiveness. Trauma still wraps its armor around me, protecting me from taking in more than I can survive. In the meantime, I trust the state to make reasoned decisions that show compassion for all while I ride an emotional roller coaster I wouldn't wish on anyone.

There may never be a turnaround in the murderer's heart, and I know not to count on it. My healing can't rest on what happens to or within another person. The state can best help me by funding ongoing private counseling and support groups with professional facilitators, and allowing me to go about the work of healing, free from the specter of another death.

When I think about how to best honor Molly, I am certain it is by living into the values she embraced. She trained to do life-supporting work. Her love for people and deep compassion led her to choose a career of caring for others. I would not want anyone killed in her name.

Victims' Families Against the Death Penalty in Lebanon

Tanya Ghorra, from the Lebanese Association for Civil Rights, gives an update on The National Campaign for the Abolition of the Death Penalty in Lebanon, particularly the way in which the campaign has reached out to families of victims and families of people who have been executed.

The National Campaign made a substantial choice for its slogan: NO to crime, NO to death penalty. It does not side only with the criminal or only with the victim, but stands beside justice and endeavors to protect the rights of the victim and his family, while keeping the right of the criminal to rehabilitation and maintaining the right of his family as well.

The Campaign recently carried out a series of visits to parents of victims, parents of those convicted and those executed, and death row inmates. These were emotional meetings and hard discussions. Afterward, we compiled statements from those we had met with and have made powerful use of them in several ways: in press conferences, in our published materials, and in trainings. Our main goal is to focus on those directly affected by the death penalty. We work on several levels, and families of the victims are an important voice for us.

One of the statements was from a father of a murder victim who had initially supported the death penalty. In a statement to the media, he had said, "We are a family in the veins of which an authentic Arab blood

runs. We do not accept [any other outcome] but the execution of the killer. Otherwise, we will take the appropriate measure."

Some years later, after the killer had been executed, and after some visits and discussions with members of our Campaign, he came to change his mind. "Instead of one killed person, there are now two," he said in his recent statement. "Had one of the officials visited us, had we felt that the State cared for us, had anyone talked to us or offered compensations to the children of the victim who have become orphans, we would have felt some dignity and solidarity. We would have felt better than yielding to our instinct... Finally, they have executed the killer. But what have they given us? A dead body! It is true that we have called for revenge, but what's the use!"

Our visits with family members of the executed were also powerful. Here is a statement from the widow of an executed man:

"The State executed my husband. We have five children and I don't work. We ran away from the people and from poverty. We went to a remote village. People there feel pity for us and give us bread every day. I see my children growing up in front of my eyes and they won't be normal. They have been forced to grow up on this. Who knows what they will do..."

At a conference called Children Refusing Capital Punishment that the Campaign organized, 14-year-old Amanda Aoun read a letter that she had written twelve years after the

hanging of the man who killed her father. She said:

"I am here to tell society about my position against this ugly way of punishing a human being, especially because from my point of view, punishment aims to fight crime and improve the criminal.

"My dad was a martyr, and his killer was hanged. I was young and didn't know if this was right or wrong. I used to hear my grandmother say, 'If they gave me a knife and told me to slaughter him, that wouldn't bring me back anything.'

"And now that I started thinking about it, I know that I'm against what happened and I didn't want him to be hanged. Because by doing so we don't reach the aim of punishment, because a dead man cannot improve. I pity the family of the hanged man and consider them innocent. Now there are more orphans: instead of two now there are five, because he has three kids.

"... I'm against death penalty because it is a second crime, where the wrong is met with wrong and it gives a bad example to the society. ... I want to ask all politicians in Lebanon, through all the people here today, to stop the capital punishment NOW and to treat the causes behind crime and finally, start working on improving criminals in prison."

For more information about the National Campaign for the Abolition of the Death Penalty in Lebanon, please visit www.deathpenaltylebanon.org

The Courage It Takes

Adapted from a presentation that Kate Lowenstein gave as part of the “Families of Murder Victims as Speakers” panel at the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty conference in Chicago this past January:

In his book *In Spite of The System*, Gary Gauger, murder victim family member and death row exoneree, and experienced speaker against the death penalty including on shows like *Oprah* and *Larry King Live*, writes: “I still get panic attacks, if that’s the word, when I do speaking engagements. Sometimes these spells last a couple of days, sometimes only for a few hours. Sometimes it’s not bad at all, but I can get anxious just by talking about what I went through. ... I’d hoped the experience [of so many speaking engagements] would desensitize me, but all it did was wear me out. Sometimes when I’m done I tell myself I’m not doing it anymore.”

I have had that exact feeling many times over the years. I’ve had times after speaking when I have started the drive home, or to the hotel room, or to the airport, and suddenly been hit by the overwhelming sadness of it all, the desperate wish that my dad were still alive and I would never, ever have to talk about this again. I’ve felt that I couldn’t bear ever again to speak of this thing that has so broken my heart and is so painful to speak about and think about.

I think other members have had similar feelings about speaking

publicly. But we do it, despite the cost to us, because we believe it is the right thing to do and we believe that the voices of victims who oppose the death penalty are critically important to the national and international debate about the death penalty. Still, just because we feel compelled to do it, and choose to do it, does not mean it is ever easy.

Whether you’re the most experienced speaker or the person who is daring to speak out for the first time, the act of speaking publicly takes courage. Taking a stand against the death penalty, while done out of moral conviction, can still bring discomfort, sometimes from our own family members who may feel differently or just don’t want us to speak about something that is deeply painful and private to them too. Or we may worry about alienating those who have worked on solving or prosecuting the case. These are people we deeply don’t want to offend, and yet our speaking out can cause a rift in those relationships. It can also embolden people we don’t even know to say incredibly hurtful things. When my brother was speaking out against the effort to reinstate the death penalty in Massachusetts, someone actually had the gall to tell him he must not have loved our father. This may seem like a statement that is so appalling we should be able to brush it off, but it is like being punched in the stomach.

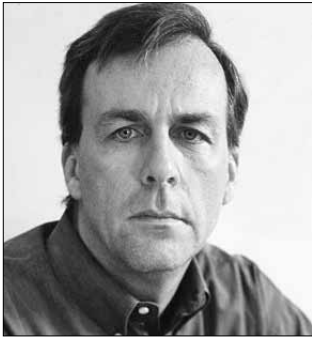
On the other side, well-intentioned abolitionists can also

make assumptions about victims’ family members who oppose the death penalty – such as the assumption that if you don’t want the death penalty, you have forgiven the killer, or killers, of your family members. Or that if you work to abolish the death penalty you must not still feel angry about the crime. Neither of these is true. Just because you oppose the death penalty does not mean you want to form a relationship with the murderer or be part of the defense team. Maybe you do, maybe you have questions only they can answer, or maybe you don’t. It shouldn’t automatically be assumed to be part of a victim’s anti-death penalty message.

And of course having the courage to speak as a family member of someone who has been executed has its own particular layers of pain and shame that rise up every time.

Victims’ family members who agree to speak, whether it is the first time or the thousandth time, are taking a piece of their agony and holding it up for strangers to see, with the hope that listeners will come to re-think their support of the death penalty, or re-examine their opinion that the death penalty is what society owes murder victims’ family members. Speaking publicly is a choice that these family members have made, but it is still one that should be recognized for the courage, strength, and love for our murdered family members that it takes. And for the toll, large or small, that it takes every time.

Message from the Executive Director



I've been thinking lately about my friend Celia McWee, who died on February 14th. No mother should have to experience the losses that Celia experienced. In 1979, her daughter Joyce was murdered in Florida. Fifteen years later, Celia watched

as her son Jerry was executed by the state of South Carolina.

Celia was an active member of several organizations, including MVFHR, and five years ago she helped us launch the No Silence, No Shame project, which focuses on how the death penalty harms families of those who are executed. At the ceremony and press conference that we held in Austin, Texas, Celia spoke about witnessing her son's execution. "I know that this experience has had a big effect on me," she said. "A huge effect. Some days I wonder about my ability to go on. But I have seen that many families of death row prisoners withdraw from everyone after the execution takes place. I know that I don't want to live it like that. I know that I want to help others who have gone through this. I know that we are stronger if we join together. 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."

Celia sometimes struggled to keep going, but ultimately she didn't want to withdraw; she wanted to help and she wanted to educate others about the impact of the death penalty. I think we all know the feeling of wanting to retreat or give up. Like Celia, we wonder about our ability to keep doing this painful work. But as Celia also knew, it's the joining together that makes it easier and makes a difference.

That's what Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights is about: joining together and helping each other so that we can keep going until the death penalty is abolished.

I know you share this vision and this commitment. Please show your support for our work by completing the form below or the enclosed return envelope and sending us your check today – or by donating online at www.mvfhr.org.

In gratitude and solidarity,

Renny Cushing

YES, I want to support the work of Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights. Enclosed is a check with my tax-deductible contribution of

\$250 \$100 \$50 \$25 Other amount \$ _____

Name: _____

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Visit our website, with its overview of our work and projects, news of our activities around the world, Gallery of Victims' Stories, summaries of our efforts in the areas of victims' rights and human rights, and all the issues of *Article 3!* www.mvfhr.org

And for regular news and statements from families of murder victims and families of the executed throughout the United States and around the world, visit "**For Victims, Against the Death Penalty**," named one of the top 50 human rights blogs of 2009. www.mvfhr.blogspot.com