ARTICLE 3

Murder Victims' Families for MVFHR 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

Newsletter 15 • Fall 2012/Winter 2013

After Repeal: Reflections from Victims' Families

"I knew it was going to happen. I just didn't know how long it would take."

Walt Everett started working for repeal of the death penalty a couple of years after his son Scott was murdered in Connecticut in 1987. He has put in long hours, like the time he stayed in the gallery at the Capitol building until 2:00 in the morning and then came back only a few hours later to participate in a press conference. He remembers disheartening occasions like the time the legislation came close but did not make it into law, but he says that he "went home committed to keep on working until we got to abolition."

Victims' family members with the Governor at the signing of Connecticut's repeal legislation

Finally, in April 2012, Walt was among the victims' family members watching Connecticut Governor Dannel Malloy sign the repeal legislation into law. He was elated to witness that moment after so much hard work.

Another long-time activist for repeal, Elizabeth Brancato, whose mother was murdered in 1979, felt the same way. "Being present at the governor's signing ceremony was definitely a significant day for me," she says. "I think it was only then that I actually believed it and understood I'd really helped to make this happen."

Victims' family members were crucial to the repeal effort in Connecticut, as many news stories and the Governor's own remarks make clear, and have been essential to the achievement of repeal in other states over the past few years as well. As we celebrate these hard-won accomplishments, we also want to offer some victims' reflections on the experience of working for repeal and on what victims may need, and feel, once repeal of the death penalty is achieved. What was it like, for example, to contribute painful personal stories to a strategic campaign? What happens after repeal, when

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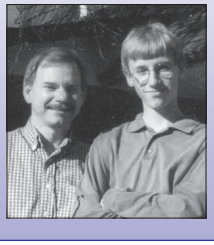

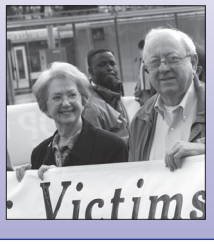

MVFHR
Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights

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.

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

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MVFHR is funded in part by The Atlantic Philanthropies.

In addition, MVFHR is the beneficiary of a grant from the European Instrument on Democracy and Human Rights. This newsletter has been produced with the financial assistance of the European Union. The contents of this document are the sole responsibility of MVFHR and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of the European Union.

Federal tax identification number: 11-3725424

After Repeal: Reflections from Victims' Families

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the death penalty is no longer a focal point?

Jeanne Bishop, a long-time activist in the Illinois repeal effort, remembers that after the governor signed the bill into law in 2010, her first thought was of her sister Nancy and brother-in-law Richard, who had been murdered twenty years before.

"The first thing I did after [the bill-signing ceremony] was over," Jeanne recalls, "was to go to their graves and say, 'We did this.' My way of marking the occasion was this very private and somber moment with the loved ones that I had lost. For me, the immediate aftermath was not so much a sense of celebration as a sense of: We did it. We accomplished this. We set out to do it in memory of our loved ones, and whether anybody else recognizes that that is who we had in our hearts as we were doing this work, that's the truth of it."

Indeed, the memory of their loved ones and a desire to honor them are what propel many victims' family members to work for repeal in the first place. "I was doing it for my son," says Vickye Coward, mother of 18-year-old Tyler, who was murdered in Connecticut in 2007. "His voice was taken away, and I realized that keeping my mouth shut and going into a shell was not going to help me. I wanted to speak out. I felt like, somebody took something from me and they didn't ask me, so now I've got to talk. And it's like Tyler was with me all the time. He was my force, like he was saying 'go get 'em, Mom.' "

Vickye gave media interviews and testified before lawmakers, and she says that "a lot of families of color said to me, 'I'm so glad that you're there and you're speaking out.' So I felt that I was representing other people who didn't feel able to speak out." It was also gratifying to Vickye when she felt that her words were having an impact. She remembers one Connecticut lawmaker who said, after having voted for repeal, that he had been affected by Vickye's and other victims' family members stories.

But speaking out can also take a toll. Elizabeth Brancato recalls, "Since I began working on repeal, I've found that I could not stop. Speaking my truth became a necessity for me. I've had periods where I wanted to stop, because it was so difficult, but I always came back because I couldn't do otherwise. Every time I speak, it sucks the life out of me and I need time to recover."

Jeanne Bishop agrees: "It does take a toll. You don't mind telling the story in service of a goal, but if you feel like there's anybody who's using your story for any other purpose – if there's any other agenda going on – that feels like a violation. There's a certain nakedness that you have when you're talking about

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something that precious to you, that painful. It's like pulling up a sleeve and displaying this awful scar, and you can see people reacting to it. Before and after I speak, I give myself a kind of space, for gathering strength and reflecting, and then I try not to just go back too quickly to normal life. You don't want to turn it on and off like a switch."

"Trusting your own voice to be received can take time and practice," observes Kristin Froehlich. Kristin, who is active in repeal efforts in her home state of Delaware, got involved in Connecticut's campaign because her brother David was murdered there in 1995. "I think it's important for campaign strategists to advise people about what messages are effective, and I also think that if somebody wants to say something that is meaningful to them, let them speak. We lose power if every victim says the same thing in the same way."

Jeanne Bishop observes that balancing campaign messages with victims' individual stories can be challenging. "It's difficult when others come in and say 'here are your talking points' or 'here is the letter we want you to sign.' It feels strange to have someone come in and try to put words in your mouth, particularly when you have been working on the issue for so long already. I do think it's very important to let us speak in our own voices and also to find out what work victims have already done and what relationships we have established with newspaper editors or lawmakers or other allies."

However passionate victims' family members are about abolishing the death penalty, they also know that their work on behalf of victims does not end with abolition. "I'm realizing that repealing the death penalty is just the beginning," says Elizabeth Brancato. "There is much more to be done in Connecticut to make sure victims get the help they need to put their lives back together as best they can." Since repeal campaigns often emphasize that money spent on the death penalty could be better spent on helping victims' family members, Elizabeth says she hopes Connecticut will now focus on that reallocation of funds.

Vickye Coward continues to devote herself to helping victims' family members in the aftermath of murder. She has been invited to assist with monthly meetings at the local police station, where detectives and victims' advocates meet with family members to hear their complaints and questions.

"One of the detectives asked me to be part of this group," Vickye explains. "She asked me to assist these families and help them know what to expect. For example, if there's a homicide, the city is supposed to pay for the funeral, but most people don't know that. There should be a list of resources available telling you everything you need to know, instead of just relying on word of mouth." Recently, Vickye was also invited to address students at a law enforcement training academy. "I spoke to them about my experience, and talked about how to notify victims' families – how to treat someone when you give them bad news. They listened and were very respectful; some were crying."

Kristin Froehlich reflects on the ways victims' family members may feel after working for repeal and then achieving it. "I think we're all really at the very beginning of looking at what victims need after repeal," she says. "Some may just want to rest or get on with the rest of life. Others may feel a loss because the work felt so meaningful and now they're no longer connecting with those people and those issues. Others might feel, 'We talked so much about victims' needs and now no one seems to be listening anymore.' And some might feel so charged up that now they want to go on to help another state abolish the death penalty."

Not long after Connecticut repealed its death penalty, Walt Everett was responding to invitations to speak as part of repeal efforts in other states. "I've half jokingly said to people that I've made a commitment not to die until we've abolished the death penalty in this country," he says, and although Connecticut holds a special place in his heart, he is determined not to let his work end there.

"I think there is this sense of, what do I do next?'" Jeanne Bishop speculates. "What is my next way of continuing to honor those loved ones that I lost? I think everybody finds their own way to do that. One way that abolitionists can stay in touch with victims even after repeal is to invite us to reach out to victims in other states. I would like to be able to say to other victims who are still working for repeal, 'How are you doing, how is the work going, what is it like for you?' And then to give the sense that you're not alone there as victims as you do this work, that we're standing with you."

Going Public After a Tragedy: Interview with Tom Mauser

Tom Mauser's 15-year-old son Daniel was one of the 13 people killed during the shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado in 1999. Tom has since become a well-known advocate against gun violence. His book *Walking in Daniel's Shoes: A Father's Journey Through Grief, Controversy, Activism, and Healing Following His Son's Death at Columbine* was published earlier this year. We spoke with Tom in August.

Since Columbine. you have committed yourself to working to prevent these kinds of tragedies, and you have become known for your dedication and advocacy. At the same time, you have been critical of the phrase "turning grief into action." What strikes you as wrong with that phrase?

It implies that you can erase grief or greatly dismiss it while doing something in your loved one's name, and while I think you can certainly turn grief into something else and make it a more positive experience, that doesn't mean that you erase the grief. It's still there. I think some people like to say "turning grief into action" because they want to think that all is well with you and wasn't it wonderful that you've been able to get over the grief? When in fact you didn't get over it, but you did find something you could do to help.

In your experience, where has that attitude come from?

From a variety of places. There's

Tom Mauser with Daniel

no one source. I use the metaphor of an earthquake and how close you are to the epicenter. Sometimes people who were affected by a tragedy but were not as close to the epicenter – like other people in our town, for example – might feel something like, 'This was a terrible thing for our community, but look how we've moved on from it." But it should also be OK if those of us at the epicenter are still having a tough time. On the other hand, I don't want people to think that most of us are just shuttered off in our homes and haven't come out yet. It's something in between. You take a little step at a time. But certainly for some of us, engaging in action, in advocacy, can he helpful.

You talk in the book about the impulse to stop this kind of tragedy from happening to other people. Where do you think that impulse comes from?

I don't know. It's a good question. To me it's just a natural human inclination, not to want others to suffer the way you have.

You have written, "Prior to Columbine, I considered myself a mild supporter of the death penalty – not liking it, but seeing it as somewhat as a deterrent. My reservations about the death penalty were mostly practical ones – for example, the fact that death sentence appeals cost taxpayers so much. Since Columbine, I have come to strongly oppose the death penalty." How did you come to change your mind?

I think it was the issue of closure. It was seeing other people who had lost loved ones to murder, seeing them in a similar situation, and realizing that there is no closure. There is dealing with grief and there is trying to find more peace, but closure isn't going to come easily and I certainly don't think it comes about through seeing someone else die.

You've been asked to comment in the wake of recent tragedies like the murders in Aurora, Colorado. How is it for you to be sought out and asked to offer a comment in these situations?

It's hard, of course, because another mass killing brings back memories for me. But because I've made myself a public person, I'm someone the media goes to. I don't like it, but I've learned to accept it. They ask, "If you could say something to the families of these

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victims, what would it be?" I have offered general comments: "Don't expect that you will all grieve in the same way. Your way might be different from others around you. Don't be afraid to go for counseling – we did it and it was helpful."

What helps, when advocacy work gets hard or exhausting?

Trying to have a balanced life. If I allowed myself to become *too* engaged in advocacy, I probably would have burned out. Still having my regular job has been important, although of course that adds a burden too, trying to juggle everything. And of course spending time with family helps, and the joy of the adoption that we went through, adding a child to our life. That's helped a lot.

We've been talking about some of the hard parts of public advocacy. What does it give you, or what do you get back from engaging in it?

For me the advocacy is very symbolic, because my son Daniel was on the debate team at Columbine High School. It's my way to walk in his shoes on this very important issue. It's speaking in his voice and trying to do something so that others don't go through what he went through.

But let me add that there is another side to it. My opponents can be very dismissive, saying, "Of course we understand that you're speaking out because of what happened to your son." As if I'm *only* doing this because of what happened to me personally. Whereas to me, honoring Daniel also means working so that others don't become victims. My feeling is that Daniel would appreciate that I have feelings for other victims, that my work isn't just about his death but is also about the thousands of other deaths from gun violence each year.

I constantly dealt with grieving Daniel's death. I didn't somehow "overcome" my grief in those early years. The best I could do was put it aside for periods of time. But I returned to it every time I was asked about Daniel by a reporter during an interview, every time I mentioned Daniel when giving a speech, every time I opened my wallet and saw Daniel's photograph, every time I walked by his room or saw his photo on the wall.

It was satisfying and heartening to hear people compliment me on the things I was doing in Daniel's name. But frankly the messages from other people that most resonated with me were those that so accurately reminded me of what I was dealing with every day, such as "There is no greater loss for a parent than losing one's child"; "No parents should ever outlive their child. No parents should ever have to bury their child. It's simply not the natural order of things"; "I can't imagine what I would do if I were to lose one of my children"; "You're having to bear an unimaginable pain."

These messages might seem overly somber, but they effectively served as a realistic reminder and acknowledgment of my pain, and assurance that it was okay to be in such anguish.

From *Walking in Daniel's Shoes*, by Tom Mauser. For more information, please visit www.danielmauser.com

The Myth of Closure: Interview with Jody Lynee Madeira

In 2009, *Article 3* interviewed Susan Bandes about her research into the idea that the death penalty provides closure to victims' families. Dr. Bandes said that emphasis on closure is actually a relatively recent phenomenon and that its rise may be partly attributed to repetition of the idea in media stories. In that same newsletter issue, we printed reflections from MVFHR members about what closure means and doesn't mean to them. Last year, *Article 3* interviewed Thomas Mowen and Ryan Schroeder about their research showing that as closure has become more common as a justification for the death penalty in the United States, victims' family members have also increasingly questioned and even rejected the idea – but news coverage doesn't accurately reflect this.

Continuing this series, we now interview Jody Lynee Madeira, whose book *Killing McVeigh: The Death Penalty and the Myth of Closure* has just been published.

Based on your interviews with victims and survivors, you're critical of the popular definition of "closure." How would you summarize that popular use of the word?

The idea that closure means it's over, it's done with, and you move on; the idea of closing the door on the terrible event and putting it forever behind you. I think the public finds that concept appealing because it feels like a happy ending, or at least a sense that things are wrapped up and we're off the hook and can stop paying attention to the story.

And then there is the specific idea that an execution is what can give victims' family members closure.

There too, if prosecutors say that an execution will give victims' family members closure, it's appealing because it's as if that will be the end of the story. And closure has come to be described as a right that victims' family members deserve and as an emotion that they can expect to have. But it's not always clear what closure is actually supposed to mean or to feel like. If we're going to do something as high-stakes as sentence someone to death based on a justification that is ambiguous – well, that's problematic. And then, what if murder victims' family members say that there's no such thing as closure, at least as it has come to be defined in popular culture? What happens then?

How did you become interested in interviewing survivors and family members of victims of the Oklahoma City bombing, in particular?

I first became interested in 2001, around the time of the execution of Timothy McVeigh. I was struck by the fact that 249 people witnessed this execution and there was so much discussion of it in the media. I was interested in that media circus, and I began to wonder what all of it meant. People would say that the execution did give closure, or it didn't, but I didn't see a lot of exploration of what closure actually meant. Did it mean "justice" or "finality" or "I don't have to deal with the criminal justice process any more" or "at last this guy is out of my life"? We didn't know, but meanwhile it was being offered as a justification.

I learned that the idea of "closure" only really started to be tied to the death penalty in the 1990s, so it's a relatively new development. I thought when I started this research that I would find a lot of information, a lot of psychological studies looking at closure, but nothing could have been farther from the truth. I found one paper by a journalist who spoke with other journalists who had witnessed an execution at San Quentin, and another study in which college students were asked if they would want to see the execution of a family member's murderer – it was a hypothetical question.

Meanwhile I saw that CNN and other news channels were interviewing victims' family members after McVeigh's execution and they were talking about what they did and didn't get from the experience. Some talked about wanting to look him in the eye, to have some kind of communication with him. Or to see him humbled and in pain. I thought to myself, "This is complex, and we don't talk about it very much, so would it be possible to ask people

directly?" I ended up doing face-to-face interviews with 13 people whose family members had been killed in the bombing and 20 who were survivors of the bombing themselves.

Can you give a quick sense of the kinds of things you found?

I found that it wasn't really so meaningful to ask people about what the execution, in isolation, had meant to them. It was necessary to explore and listen to people's whole stories, including whether they had attended or taken part in the trial, what they had thought about it, whether they had been involved in memorialization efforts or victim advocacy.

One thing I heard was that people tied the execution to the silencing of Timothy McVeigh. They said things like, "I wanted to see him silenced and I saw him silenced." Or, "Every time McVeigh gets in the media he's trying to hurt victims' families, and that's why he needs to die." I became interested in the sense that people felt they were trapped in a relationship with him, involuntarily, and they couldn't shake him loose – and that the media had a lot to do with that. I wondered, what if McVeigh had not been executed but the media coverage of him had quieted down, so that victims did not have to keep hearing him and seeing him?

You were against the death penalty before you began your research. What was it like to interview survivors and victims' family members who were in favor of the death penalty?

When you're talking with someone as an interviewer, you put your heart and soul into each interview. It wasn't difficult to speak with or listen to people who were pro-death penalty because of what they had gone through. I agonized over what they had gone through.

It's interesting that even though you reject the popular definition of closure, you didn't end up rejecting the word entirely, but instead chose to redefine it.

I do think that there's no such thing as closure as it is currently understood – that idea of moving on and forgetting and closing it up as if it never happened. As I have listened to murder victims' family members, I have heard pushback against that common understanding of the term, and I want to harness that pushback and help give voice to it.

One way to rethink the idea of closure is to think of it in terms of regaining control, regaining a voice. As a victim, you're tossed into a wildly disrupted story. Something terrible happened that you had no control over, and at first you have very little information, understanding, or power. And very little voice. What I learned from my interviewees is that you regain control by getting answers, by developing a story, and I actually think that we do the majority of that labor internally, although of course our internal processes are also very much affected by what goes on outside.

Some of the people I talked to had found value and meaning in talking with other murder victims' family members and recognizing that there is no one way to grieve. It's like they were giving themselves permission to grieve in their own ways and not give in to the expectation that you have to move on and get over it. But at the same time, they had found ways not to be stuck in any one moment, not to be stuck in the moment of the bombing, or the trial, or the execution. Some had helped with the planning of the Oklahoma City memorial, which was an example of taking on a positive project and not linking one's own recovery to what the criminal justice system did or didn't do, because that can crumble in an instant.

Of course, because having a voice is so important, I think prosecutors should allow anyone who wants to speak to speak, whether they're for or against the death penalty. And it's important for prosecutors to work with families, explain what is going on, help people prepare to hear or to give difficult testimony. But, as I've said, I think it's problematic to say that the law can provide closure in the sense of "this is the end of the story" or "now the victim is whole again."

Murder victims' family members say that nothing can ever make you whole again. You can develop some distance, some perspective; you can regain some control. But these steps forward are psychological and emotional and have to come from a person's interior. Outside developments such as media coverage and legal proceedings certainly are big influences, but can't provide "closure." It's what a family member does with them that counts.

MVFHR in Action

Highlights of MVFHR's work in recent months

Members of Montana Family and Friends of Homicide Victims stand together after a meeting where they were joined by MVFHR Executive Director Renny Cushing. During this visit to Montana in April, Renny Cushing also spoke at the Montana Abolition Coalition's annual summit and at several public events about the death penalty, and provided a training for the Montana Abolition Coalition board and staff about working with victims.

The following month, Renny Cushing and MVFHR Program Director Kate Lowenstein, along with Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation Executive Director Scott Bass, met with members of the Delaware Repeal Project to provide consultation about effective ways to reach out to victims' family members and families of people who have been executed.

In August, MVFHR presented two workshops at the National Organization for Victim Assistance conference in San Diego. Marie Verzulli and Renny Cushing presented "Working with Victims Who Oppose the Death Penalty," and Yolanda Littlejohn and Renny Cushing presented "Victims After Exoneration," which marked the public launch of MVFHR's project of the same name. The Victims After Exoneration project provides a support network for murder victims' families who have experienced the exoneration of the person who had been convicted of the crime. The project also advocates for victims who are in this situation, provides the victim perspective to national groups working to exonerate those who have been wrongly convicted, and urges victim organizations to understand and respect these particular victims' needs.

Participants in the Tenth General Assembly of the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty, held in Amman, Jordan in June. Renny Cushing represented MVFHR and led a workshop on working with murder victims' family members, Each year, the General Assembly offers a valuable opportunity for MVFHR to participate in discussions about the death penalty around the world; this year's panels included a discussion of the death penalty in the Middle East since the Arab Spring and an exploration of steps towards developing and adopting an Optional Protocol to the African Charter on Human Rights on abolition of the death penalty.

In Malaysia, MVFHR's Asia Program Director Toshi Kazama (right) with Member of Parliament Liew Chin Tong (center) and human rights lawyer Ngeow Chow Ying, holding a report that MVFHR prepared at the request of Justice and Law Minister Aziz about how various U.S. states have declared a moratorium on the death penalty. Toshi visited Singapore and Malaysia in July, at just the time that each country took steps to abolish mandatory death sentences for people convicted of drug trafficking. This was a follow-up to Toshi's successful visit to these countries last fall, when he gave several presentations and met with lawyers and public officials.

As part of the same trip, Toshi also represented MVFHR on a visit to Thailand, where his presentations were covered by television and print news, and where he was able to speak directly with members of Thailand's Ministry of Justice's death penalty study group.

Photo by Curtis McCarty

MVFHR members at the United Nations in Geneva two years ago. After a long effort, MVFHR was recently granted Special Consultative Status to the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the United Nations. We first applied for this status in 2008. After our application was blocked from coming to a vote at each annual session of the Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations because of objections from the Chinese government, we worked with our allies in the European Union and also our own U.S. delegation to the United Nations who, though supportive of the death penalty, recognized the legitimacy of MVFHR's voice. We are pleased that during the 2012 session, the Committee on NGOs recommended in our favor, and our status became official in July.

This formal designation gives MVFHR an opportunity to be an even stronger voice in the global debate about capital punishment and to influence the positions and the work of the United Nations. For example, we hope to organize a "side session" at the UN that will present voices of victims who oppose the death penalty. We also want to press for international recognition of the death penalty as an abuse of power, and for families of executed persons to be recognized as "victims" under the "Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power," an idea we first raised in our 2006 report *Creating More Victims: How Executions Hurt the Families Left Behind.*

We appreciate the recognition and the opportunities that come with the granting of Special Consultative Status, and we celebrate this milestone in MVFHR's organizational history.

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 NBC New York News, 5/14/12, "9/11 Husband Urges No Death Penalty":

… Blake Allison won one of 10 lottery tickets available for relatives of 9/11 victims who wanted to see their loved ones' accused killers formally arraigned on terrorism, conspiracy and other charges last weekend, reports the New York Post. His wife, Anna, was a software consultant en route to visit a client in Los Angeles and was on board American Airlines flight 11. She was 48.

Allison told friends and family he wanted to go to Guantanamo Bay to "see the faces of the people accused of murdering my wife," reports the Post. While there, the 62-year-old ended up meeting with the lawyers of the accused, offering to testify against the death penalty should a military commission convict them of capital charges, according to the paper.

The wine-company executive's staunch opposition to the death penalty predates his wife's death. Allison told the Post he believes the death penalty should be off the table in the 9/11 case, though he acknowledges his wife's relatives and the relatives of the other 9/11 victims who went to Guantanamo Bay disagree.

"They want what they perceive as justice for their loved ones," Allison said of the other families. "I would never tell anybody in my position what they should feel."

"The public needs to know there are family members out there who do not hold the view that these men should be put to death," he added.

From a column by Sarah Moses in the Mississippi Clarion-Ledger, 6/13/12:

… As news stories reported last week, the relatives of Henry "Curtis" Jackson's victims publicly appealed to the governor for clemency thus raising serious questions about our supposed commitment to victims. The courage of Regina Jackson and Glenda Kuyoro, Jackson's own sisters, is even more remarkable when you consider the gruesome facts of the crime: Regina was stabbed multiple times by her brother, and Henry murdered four of the women's children aged 2 to 5 and paralyzed another.

Despite their profound loss, the women pleaded with the governor not to add to their family's tragedy by allowing the state to kill their brother. As Regina wrote, "As a mother who lost two babies, all I'm asking is that you not make me go through the killing of my brother."

… Of course, one of the justifications that lawyers, legislators, and governors often offer in support of the death penalty is that it honors the victim's family. But organizations like Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights (MVFHR) have long pointed out that states and prosecutors are not as eager to honor victims' families when they oppose the death penalty, as seen in the Jackson case.

From a 7/25/12 NBC News story, "Tragedy Compounded," by JoNel Aleccia:

Last Friday, when [James] Holmes allegedly opened fire in a movie theater in Aurora, Colo., his parents, Robert and Arlene Holmes, were instantly thrust into a club that no one wants to join: family members of notorious killers. …

But a group organized on behalf of murder victims' families urges compassion and understanding for the families of murderers, too.

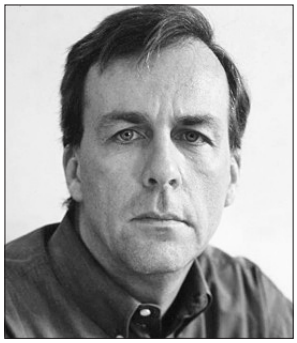
They suffer in a different way than those who lose loved ones to violence, said Renny Cushing, founder and executive director of Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights, or MVFHR, which has organized support sessions for killers' families.

"I became really painfully aware of the ostracism that takes place," said Cushing, whose father was murdered in 1988. "Immediately, there's this thought that families must have done something to cause this, that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

That's all too familiar to Robison, a retired third-grade teacher. Her son, Larry Keith Robison, was executed in 2000 in Texas for the grisly murders of give people, including an 11-year-old boy. He had been diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia at age 21, three years before the 1982 murders.

Though it's been nearly 30 years since the crime, Robison still clearly recalls the shock and horror of the early days -- and the reaction of some in the community of Burleson, Texas. Reporters surrounded her home; in ensuing months, some parents asked to have their children removed from her class. …

Message from the Executive Director



"You have made me challenge my assumptions about what victims of violent crime want. It was a real light bulb moment for me."

"I never considered a victim opposed to the death penalty. [This was] very useful information."

"Important information and perspective for advocates to consider so as to avoid marginalizing victims who hold this view."

These comments from participants in MVFHR's workshop at the National Organization for Victim Assistance conference this past August remind me of how crucial our voices are. Since MVFHR's founding, we have been bringing victims' perspective and experience to the death penalty abolition movement and bringing awareness of victim opposition to the death penalty to those who work as victims' advocates and victims' assistants. We have urged victims' advocates to recognize that they need to be ready to serve all victims, whatever their position on the death penalty. It hasn't always been an easy message to deliver or to receive, but we've kept at it, and these comments show we're being heard.

MVFHR is committed to challenging assumptions, inviting listeners to consider what they may never before have considered, and advocating for the unique voices of victims who oppose the death penalty. We don't give up, even when the work is hard or painful or frustrating. We believe in the incomparable power of our members' stories and of what we can achieve when we come together.

I know you share this commitment. You have seen what can happen when we raise up the voices of victims' family members, and you know how important it is to keep raising up those voices so that together we can end the death penalty and take better care of each other in the aftermath of homicide. **I know that we are all working for victims and against the death penalty, and I know I can count on you to support MVFHR. Please help us continue this vitally important work by sending your check today or donating online at www.mvfhr.org. We can't do it without you.**

In gratitude and solidarity,

Renny Cushing

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 $_____

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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**