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 8 • Spring/Summer 2009

Listening to Those Affected by Murder and the Death Penalty

"Losing a loved one through homicide is one of the most traumatic experiences that an individual can face; it is an event for which no one can adequately prepare, but which leaves in its wake tremendous emotional pain and upheaval," says a handout from the National Center for Victims of Crime. This is a succinct summary of the ongoing devastation of homicide, but sometimes it can be hard to see and feel all the individual experiences contained within a general statement like this one.

Listening to individuals talk about the specifics of their own experience shows how distinct, how deep, and how ongoing are the effects of murder on a surviving family. Writing about her own experience of losing her father to murder, MVFHR staff member Kate Lowenstein has put it this way: "The murder was not a single incident but a transforming of the soul, by agony, into a new and forever different form."

Photo by Scott Langley

Families of victims and families of the executed, affected by each other's stories, share a moment at the end of the "Prevention, Not Execution" event (see p. 8)

This issue of *Article 3* focuses on the effect of homicide, with detailed and reflective stories about the invisibility that a child felt after her mother's murder and the way that a father of a murder victim confounds others' expectations about how he should feel. This issue of the newsletter also focuses on the enduring and complicated effects of the death penalty on those who are closely involved with it – from families of the executed to, perhaps surprisingly, prosecuting attorneys. Running as a unifying theme throughout the stories and interviews is the power of listening as a way to achieve real and sustained change.

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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.

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 and the National Organization for Victim Assistance

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In a World Apart: How a Mother's Murder Affects a Child

From a longer essay by Oregon MVFHR member Suzy Klassen:

Within a Mennonite community in rural Indiana, I came home from school in 1969 and opened the door to our home to find my mother lying on the floor, dead. She had been the victim of a sexual attack, and had been brutally murdered. Raped, strangled, and shot four times by her assailant. My beautiful 41-year-old mother, naked and bruised, lying in blood with her bra tied around her neck.

There is a famous Norwegian painting by Edvard Munch entitled "The Scream." It is considered a symbolic portrayal of anguish, isolation, and fear. The first time I saw it I was flabbergasted. It was unbelievable how accurately someone had captured me at the moment of transformation from being an 11-year-old sixth grader to becoming the being in this painting. Finding Mom, I felt stunned into muteness by the magnitude and horrific detail of what I beheld, as if I'd been shot into another universe where "the scream" said it all. From that moment I would now live in a world where I would be constantly reminded that I had met evil face to face. A place where wishing to go home was an impossibility because that universe no longer existed. My home had always been Mom.

My oldest sister, Ruth, was 16 at the time, Frieda was 15, and Bess was 13. My father, my sisters, and I began living in a pain we couldn't believe existed. Mom's murderer was never caught, and from that point on I would always have three escape routes choreographed in my head in case the murderer returned.

Our father, a child psychiatrist and respected member of the community, began calling me Stone Face. It angered him to see the constant veneer of shock on my face. It angered him that a person with his training and experience was helpless to help us. Being a child psychiatrist, he felt he should be able to get us through this tragedy. Or that because he was the only parent left, we would naturally come to him for consolation and help.

But he, too, had his own unimaginable world of pain to live with, trying to hold it all together while continuing his work as medical director of Oaklawn Center. He had no real place to direct his anger, and he told me years later that all he really wished to do at that time was crawl under his desk. At night, if Dad was able

to fall asleep, he would wake thinking he'd heard a shotgun blast, and then be up pacing the in the house through the night, constantly checking on us. What he suffered as a husband and a parent was beyond words.

No one was ever caught, the investigation was hugely botched, and on the day of her murder, my father had been three hours away in a different state doing consultation work. When he did finally get home, I wouldn't let him go to our house. I would have done anything I was capable of to keep him from seeing Mom that way. He tried to tell me how he wanted to and felt he should, but out of respect for my feelings, he finally promised not to. I'm sure it was one of the hardest decisions of his life. I'm still thankful he made that choice.

Suzy Klassen as a child

Mom was killed on Friday. On Sunday we returned to our house with bullet holes in the floor and fingerprint powder on the walls and counters. The funeral was on Monday, and we were sent back to school on Tuesday. This was done because dad felt it was important to show the community we could go on, that we could function despite our tragedy. We needed to be an example of strength.

I went back to school. My sixth grade teacher was clearly lost about what to say, what to do, or how to relate to me. So without a word, he simply laid the missed assignments on my desk and walked away. It was the first of what seemed like a lifetime of similar experiences. There was a huge distance between me and my classmates, who stopped talking to me out of the awkwardness of not knowing what to say or how to be around me. Sometimes adults were so uncomfortable being around me, they just didn't attempt anything. Others might explain to me that mom's death was the Lord's will, or say something which made no sense, like, she's in a better place now. Or I would come into somebody's radar and be identified as one of Otto Klassen's daughters, and inevitably the question came: Were you the one who found your mother? And then there were some who felt it their duty to tell me what to do with my life, adding that it's what your mother would have wanted.

Now, I'm able to recognize that these statements are sometimes spoken to end an awkward silence, or as a way for people to set boundaries for themselves to rationalize the horror. But as a child, those words and actions felt like an erasure of mom's being, and I didn't know how to respond.

The isolation from others made me feel invisible, and being invisible became so familiar that I accepted it as the zone in which I could function. When someone smiled, it often startled me; it meant I'd been seen. Invisibility in all situations was the closest I could get to anything resembling security.

and today, with sons Dylan and Zach

This sort of worked until I entered junior high. I still sought to be invisible, but I learned that it's more painful being pointed at for being a loner, than attaching yourself to a group. I did the minimum necessary to get by, but it required an enormous amount of energy, and sometimes the divide in our emotional maturity was too much. I couldn't believe how girls my age could take for granted all that they had – a living mother at home. Against society's values for what my projected development should have been, I would always be way behind, or emotionally way ahead. There was no place to fit in and be who I honestly was – a kid whose mother was tragically murdered, living in a world apart.

Listening for a Change: The Texas After Violence Project

Through listening to subjective, first-person narratives of experiences, the Texas After Violence Project, founded in 2007, seeks to understand the deep and extensive effects of violent crime and capital punishment and to engage communities in thinking collectively, critically, and constructively about our responses to violence. We spoke with Virginia Raymond, project director, and Walter Long, counsel to the project, in February.

Why a project that focuses on interviewing and listening?

Virginia Raymond: Thinking about the death penalty has gotten stagnant and polarized, to a certain extent. People tend to talk about it in ideological terms: I'm for it or I'm against it. It's not a kind of conversation that allows much room for understanding.


Photo by Dolores Carrillo García

What our project does is attempt to listen to the experiences behind people's opinions. We need to allow experiences to challenge and complicate our ideologies. If you only talk ideology, the conversation becomes a stand-off. Listening to stories, people's actual experiences, opens the way for dialogue.

So, through the interviews we're hearing the stories of family members of murder victims and family members of people who have been executed. Second, we're trying to get a fuller picture of the effects of the death penalty on everybody, and this includes first responders – emergency medical personnel, police officers, sheriffs – all the way through to people who work in the prisons and are connected to the process of executions.

This is a project that we hope will shake people from their certainties and lead us to a deeper dialogue about how to better prevent violence and how to deal with violence when it does happen. We're not an advocacy project, although it's certainly no secret that the two of us and other people associated with the project have worked against the death penalty in various forms. But we're not afraid of hearing other perspectives, especially when they come from experiences.

Walter Long: My own perception of the death penalty is that it's a policy that creates an enormous amount of trauma. I'm trying to find out if there's some legal norm that could be identified that sets the limits on the amount of trauma that can be caused by government. One of the things I've been looking at recently is that the torture convention, and other laws dealing with torture, define torture not only in terms of *physical* harm committed intentionally against someone by a government actor, but also in terms of *emotional* harm. There's an affective element to the definition of torture. So where does the death penalty fall within that? To look at that we have to have evidence of how the death penalty affects people. Through the project we're collecting some amazing stories that certainly record that.


Photo by Sabina Hinz-Folek

My interest is then to look at this in terms of policy and to try to identify some ways out of this violence that we're committing against ourselves. I'm interested in trying to help the discussion move towards finding a legal and policy position that's acceptable to everyone. For example, I can imagine that victims' advocates may feel that they're not heard by abolitionists who are just saying, "The death penalty's wrong, get rid of it." I certainly want to change that, if possible. There's no solution to the level of violence in our society, whether committed by individuals or the government, until we all come together and find it together.

You said something about shaking people from their certainties – what's an example of that?

VR: One of them is the idea of sides. We have now interviewed four law enforcement officials, and I have been very moved by those interviews because they were not at all what I expected. We found much more ambivalence about the death penalty and much more trauma and hurt. I think we're breaking up the idea of us and them or the idea that there are just two sides to the issue. I

talked to someone whose sibling, a correctional officer, was murdered; it was striking to hear about the range of views and reactions within that one family. Some of the stories are from people who have made up their minds, but a lot are not about "for or against," just about people's experiences, and hearing of a whole set of tragedies.

What kinds of things have you specifically learned from victims' families or families of the executed?

VR: In listening to families of murder victims, I'm hearing about the devastation that the murder has wreaked on the family not just in terms of the loss of one beloved person but in terms of the ongoing effects on the children, spouse, siblings, and the effect of continued state intervention into the family's lives – all of the different repercussions of having someone murdered.

WL: I talked to a mother who told me that she attempted to commit suicide when her son had an execution date. There's a story that didn't make the papers. In a nutshell it shows the web of emotional relationships within which we all dwell and the emotional effect on someone who's very close to a person subject to extreme violence. There are quite a few stories of that nature that we're collecting.

What are the political or policy implications of listening?

VR: It's a lot harder to demonize people after you have listened closely to them. The venom with which these debates have been carried on in the Texas legislatures up to now, not just in the hearing rooms but also in the hallways, is just staggering. The political implications of listening to each other are huge; we may not agree, we may come out with different conclusions, but the tone of the discussion changes and we will likely come out a lot closer.

WL: I think listening is itself the practice of nonviolence. My hope is that the project can be a model that might be imitated in the broader political sphere.

There's a story about a town in Italy that was besieged by a wolf; the wolf would come in at night at pick off somebody from the streets and eat them. The town was at a loss about what to do about this violence. The town leaders heard about this guy who talked to animals so they got in touch with St. Francis and asked him if he'd come and try to do something about this. He said he'd come and try to talk to the wolf and listen to him. He did that and came back into the town to deliver his conclusion, which was, "You need to feed your wolf." So from then on the townsfolk would put out leftovers on their doorstep every night and the wolf would come in the middle of the night, eat the leftovers and leave, and no one suffered any more attacks.

I think that's a very strong story conveying the power of listening, the importance of hearing everyone's perspective and coming to a solution that is beneficial for all.

VR: A listening project is not the same thing as a decision-making project, so our goals within the project itself will be making some of the material available as and to the extent that the individuals decide. Of course, I have a vision of a world where violence is nipped in the bud and we don't even get to the issue of the death penalty. But I think it's extremely important that the project not be agenda-driven.

WL: I agree with that, though I certainly sounded agenda-driven earlier in this conversation. I do think it's important and helpful to think about how what we're finding through the interviews is related to policy, and to talk about that. But whatever talking we do about that isn't meant to be preemptive; it's meant to be a dialogue.

VR: I guess we do honestly believe somewhere deep that if people knew everything about the death penalty, they would probably choose not to use it. So in that sense, yes, we are looking for social change. That's the double meaning of our project's phrase, "listening for a change." But we're looking to have that change come about in a different way than some of us are used to.

WL: The name of our organization really encapsulates that desire for social change. "Texas After Violence Project" looks back to the acts of violence that individuals have committed and the government's violent responses. Deeply listening to persons affected by both, the project looks forward to the building and sustaining of a less violent, more just, state in the future.

Finding Common Ground

Rachel Hardesty has created a Listening Project with death penalty workers in Oregon and serves as an assistant professor specializing in Restorative Justice. The piece below is an adaptation of a talk that she gave at this year's National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty conference.

After listening closely to the death penalty debate in commutation hearings, public forums, courtrooms, and classrooms, I decided to adopt the conflict resolution frame and embarked on a project in Oregon to identify the stakeholders in our death penalty scheme and listen to their reasons for their positions to see if common ground could be identified.

Photo by Scott Langley

The listening project has included execution team members, defense attorneys, judges, prosecutors, victims' families, homicide detectives, and parole board members. I will focus here on the stories that emerged from my encounters with prosecutors, who unlike corrections personnel are impacted directly not only by their pursuit of the death penalty but also by the crimes and the experience of the victims.

Without exception, these men had visited the crime scenes and had seen the state of the victim's body first hand. Each one had worked closely with local detectives to reconstruct the experience of the victim and the events of his or her death and each one had stories to tell.

In interview after interview I listened to men struggle to find the vocabulary to communicate the horror and anguish they supposed must have been the experience of the victim, describing their own helplessness, outrage, and fear in the face of such remorseless violence. Over and over again, I heard these men relate how they had had no strong feelings about the death penalty until they were exposed to this or that crime scene.

Prosecutors are uniquely positioned in the death penalty sequence. They alone are required to enter into the experience of death suffered by the victim as they represent that person to jurors. Perhaps it becomes difficult then to imagine other ways to avenge that murder or other ways to channel the visceral disgust and outrage that they feel.

Prosecutors may develop a personal interest in sentencing outcomes related to their feelings about the crime. Victims' families who don't support the death penalty may challenge prosecutors who then feel frustrated and thwarted. I wonder if some of the ways that we hear about anti-death penalty victims' families being treated comes from this inner conflict rather than from a commitment to a professional mission. My sense is that prosecutors feel that they're representing the community, and in particular the victim's family, and if the victims then separate themselves from the prosecutor's direction, it undermines the prosecutor's credibility. They can't say that the sentence is for the victims; they no longer have that vindication for seeking the ultimate punishment. I imagine this is very unsettling.

The range of people who are deeply personally affected by the issue of the death penalty is much greater than we may initially assume. What I found was that once I embraced the prosecutors' stories, I did not lose my own commitment to abolition, but instead became a more credible and sympathetic listener to supporters of the death penalty. We recognized and share the same problem. What is different is our solution to the problem.

While the abolition movement ignores these very strong forces that are the interests underpinning support of the death penalty and does not engage with supporters to solve these problems and reach out to *all* victims of these crimes, I believe the debate will rage on. Our society will continue with the superficial palliative that the death penalty undoubtedly is, along with its immense collateral damage, and new victims will continue to be made. We may win small battles, but we will not win the war while we adhere to a win-lose metaphor for the conflict.

Our opportunity is to facilitate a shared solution in which we are all winners on the same side devoting our resources to creating a society in which these crimes occur with increasing rarity. I believe we can collaboratively engage in seeking an alternative that defines our humanity, builds justice, and supports peace.

Expectations

MVFHR member Gregory Gibson is the author of the book Gone Boy: A Walkabout.

Seventeen years ago my son Galen was murdered in the school shooting at Simon's Rock College in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. The anniversary of that event is for me an occasion to ponder the astonishing nature of a universe that could take our brave, resilient, beautiful boy and leave us with Wayne Lo, his murderer, who snapped and broke all those years ago.

Wayne writes to me a few times a year, usually with a small check that I deposit in the Galen Gibson Scholarship Trust. He earns the money by selling his artwork on the internet. This made the news for a moment in the spring of 2007 when a zealous fellow down in Houston coined the term "murderabilia" and decided to crack down on its sale.

Media people contacted me about this, expecting some juicy outrage from me. I opined that donating money to a scholarship fund was one of the few ways that Wayne Lo, locked in prison for the rest of his life, could try to atone for what he'd done. Society, I told them, has been very efficient about punishment, but backward about reconciliation and rehabilitation. This was not the answer they wanted to hear, so it didn't get much play.

In various ways over the years I've heard a lot about what I ought to be doing and feeling, and I am often confronted by people who expect me to feel a certain way when, in fact, I do not feel that way at all. I know that the media people who contacted me about the "murderabilia" story probably thought they were taking care to get the victim's side, to let the victim's feelings be heard. I happened to confound those expectations because I saw the matter another way.

I never expected to have a murdered son, and much that has happened since that time has surprised me and, I'm sure, surprised others. I've learned that you can't predict how a survivor will respond and you can't substitute a generalization for any one person's specific and distinct experience. There are those who expect you to be "over it" after whatever amount of time seems right to them – six months, a year, six years. There are those who become so emotional themselves that you end up trying to reassure them, when what you really want to do is run in the other direction.

Much of the time, I realize that what I'm really dealing with are people's own fears or their overwhelming desire to normalize what for them must be an unthinkable situation. They wonder what we all wonder: "How did this happen?" There's an old concept that says if you have bad luck you must somehow have earned it. Maybe seeing it that way helps other people deal with their fears and feel a sense of control in what is otherwise a random, unpredictable universe in which what happened to our family could happen to anyone.

We confound expectations by not supporting the death penalty, too. I remember the shocked looks I would get when the topic of the death penalty came up and I said I didn't think that would help us. Over the years, though, people have become less surprised by our response. When I say, "If we killed him, where would that get us," or when my wife says, "Why should he get out of it when we're still here dealing with it?", these days people seem to understand where we're coming from.

But here's the other thing: I'm sure there was a point in my journey when I would gladly have applied the death penalty to Wayne Lo myself. But you move through that; your thought process changes and your perception changes. This whole question of confounding expectations isn't just about other people; you find that your own internal expectations are continually being overturned too. In large measure, that's what my book *Gone Boy* is about. Maybe our awareness of external expectations ends up heightening our awareness of our own internal process. In the end, that's what's most important anyway.

There are endless branches on this journey, and no two people's experiences are ever the same. If I meet someone who expects me to act or react or feel in a way that I don't, ultimately what is there to do but try to be honest with them, and keep moving on? If I've learned anything over the past seventeen years, it is simply to follow my heart, regardless of the expectations that surround me.

MVFHR in Action

A sampling of MVFHR's work in recent months

Giving Testimony

This past season saw a great deal of legislative activity regarding the death penalty in several states around the U.S., and MVFHR members testified against reinstatement in Alaska and for repeal in Illinois, Montana, New Hampshire, Maryland, Connecticut, and Colorado.

In February, new MVFHR member Marty Price joined others in testifying in Maryland. Marty's father was convicted of the murders of Marty's stepmother and stepsister. In his testimony, Marty said, "There were times when my own anger got the best of me and I felt like I, myself, could have delivered the lethal injection into the man who caused so much pain in my life. But that man is my father and I love him. … I am opposed to capital punishment and I urge you to repeal the death penalty in the state of Maryland. Our judicial system has many perspectives to consider when rendering a verdict…and yet it still cannot fully capture the residual effects. More violence is more violence, no matter who or what issues it."

Also in February, Gail Rice represented MVFHR at a hearing on a bill that would repeal Colorado's death penalty and divert the funds to the solving of cold cases. Gail's brother, Bruce VanderJagt, a police officer, was killed in Colorado in 1997. In Gail's testimony, she said, "My husband, Bob, and I were devastated by the murder. A great and heroic policeman was gone. His loving wife, Anna, and his daughter, Hayley, almost three at the time, faced a lifetime without him. All of us – Anna, Hayley, and I – have needed professional counseling to get through this tragedy. … Many politicians fight for the death penalty because they think that victim family members want it and need it. But I represent hundreds of murder victim family members across the country who do NOT want the death penalty."

In March, MVFHR members Art Laffin, Antoinette Bosco, and Walt Everett presented testimony at a Connecticut hearing. Here's an excerpt from Art's testimony:

"Nine years ago my younger brother, Paul, was murdered in Hartford, Connecticut. On September 20, 1999, as Paul was leaving Mercy, Housing and Shelter where he had worked for ten years, he was stabbed to death by a mentally ill homeless man, Dennis Soutar, who often frequented the soup kitchen at the Shelter. My family and I were consumed with a sorrow that defies words. I still can't believe what happened to my kid brother. … There are many people who believe that we have to kill the murderer in order to bring closure for the victim's family. I believe that killing people who kill will never bring true closure and healing."

Prevention, Not Execution Project

In October MVFHR, in collaboration with the National Alliance on Mental Illness, held an event in San Antonio, Texas that marked the official launch of the Prevention, Not Execution Project, which focuses on opposing the death penalty for people with mental illness. Families of victims killed by someone suffering from mental illness and families of people with men-

Photo by Scott Langley

As other participants in the "Prevention, Not Execution" project watch, Julie Nelson places a rose in memory of her father, George Arthur Nelson, who was shot to death in California by a Vietnam veteran who had chronic schizophrenia.

tal illness who have been executed traveled from Florida, Georgia, Tennessee, North Carolina, California, Maine, Massachusetts, and elsewhere in Texas. The family members gathered for a private exchange of stories and then a press conference and public remembrance ceremony.

In his concluding remarks at the press conference, California member Nick Wilcox said, "As the father of a daughter murdered by a mentally ill man, I am here today as witness to this project. My wife and I are joining other families whose loved ones have been killed. We are standing together to say that prevention, not execution, is how we honor our loved ones' lives." Texas member Lois Robison's remarks ended with this: "When I was invited by MVFHR and NAMI to participate in the project that we are embarking on today, I said, 'I've been waiting 25 years for this.' I have been waiting for people to come together and say that the death penalty is not the answer to the problem of untreated mental illness in our country."

Photo by Scott Langley

Stan Allridge (second from right) with others on a march in Texas

International Work

MVFHR continued to work with the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty and the Asian Death Penalty Abolition Network, and in November several MVFHR members spoke in Italy and Spain at the Community of Sant'Egidio's "Cities for Life - Cities Against the Death Penalty" events. We worked with the international human rights group WITNESS to post videos of MVFHR member testimony on The Hub, a site through which human rights activists can share video and audio material, and on World Day Against the Death Penalty, video testimony from MVFHR members was featured on the site's front page.

In November, MVFHR director Renny Cushing joined representatives from other U.S. groups in briefing delegates from members of the European Union about the U.S. death penalty abolition movement. This briefing, held at the French Embassy in Washington, DC, was the first of its kind, and for many of the delegates it was their first occasion of learning about victim opposition to the death penalty.

Also this fall, Amnesty International in London contacted MVFHR about an upcoming press conference and series of educational events that their Caribbean Team was organizing in Jamaica, for which they hoped to find someone who could speak about losing a family member to execution. MVFHR member Stanley Allridge, whose two brothers were executed in Texas, traveled to Jamaica to speak at a press conference, to high school and law school students, at a community forum, and in several media interviews.

Information Clearinghouse

Responding to requests for information and referrals is always a big part of MVFHR's work, and over the last few months we've responded to inquiries from a Japanese news organization, a French documentary journalist, a Boston Globe writer now working on a book about Massachusetts victim's family member Bob Curley's change of heart regarding the death penalty, and an array of other journalists, students, and researchers. We contributed material to Amnesty International's death penalty "Campaigning Toolkit" (in the section "Do executions really provide justice to victims of crime and their families?") and to Human Rights Watch's new report, "Mixed Results: U.S. Policy and International Standards on the Rights and Interests of Victims of Crime. "

Victim Opposition to the Death Penalty in the News

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

From the Keene (NH) Sentinel, 2/12/09: Kirk Simoneau said he was standing just feet away when a drunken driver hit and killed his father. "If I could have, in the moments after my father's death, killed the woman who caused my father's death, I would have," he said. "And that's why I stand opposed, because in considered reason, in tempered thought, we do the right thing. In sudden emotion, we do the wrong thing."

*From the Great Falls (MT) Tribune, 2/4//09: "*You could be killing people for the rest of my life and it wouldn't compensate for the loss of my little girl," [Marietta Jaeger Lane] said. "All it really does is make another victim."

From Renny Cushing/MVFHR's letter in the Nassau (The Bahamas) Tribune, 12/16/08: I share the grief, outrage, and desire for recognition felt by the victims' family members who marched in the streets last month. Where we differ, however, is in regard to whether the death penalty is the best way to address our pain, our loss, and the injustices we have experienced.

From Bonnita Spikes's letter in the Maryland Gazette, 10/23/08: I work with homicide survivors, particularly within black communities in Maryland where nearly 80 percent of state murders occur. The notion of a death sentence for their loved one's murderer isn't even a remote thought for these families. They are struggling to hold their low-income households together, to help their families grieve and survive the trauma one day at a time. Most have no insurance and are [in] dire need of support and traumatic grief counseling.

From the Japanese Daily Yomiuri, December 2008: "Although I had no intention of forgiving him, I wanted him to live and continue conveying his atonement with all his heart," Masaharu Harada said. "My mind changed as I became aware that nothing worthwhile could come from his execution." In 2007, Harada founded an organization to encourage dialogue between crime victims and imprisoned criminals.

From the Montgomery (AL) Advertiser, 11/10/08: Before a quiet audience Shirley Cochran recalled the day she found out her first husband was murdered. She remembers wanting his killer to die. But years later she would marry her new husband, James Bo Cochran. Her new husband spent 19 years and four months on death row before being exonerated for the murder that sent him there. She remembers wanting him to live. "The death penalty should not be," Cochran said shaking her head. "I know that if it was someone in your family, you wouldn't want it to happen."

From the Jamaica Observer, 1/18/09: Beverly Bennett, the mother of the slain student, told the Sunday Observer that last Christmas was very hard to deal with as the excruciating memories came flooding back. ... But despite the agony of losing a daughter and sister, Morris' relatives are not bitter at the man who slaughtered their loved one. According to Bennett, she does not support the death penalty. "The child is already gone. It (the death penalty) cannot replace your loved one. It is just time that will heal it," Bennett said.

From the Nashua (NH) Telegraph, 9/28/08: "Too often we hear that the death penalty is a quick way to give solace to victims," she said. "But I think the needs of victims are complex and many." Carol Stamatakis said her father was shot and killed about 10 years ago ... She said what's needed are more resources and support for victims and investigators.

From In the Fray magazine, 2/3/09: Having to wait for your son to be executed is "horrible, because you know it is coming, but you don't know when," said Celia McWee, whose son, Jerry, was executed 14 years after her daughter, Joyce, was murdered by Joyce's husband on December 31, 1980. "[My daughter's murder] was a shock, but [it was] nothing compared to the death penalty hanging over your head for 13 years," she said.

Help Us Continue the Conversation!


Photo by Scott Langley

Some time ago I was about to testify against the death penalty before a group of lawmakers. As I was waiting my turn, I listened to a man who was testifying before me. I listened to him talk about how, when he was 14, he saw his own parents murdered right before his eyes. Of course that was excruciating for him, and the pain didn't end quickly; he told the lawmakers that many years later, when his first child was born, he felt his parents' brutal absence all over again. As I listened to him, I wasn't thinking about political strategy – I was remembering the day my own daughter was born in the same hospital where my father's body had been taken after he was murdered.

That man was testifying in favor of the death penalty, and I was there to testify against it, but for just a moment, as I listened, I had more in common with him than I had with anyone else in the room.

As the stories in this issue of *Article 3* demonstrate so vividly, the effects of murder and the death penalty are deeper and farther reaching than most people can truly imagine until they listen closely, with an open mind and heart, to the experiences of those who have been directly affected. And as the stories here also make so clear, we need to listen deeply even to those who hold a different position on the death penalty, and we all need to figure out ways to work toward genuinely shared solutions.

This is a big dream and a big task, and we're not afraid to undertake it. Each day at MVFHR we work to create and spread the word about new ways to – as the Texas After Violence Project puts it in these pages – build a less violent and more just world. But to achieve this tremendous dream, we urgently need your support. Financial contributions from our members and friends help us all keep working in the ways that are so badly needed. Won't you please help us to raise an additional $5,000 now so we can spread our voices even further and bring our dream of eradicating the death penalty closer to reality?

Please help by completing the form below or the enclosed return envelope and sending us your check today.

In gratitude and solidarity,

Renny Cushing

Renny Cushing
Executive Director

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: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State:_____ Zip: _____

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To donate with a credit card, please visit our website, www.murdervictimsfamilies.org

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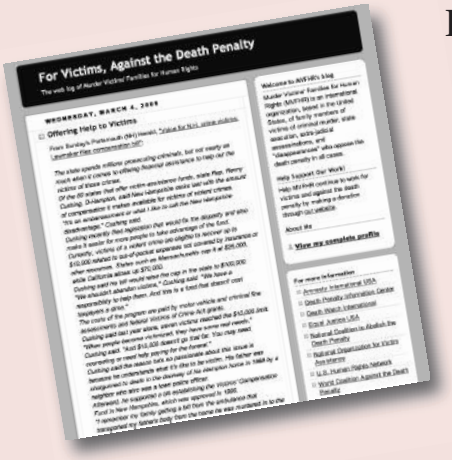
One of the top 50 Human Rights Blogs!



In January, e-justice selected MVFHR's blog, "**For Victims, Against the Death Penalty,**" as one of the top 50 human rights blogs. Come visit us at http://www.mvfhr.blogspot.com for news, updates, stories, and statements from families of murder victims and families of the executed throughout the United States and around the world. Checking the blog regularly will let you know how MVFHR and its members are making a difference week after week – and be sure to browse the archives, too!

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