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Bearing witness to the end

Feelings forged in a grieving father's effort to forgive one killer fuel a friendship with another

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Twenty years ago, Tom Fewel's 8-year-old daughter was abducted on the way to her Chapel Hill school. A professor found her hanged from a tree at a nearby biological reserve.

Ten years later, still struggling with his loss, Fewel of Chapel Hill began corresponding with Steven Van McHone, imprisoned on North Carolina's death row for killing his mother and stepfather. Fewel says McHone helped him move closer to forgiving his daughter's killer, and so he worked to try to save McHone's life.

Despite pleas by Fewel and others, Gov. Mike Easley refused last week to commute McHone's sentence to life in prison without parole. Several relatives said they lived in fear of McHone even with him behind bars and wanted his sentence carried out.

At 2 a.m. Friday, McHone, 35, was executed. At McHone's request, Fewel witnessed his death by lethal injection. Now, Fewel is mourning a killer who helped him better understand forgiveness.

"I know something about grief," Fewel, 59, said Friday afternoon. "I know I will deal with this better as time goes on. But right now, I'm just very sad."

The death of Jean Kar-Har Fewel on a January day in 1985 shocked Chapel Hill. Parents who had normally let their sons and daughters walk alone to school started going with them. Jean, an orphan from Hong Kong, had lived with Fewel and his wife, Joy Wood, for about a year, and the couple was in the process of adopting her. Her death left them bereft.

Fewel and his wife oppose the death penalty and had asked the jury to spare the life of George Richard Fisher for the attempted rape, kidnapping and murder of their daughter. Fisher, 56, is serving a life sentence.

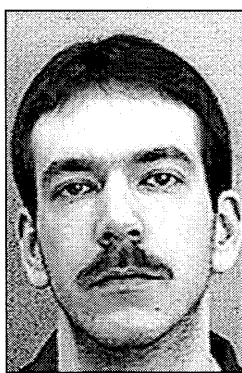
"Even though Joy and I did not want Jean's killer to receive the death penalty, that doesn't mean I had forgiven him," Fewel said in an interview early last week.

In 1995, Fewel's need to forgive Jean's killer led him to reach out to another one.

He had heard a fellow member of Olin T. Binkley Memorial Baptist Church in Chapel Hill discuss her experience visiting and writing to a death row inmate. After the talk, People of Faith Against the Death Penalty had letters from inmates seeking pen pals.

Fewel and McHone were unlikely pen pals, let alone friends.

McHone had been sentenced to death for the 1990 shooting of his mother, Mildred Adams, and stepfather, Wesley Adams Sr., in Surry County.



Steven Van McHone, 35, was executed early Friday.

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Fewel was seeking insight into two issues: his inability to forgive Fisher, which he felt was separating him from God, and a sense of powerlessness to stop the death penalty.

Fewel remembers that McHone's letter was well-written; his penmanship good. And so Fewel began to write to McHone. Within a few months, Fewel was visiting McHone. They would talk about the murders, the grief, forgiveness. They also talked about art, books and Carolina basketball.

"He is a very personable guy," Fewel said Friday afternoon. He then paused, catching himself. "I'm still talking about him in the present tense."

Art of making friends

In the course of their friendship, McHone gave Fewel three pieces of his artwork, a watercolor and two drawings. Fewel featured the art in a brochure that he handed out about McHone's clemency petition. The pieces are framed and displayed in Fewel's Chapel Hill home.

"I wanted people to see that and know something else about him," Fewel said.

Fewel also wants people to know that McHone's defense lawyer, who did little investigation before trial, was later disbarred for wrongdoing in an unrelated case. The prosecutor, who withheld from the defense attorneys witness statements and a 911 tape, later resigned to avoid unrelated criminal charges, Fewel said. Fewel said McHone was too drunk to form the intent to kill that is a requirement for a first-degree murder conviction.

Prosecutors say McHone received a fair trial. He confessed to the killings, threatened to kill other relatives and was sober enough to find weapons, reload them and hit his targets.

Fewel said he saw McHone's remorse deepen and his acceptance of responsibility grow over the years. When they started meeting, Fewel said McHone would say, "When my crime was committed."

That eventually changed to, "When I killed my parents."

Watching that progression helped Fewel better understand forgiveness, which for him means to release his anger and hate over his daughter's murder.

In a letter Oct. 27 to Easley, Fewel wrote, "Through our conversations, I've learned lessons about grief and guilt that I can apply to how I deal with Jean's murder. I have come to believe that forgiveness may be as simple, and as difficult, as praying that the peace of God will be with her murderer."

Fewel is now able to pray that Fisher finds God's peace. He is not done with struggling to forgive Fisher.

"I'm still not sure I'm through with that issue in my life," Fewel said. "But I've come a long way, and Steve has helped me."

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