



home : durham county : story

calendar | classifieds | cars | real estate | jobs | shopping | movies

Local News

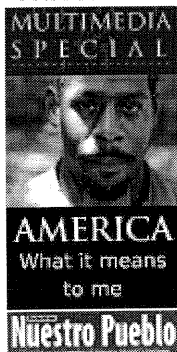
- Durham
- Orange
- Granville
- Person
- Chatham

Sections

- Nation/World
- State
- Sports
- Business
- Weather
- Opinion
- Technology
- Health/Med
- Arts & Features
- Fun & Games
- Gallery
- Religion

Resources

- Hot Topics
- Archives
- My ClipFile
- Traffic
- Air Travel
- Maps
- VoteBook



Comment on this story

Subscribe to The Herald-Sun

<< save to my clipfile >> | << e-mail this article >> | << printer-friendly version >>

Death penalty foes bring grieving families together

BY VIRGINIA BRIDGES : The Herald-Sun
vbridges@heraldsun.com; 419-6648
Dec 7, 2003 : 12:06 am ET

DURHAM -- In an attempt to bridge the grief between those who've lost loved ones to murder and those who've lost loved ones to the death penalty, the "walking wounded" spent a morning together Saturday.

There was a Chapel Hill father who lost his daughter after George Fisher lured her into his car, raped her and left her hanging from a branch in 1985. There was a sister from Kinston who lost her brother to a state needle after he was sentenced to death for the 1992 murder of Billy White. There was an Asheville daughter who lost both of her parents in 1975 after two men broke into their family home in Virginia, spraying bullets.

And there were lawyers, counselors who work with death-row inmates and others who spent their Saturday listening, talking, and wiping tears at the Eno River Universalist Fellowship off Garrett Road as the Capital Restorative Justice Project presented a conference titled "Restorative Justice and the Death Penalty: Exploring the Human Costs."

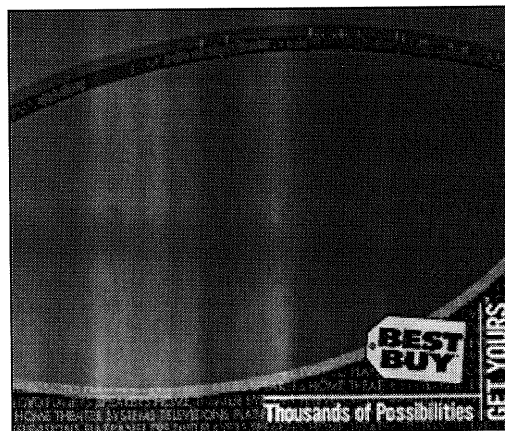
'Like a battlefield'

The conference began with Cindy Adcock, who is a Duke law professor, director of the Duke Death Penalty Clinic and an attorney who has represented inmates on the state's death row since 1993. She described events that culminated one year ago.

Ernest Basden was sentenced to death for firing a shotgun twice at Billy White, a Kinston insurance agent, in a 1992 plot that involved two other conspirators, including White's wife.

While in jail, Basden sobered up, returned to his religious roots and became a liturgist for the religious community, said Adcock, who has lost three clients to the death penalty and is working with three more. While in jail, Basden also became an advocate for the abolition of the death penalty.

Family members and defense attorneys gave the governor petitions and a videotape that indicated six jurors said they would have opted for life without parole, rather than the death penalty, if that sentence had been available. The Legislature has since approved the option of life without parole for first-degree murder cases.



Cus
Cor
Obi
Ann
Adv

Vis
2
B
Z
w
h

H
T
SM

approved the option of life without parole for first degree murder cases.

Nevertheless, in December 2002, friends and family members made their way to Central Prison, spending Basden's last hours with him, talking, laughing, crying and hugging, she said.

"Ernest would be executed at 2 a.m., Dec. 6, 2002," said Adcock, describing the images of the moment.

"These images were like a battlefield," she said. "There were the dead and the walking wounded."

'Regard for life'

Adcock said she woke up the next morning and decided to make something positive of the situation.

And that is how Tom Fewel of Chapel Hill ended up standing in front of about 90 conference participants Saturday, talking about Jean, the 7-year-old child he and his wife adopted from a Hong Kong orphanage for unwed mothers in 1976.

"Everyone Jean had known very well was a child, and she had to learn that people stop growing," Fewel said, describing a girl who had to learn a new language and a new culture. "One evening we realized she was anxious about what we would do when Joy and I outgrew the house."

One Wednesday in 1985, Jean left for school and didn't come back, Fewel said.

"While walking to school that morning, Jean was attracted to George Fisher's parked car," Fewel said. Fisher kidnapped her and took her about four miles from their home. She was found later that morning, raped and murdered, he said.

Fisher was sentenced to life in prison for murder, 40 years for first degree kidnapping and 20 years for attempted kidnapping.

Fewel testified during the sentencing phase and expressed his opposition to the death penalty.

He said people ask him if that means he has forgiven Fisher.

"I have been told by some who disagree with me about the death penalty that I love my daughter's murderer more than I love her. How misguided," he said. "I hope I have more regard for life than did my daughter's murderer. I hope that all of us do, regardless of our opinions about the death penalty."

Mutual tragedy

After Fewel and three other members of murder victims' families spoke, the participants went into small-group sessions to discuss their feelings and reactions to the conversation about the devastation murder brings to victims' families.

"The groups are talking about what are their reactions -- what can be done to support them," said Jennifer Sikes, a member of the organizing committee of the conference, which was co-sponsored by area churches and other groups opposed to the death penalty.

Sikes said the conference was organized to help bridge the understanding of mutual tragedy between the executeds' and the victims' families.

Gerda Stein, who works at the Center for Death Penalty Litigation, said the judicial system is clearly adversarial, and it does not promote healing for anybody.

Others at the conference said the state should end the death penalty and use the money that goes to the lengthy appeals process to help those who are challenged with poverty, mental illness and other social inequities.

A contrary view

John Hood, president of the John Locke Foundation, a conservative think tank in Raleigh, said in a telephone interview after the conference that there sweeping generalizations are often made about the death penalty, and that it is important not to judge its role through a few examples of how it hurt or helped victims' families.

The death penalty is not about revenge or deterrence, but "justice itself," Hood said, adding that it is important to note that some believe allowing those who commit murders to live would be acting unjustly.

He also said that if those found guilty of capital murder spend their lives in prison, then the potential exists for an escape or a murder of another inmate.

'His life had worth'

After the small-group sessions and a lunch where WRAL anchor David Crabtree spoke, another panel of four sat before the group.

The panel included a friend, a sister, a niece, and a daughter of men who have been put to death by the state.

Rose Clark, Basden's sister, choked on her emotion as she described the pain of losing her brother.

"As I reflect back, I wonder who do I need to forgive," she said. She listed judges, prosecutors and investigating agents who she said didn't handle her brother's case properly and went after him because he didn't have money or influence.

She said Basden was under the influence of drugs and alcohol, given to him by another conspirator, and couldn't remember the murder that he confessed to. Then she described the people Basden helped in prison. "The death penalty reaches so much farther than we can comprehend," she said, adding that it has created a system which leaves people with resentment and hate. "I miss Ernest terribly. His life had worth."

Other members of the panel included Basden's 19-year-old niece, Sonya Clark. Sonya Clark said she met Basden when she was 11 years old.

"He was just a man behind a glass," she said. But he became a man she joked around with and got to know and love, and now she speaks against the death penalty that took him from her, she said.

Cissy McKissick, who teaches at a Wake County public school for elementary school-age children with behavioral problems, spoke of the two friendships she made with death row inmates through letters and visitation

She described Desmond Carter, who was executed on Dec. 10, 2002, as a father who struggled to explain to his child that he would be put to death. She said he was painted by the media as a criminal, yet the public didn't get the chance to see the Carter she grew to care for and learn from through her correspondence

grew to care for and learn from through her correspondence.

"So, I guess, I am to stand up to who they were as human beings," McKissick said.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.

 [Comment on this story](#)

[Subscribe to](#) **The Herald-Sun**

[« save to my clipfile »](#) | [« e-mail this article »](#) | [« printer-friendly version »](#)

[:: privacy statement ::](#) | [© 2003 The Durham Herald Company](#) | [terms of use ::](#)

