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Kinston woman crusades against death penalty

December 07, 2003
Mark Lineberger
Staff Writer

By 2:17 a.m Friday, Robbie James Lyons' heart stopped beating and he became the 30th convicted killer executed in North Carolina since 1984. His victims' families made no bones about it -they wanted him dead, they wanted closure.

But Kinston resident Rose Clark thinks closure is an impossibility for the family of victims and those who die for their crimes. She knows what she's talking about. Her brother, Earnest Basden, was executed last year for a murder-for-hire scheme that took the life of a Kinston insurance salesman in 1993. Clark's eyes still water when she talks about her brother's death.

Clark believes the death penalty causes more harm than good, not just for the families of the condemned, but for the families of victims as well.

"Executions won't bring back their loved ones, Clark said. "They just create more pain and suffering and can tear families and communities apart.

Since her brother's death, Clark has become actively engaged in the fight for a moratorium on the death penalty. On Saturday, exactly one year to the day of her brother's execution, Clark was to address nearly 90 people assembled in Durham for a day-long workshop held by the Capital Restorative Justice Program, a relatively new organization that seeks to eliminate the death penalty.

Clark said the conference would bring together the families of both victims and killers, to talk, understand and hopefully explore the possibility of justice and healing.

Her daughter was also on the list of speakers.

Sonya Clark has fought the death penalty side by side with her mother.

Clark said Sonya was very close to her uncle and often visited him while they waited for the end to come.

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The death penalty has weighed heavily on Cindy Adcock, a law professor who was one of Basden's lawyers in the failed efforts to save his life. She founded the Capital Restorative Justice Project after Basden's execution. Adcock also had become close with Basden. He was the third inmate she tried in vain to save.

"There are ... no winners with the death penalty, Adcock said. "Just a lot of pain.

Adcock hoped that Saturday's forum would give people a chance to share ideas and express their opinions.

"I'd like to see people come out of the conference with a new energy and strategies for getting a moratorium, Adcock said.

In the meantime, Clark said, she plans to continue the fight for others. She can fire off a barrage of arguments against the death penalty with a palpable sincerity.

Among them, she says, it's cheaper to house an inmate for life than to execute, once the costs for the years of court battles a death sentence automatically spawns are calculated.

She also thinks the way capital cases are prosecuted needs a serious tune-up.

"Once they have a suspect, the prosecution concentrates on building a case no matter what instead of finding the truth, Clark said. She pointed to two other conspirators in the crime for which her brother was executed. Both received lighter sentences.

And perhaps her biggest concern about the death penalty is what she sees as the inequities inherent in the current system. She believes it is the poor and uneducated who are put to death.

"There's just too much of a chance for too many innocent people to be put to death, Clark said.

Clark knows her brother is gone. But she hopes that by spreading ideas and spurring others into action, the end of the capital punishment will be one step closer.

Mark Lineberger can be reached at (252)527-3191 Ext. 251 or Mark_Lineberger@link.freedom.com.

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