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## Walk on Saturday to stop executions

*By: Azim Khamisa*

This Saturday, a crowd will gather outside the San Diego Hall of Justice to urge District Attorney Bonnie Dumanis to stop seeking death sentences in our county. This event will mark the beginning of an 800-mile Walk to Stop Executions, which will travel throughout the state of California to make the same plea to district attorneys in other counties. This is a journey in which all San Diegans should participate, whether in body or in spirit.

My own journey in opposition to the death penalty began in 1995, when my son Tariq, then 19, was shot and fatally wounded by 14-year-old Tony Hicks. Tony became the first juvenile in California to be tried as an adult, and was sentenced to 25 years to life.

After my son's murder, I decided to become an enemy not of his killer, but of the forces that put him on that dark street holding a handgun. I reached out to Tony's grandfather, Ples Felix, and we have worked together ever since to break the epidemic of youth violence. Tony now writes letters from prison that we use in our programs -- letters that have had a positive effect on other young children. If California had punished Tony by executing him, both his life and the effect of his message would have been lost.

All of us, as San Diegans, Californians and Americans, created the society that made both Tariq and Tony into victims. We must take responsibility for our creation. Instead of breaking the cycle of violence, the death penalty perpetuates it, both by committing more killing and by draining resources that could be used to help our children find hope and move away from violence. Maintaining the death penalty has been estimated to cost Californians more than \$100 million every year over and above the other costs of our criminal justice system. Wouldn't this money be better spent on providing after-school activities for our children, and educating them on the alternatives to violence?

I know from experience that the journey from tragedy to forgiveness can be long and difficult. But I have also found that it is necessary, both for the individual and for our society as a whole. I encourage all members of our community to join in this effort to walk away from violence and turn our attention to the pressing problems that make our children into victims of society, and of each other. Please join me, and all of those participating in the Walk to Stop Executions, in asking our district attorney to stop seeking death sentences in our county.

*Azim Khamisa is founder and chairman of the Tariq Khamisa Foundation, a San Diego-based nonprofit organization dedicated to breaking the epidemic of youth violence. Among other activities, he speaks to elementary and middle school children about gangs, violence, revenge and the importance of becoming "peacemakers."*