

CCV Year-End News 2011

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california
Crime Victims
for **Alternatives**
to the Death Penalty

Inside this issue:

The challenging journey from a death penalty proponent to outspoken advocate 1

Role of murder victim family members vital to new SAFE CA ballot initiative 2

A new face: Deldelp Medina explains why she got involved in effort to end the death penalty 2

Room for varied perspectives—a reflection on four years as CCV’s Outreach Coordinator 3

A year-end review of CCV successes 4

An unexpected journey: Mother of wrongfully convicted young man becomes a death penalty

If you ask Orange County resident Ronnie Sandoval what she thinks about the death penalty, she will likely give you an earful about the failures and injustices of our criminal justice system. Yet just 15 years ago, her response would have been significantly different. Ronnie would have told you that she firmly believed it helped ensure our public safety, that people who murdered, tortured, or raped people deserved to die. Never did Ronnie anticipate that she would one day become an ardent advocate in the fight to end the death penalty.

For much of her life, Ronnie believed that we had a perfect criminal justice system. She had plans to go to law school, get a job in the district attorney’s office, and become a well-known prosecutor. Then, her life was flipped upside down. She received a phone call from the police, telling her that Arthur, her 16-year-old son, had been arrested for 12 armed robberies. “The walls just came crashing down,” said Ronnie. “I knew he was innocent, we had the records to show he was in school at the time. But the police and district attorneys just didn’t care.”

Arthur was wrongfully convicted and sentenced to 12 years in prison. “That’s when I found out we had enormous flaws in our system. I understood maybe there was 1% that would fall through the cracks, but through Arthur’s experience, it’s a lot more than that. They aren’t cracks,

they are gaping holes,” Ronnie explained.

After he was convicted, Ronnie worked tirelessly to free her son. She reached out to every organization and media outlet she could think of. After months of nobody listening or paying attention, a reporter from the LA Times called. Somebody



had finally taken interest in her son’s story. Together, they exposed the inconsistencies in the case, and eventually helped land Arthur a proper defense team.

In August of 2000, Ronnie got a phone call from Theo Lacy Jail in Orange telling her to pick up her son. Finally, after two years of trying to prove his innocence, they had succeeded. The district attorney’s office had decided not to oppose Arthur’s appeal. As Ronnie walked into the jail, a guard said, “Ms. Carmona, there’s

your son, are you ready?” She pushed through the doors, grabbed Arthur, and ran out the building. As they made their way through the crowd of media, Ronnie told her son, “Don’t look back, because we’re never coming back here.”

“I couldn’t believe we had finally freed him, it felt like a dream. I never stopped thinking that maybe it was too good to be true, that one day they would come and take Arthur away from me again,” said Ronnie. Arthur also had difficulty transitioning back into society. He soon, however, found a new purpose in advocating for the

(Continued on pg. 3)

Deldelp Medina joins CCV as Northern California Outreach Coordinator



Deldelp Medina is a murder victim family member who has been dedicated to bringing an end to the death penalty. As a bilingual and bicultural woman, she has spent the last ten years working with the Latino community in the arts, humanities, non-profit, and social justice issues. Working with CCV has brought for her to forefront and solidified for her the need for criminal justice reform. Upon meeting fellow murder victim family members, she was struck by the similarities family members share no matter how personal their stories are.

We know that Deldelp will help us reach out to the Latino communities in California who want a new friend in a time of need. Her goal is to help them share their stories and experiences in a healing way, that ensures safety and justice for all California.

If you or a family member want be involved in your community on this issue let us know. You too can make a difference in California. Let's work together to ensure that the 46% of unsolved murders and 56% of rapes currently not solved every year are solved.

SAFE California Campaign features voices of victim family members

In late October, history was made in California. Across the state, law enforcement officials, murder victim family members, exonorees, and concerned citizens gathered to announce the official launch of the SAFE California Campaign, and the very first supporters signed the petition that will end the death penalty in California.

SAFE California (Savings, Accountability, and Full Enforcement for California) is a ballot initiative which will, after gathering the necessary 504,760 signatures, place a measure on the ballot to let voters decide to replace the death penalty with life in prison without possibility of parole. The measure will also create a \$100 million SAFE California Fund that will provide local law enforcement with money to investigate the unacceptably high numbers of unsolved murders and rapes. It also requires that inmates work in prison and pay money into the victim compensation fund which provides victims with counseling, medical expenses, and other needed services.

At the press conferences held in San Francisco, San Jose, Los Angeles, and San Diego, murder victim family members criticized the death penalty as a harmful system to those who have experienced the pain of losing a loved one. "It takes money away from the community without giving anything back," said Lorrain Taylor, who lost her twin sons to gun violence in 2000. Instead, family members echoed the idea that the money spent on the death penalty could be used to create violence prevention programs, hire more police officers, and fund education.

Californians last voted on whether to have a death penalty in 1976. At the time, little was known about the enormous

amount of resources it would consume. Since the death penalty was reinstated, Californians have spent over \$4 billion on 13 executions. It is anticipated that over the next five years, the death penalty will cost the state an additional \$1 billion.

While California is struggling to fund basic programs such as

education and public safety, the death penalty has continued to siphon away money. Campaign manager Natasha Minsker thinks that voters are ready to do away with the costly system, "Californians are ready for the SAFE California Act because now they realize we have wasted literally billions of dollars on a failed death penalty system. It's time to take our resources and put them instead toward public safety."



As Californians prepare to make this choice, it is crucial that the voices of murder victim family members who oppose the death penalty are heard. Focus groups have shown that the stories of

victim family members are among the most powerful and influential in making a decision on the death penalty. Therefore, CCV has joined the broad coalition that supports the campaign. Not only is it important that voters hear why our supporters oppose the death penalty, but that they also understand that California is failing to meet the needs of victims. CCV is hopeful that this campaign will be able to create a new discussion on how to best serve those who have lost loved ones to violent crime, and be able to allocate additional funding to meet those needs.

The campaign will have until March to gather the required signatures in order to qualify for the ballot. If you are interested in learning more about the campaign, visit www.safecalifornia.org, www.facebook.com/safecalifornia, or follow on Twitter @SAFECalifornia.

Room for varied perspectives of murder victim family members



By Judy Kerr

In October 2007, I joined California Crime Victims for Alternatives to the Death Penalty as the Outreach Coordinator. Over the past four years, I watched CCV grow from a fledgling group with a few ardent supporters to nearly 1000 murder victim family members. CCV has become a recognized voice in death penalty and victim rights issues, and is now a key ally in the SAFE California campaign to replace

the death penalty in our state.

I have learned much through my work with murder victim family members throughout the state. Paramount among the messages that I have heard is that there will never be a right way to feel about the death penalty. As the survivor of a violent loss, there is no right way to feel about convicted killers. There is no right way to feel about murder. It is precisely because the death penalty is so emotionally charged that we, as murder victim family members who intimately understand the range of emotions, have such an important role in this campaign.

We each have our own personal experience of rage, or need for revenge, or for forgiveness, or of confusion about all of these. Yet through all of this, we raise our voices to the public to tell our truth. No matter where we stand on the death penalty, it is clear that the death penalty does nothing to serve victims. In fact, as we can share from each of our varied perspectives, the death penalty harms us as victims.

The range of emotions from victims around the death penalty was brought home to me recently when I attended an advanced screening of a documentary film by Werner Herzog. "Into the Abyss" is a startling and blunt film that explores the death pen-

alty from interviews of victims' family members, perpetrators, executioners, clergy, and community leaders.

After the screening, I discussed the impact of the film and the portrayal of the individuals involved with a few death penalty activists. When the conversation shifted to Herzog's interview with the family member of the murder victims, I found myself reminding those with me that there will never be a "right way" for murder victim family members to feel after the horrifying loss of loved ones to unspeakable violence. I can understand the confusion in this woman's voice as she shares the story of her mother's murder with Herzog. I understand her rage as I have felt it myself. I understand her deep emotional longing, both initially and years later as it becomes ingrained by the learned expectation that execution equals justice.

When I honor my emotions by allowing them to stand as emotions and turn to reasoned thinking about what makes sense for policy, I am left with the fact that the death penalty harms victims. It will never serve victims to base our criminal justice policy in the emotional reaction of victims because of the range of emotions within the victim's community.

I am comforted and not the least deterred by the fact that many victim family members support the death penalty. An equal or greater number oppose or are confused by by state sponsored killing. I deeply appreciate the position of California Crime Victims for Alternatives to the Death Penalty leaving room for the full range of emotion and opinions from anyone whose life has been changed forever by violence

There will never be a right way to feel about murder but, with SAFE California and with the work of CCV, there is a right way forward for criminal justice policy that pays attention to the needs of victims and surviving family members.

I am looking forward with my heart and with my head to our continued success in 2012.

(cont. from pg. 1)

wrongfully convicted. He and Ronnie traveled throughout the state speaking to audiences about his experience. He testified several times before the California legislature promoting bills that would prevent the injustice that he had faced from happening to others.

Through their work, Arthur also brought his mother to the realization that just like innocent people were being incarcerated, innocent people were likely being executed as well. Arthur had been researching how many people the state may have executed that were innocent, and had begun speaking out about the death penalty as well. "Arthur really changed my mind," said Ronnie, "he knew what was going on and wanted to change it. And he asked me to help."

In February 2008, just eight years after being released from prison, Arthur was murdered at a party. He was just 26 years old. Ronnie's biggest fear of losing Arthur again had come

true, although not the way she imagined. After all Arthur had gone through, it seemed especially unfair that he would become a victim of violence. The person responsible was sentenced to six years in prison for hit-and-run, but only served 10 months.

Ronnie, through her grief, has decided to continue the work that Arthur believed in so much: fighting for the wrongfully convicted and advocating for an end to the death penalty. It isn't easy. Each time Ronnie speaks, it brings back painful memories of her sons senseless murder. But it also provides some comfort, knowing that this was what Arthur believed in. "It was the right thing to do, to pick up the torch and keep moving. It has been hard, because it is so personal now, but it is the right thing to do."



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www.californiacrimevictims.org to sign up!**

California Crime Victims for Alternatives to the Death Penalty (CCV) is a coalition of murder victim family members who support alternatives to the death penalty. After the horrifying loss of a loved one to homicide, they are left with a clear awareness that the death penalty fails to address the needs of victims on many counts. The coalition does not endorse any specific reason for opposing the death penalty, but supports all families in telling their stories and educates the public about alternatives to the death penalty. CCV can also direct families to available support and resources regardless of their views on the death penalty or whether the perpetrator has been apprehended.

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Year of success and change for CCV

CCV has gone through some significant changes this year, along with accomplishing many goals. Throughout the year, CCV has seen its membership rapidly grow to about 700 murder victim family members and crime victims that support our message. CCV supporters also spoke at schools, faith communities, colleges, and in front of legislative bodies to make sure that our message is heard.

In July, Aarti Kelapure departed to pursue a masters degree at NYU. Her work and dedication in building this organization was amazing, and made it an easy transition when I took over in mid-July. We also transitioned our Northern California Outreach Coordinator from Judy Kerr to Deldelp Medina. Judy has been one of the main faces of CCV for many years, and we thank her for her countless contributions and wish her luck as she begins her new job. We are also excited to have Deldelp join our team, she will be a great addition to the CCV staff!

During the month of August, CCV was busy working with Senator Loni Hancock to pass SB 490, a bill that would have put the death penalty on the November ballot. Our supporters met with representatives across the state, sharing their concerns about why the death penalty does not meet victim needs. CCV supporters also lobbied at the State Capitol and spoke in front of the Assembly Public Safety and Appropriations committees, and at a joint informational hearing. Many thanks to those who took time off to help us in that effort!

At the end of October, CCV held a workshop for those interested in becoming more involved with CCV and the SAFE California Campaign. Murder Victim Family Members from around the state gathered in San Francisco to discuss the best ways to share their story and learn how to change the dialogue around the death penalty. CCV hopes to continue providing workshops throughout the coming year.

If you are interested in finding new ways to get involved with CCV and spreading the message that the death penalty is not serving victims' families, please contact me. The work of our supporters is instrumental in this cause, and your voices are truly the ones that change hearts and minds.

As we head into the new year, I want to thank you all for your continued support. I am honored to be a part of this group and to get to know each of you. Next year will bring even more successes as we work to finally end of the death penalty in California, and I look forward to sharing those moments with you.

Wishing you a happy holiday season,



Chelsea Bond
Program Coordinator