

We should be devoted to ending injustice, not ending more lives

By Naomi White and Derrel Myers

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Twelve years ago, our 23-year-old son was murdered. Today, we are attending a national gathering with other family members of murder victims working to end a different kind of killing: the death penalty. We can think of no better way to honor our son's life.

On the evening of Jan. 19, 1996, our only child, Joshua "JoJo" White, was driving home from work at Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Academic Middle School in San Francisco where he counseled and tutored troubled adolescents. At 16th and Carolina streets, an agitated youth confronted JoJo and his three friends. JoJo and his friends tried to reassure the young man, but he pulled a gun from his coat and fired into the car. JoJo's last words before the fatal shot was fired were, "Peace brother, one love." The bullet pierced his heart and he died within seconds in the arms of his friend Equipto.

During his life, JoJo had developed an empathy with troubled youngsters. It grew from his own experiences in the playgrounds and classrooms of San Francisco. At age 12 he was diagnosed with dyslexia and was placed in special education classes with other "problem" children. Being a typically competitive adolescent he was at first angered and shamed to be considered part of society's lesser achievers. But it was in those classrooms that his most important education began. He learned from the inside how it felt to be looked down upon by others. Over the following years, JoJo saw how devastating poverty, inequality and violence can be to young hearts and tender egos. He saw that many of these children were being tracked into a wasteland of disrespect, despair, drugs, violence and prison. He saw these problems and wanted to be part of the solution. But sadly, he became one of the many victims of this system.

We don't know who killed our son; there's no name, no fingerprints, not even a clear description since it happened so fast in the dim light of evening. But we do know why he died. And we do know that the young man who killed him was as much a product of our society as the gun he used. Having lost our only child to murder and having lived with that horror for 12 years, we deeply understand the heartbreak and even the rage of others who have experienced similar loss. We hear their cries for justice. We, too, want justice, but a justice that excludes vengeance, more killing - and more injustice.

On Jan. 10, the California Commission on the Fair Administration of Justice, which is charged with making recommendations on how we can improve our criminal justice system, began a three-hearing investigation into the death penalty. The hearing exposed deep racial and ethnic inequalities in the death penalty system that will take millions of dollars to address - on top of the millions it already costs to maintain the broken process. How much better would it be to use that money to help at-risk youth, to solve the countless murders that go unsolved, to provide grief counseling for the loved ones of murder victims? The millions of dollars that are wasted on the death penalty each year could be better spent on programs that actually help prevent crime and offer positive alternatives to youth. We seek a justice that changes the social and economic conditions that foster violence.

Today, in San Jose, we are attending the annual conference of the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty. We are meeting with other parents who have buried children, other survivors of murder victims. We have different stories and come from different walks of life, but we are united by a common goal: ending the killing, in the name of justice.

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