

# CCV Summer News 2008

June 15, 2008

### Special points of interest:

- Murder victims' family members testify before California Commission on the Fair Administration of Justice
- CCV attends the Annual Victims March at the State Capitol

## Murder Victims' Family Members Testify at Death Penalty Hearings

Earlier this year, the *California Commission on the Fair Administration of Justice (CCFAJ)* held three hearings on California's broken death penalty. The Commission is tasked with recommending reforms for the many problems that plague California's death penalty.



Aundré Herron testifies in January in Sacramento

Commissioners that when a county District Attorney decides to seek a death sentence, cuts have to be made elsewhere in their budget.

Aundré Herron, whose brother Danny was murdered, Lorrain Taylor whose twin son's Albade and Obadiah were murdered, Judy Kerr, whose brother Bob was murdered, Greg Wilhoit, whose wife was murdered, and Janis Gay whose grandfather was executed, gave further riveting testimony at the first hearing.

Family members Aba Gayle and Vera Ramirez-Crutchter told their moving stories to Commissioners at the second hearing, held in Los Angeles on February 20<sup>th</sup>.

The hearing on March 28, 2008 was the third and final hearing on the death penalty by CCFAJ. At this hearing, several murder victims' family members were allotted official speaking time, while victim family members Melissa Broome, Dawn Spears, Barbara McNab, and Mary Kay Raftery all spoke during the public comment period providing moving testimony for the Commission members.

*(Death Penalty Hearings continued on page 3)*

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CCV members presented powerful testimony at all three hearings, raising many serious questions about California's death penalty, including its cost and whether funds could be better used elsewhere.

At the first hearing, held in Sacramento on January 10<sup>th</sup>, Amanda and Nick Wilcox, whose 19 year-old daughter Laura was murdered in 2001, told the Commission that funding for grief counseling services ran out well before they were ready to end the sessions. They reminded the

## 19th Annual Victims March on the State Capitol Steps in Sacramento

Each April since 1981, the Office for Victims of Crime has helped lead communities throughout the country in their observances of National Crime Victims' Rights Week (NCVRW). Rallies, candlelight vigils, and a host of commemorative activities are held each year to promote victims' rights and to honor crime victims and those who advocate on their behalf.

As part of NCVRW, California Crime Victims for Alternatives to the Death Penalty joined hundreds of crime victims on April 16, 2008 for the 19<sup>th</sup> Annual Victims March in Sacramento on the West Steps of the State Capitol. This year's theme was "Justice for Victims, Jus-



Family and friends remember their loved ones at the 19th Annual Victims March in Sacramento

stice for All." The day included dispensing information about CCV and alternatives to the death penalty followed by a beautiful program filled with songs and speakers.

Aarti Kelapure and Judy Kerr spent the day at the CCV table and talked with numerous crime victims and murder victim family members who were at the rally. Many of those who stopped to talk were encouraged to know that others shared their opposition to the death penalty. The membership list for CCV grew by over 20% in a single day as support for death penalty abolition continues to gain ground across the state.

*(Victims March continued on page 3)*

## New Film "Love Lived on Death Row" Documents Four Siblings' Path to Forgiveness

When the four Syriani siblings were just children, their father was sentenced to death for the murder of their mother. The children, including ten-year old John who had witnessed the crime, testified against their father during the trial.

For fourteen years, the Syriani children grew up without a mother and without knowing their father. In 2004, they decided to visit their father, Elias Syriani, on North Carolina's death row. They did not know what to expect, but hoped for answers in order to move on with their adult lives. To their surprise, this visit would be the first of many visits and the beginning of their journey toward reconciling with their father.

In the film *Love Lived on Death Row*, filmmaker

Linda Booker chronicles the growing relationship between the children and Elias and their pursuit for their father's clemency, including public appearances on television and a meeting with the governor. Despite these efforts, the governor denied clemency and Elias Syriani was executed in November 2005, leaving the Syriani sibling without a mother or a father.

*Love Lived on Death Row's* portrays the Syrianis as murder victim family members and family members of the executed and examines the healing process, as well as the role capital punishment plays in serving justice.

*We will be hosting several screenings of the film in Fall 2008. Details coming soon.*

## 19th Annual Victims March at the State Capitol cont.

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The majority of those who stopped by the table were clear in their support for CCV. There were others, however, who still questioned the notion that the death penalty does not serve murder victims family members. The opportunity to share information from the ACLU of Northern California's recent report, "The Hidden Death Tax: the Secret Costs of Seeking Execution in California" was perhaps the most valuable point in the dialogue of the day. Many crime victims, when they learn of the enormous cost dis-



Judy Kerr behind CCV's table at the 19th Annual Victims March

parity between capital punishment and life in prison, can easily conclude that the death penalty does not serve crime victims.

When asked to comment on the rally, CCV Victim Liaison and Spokesperson Judy Kerr said, "I have only recently become vocal and active in this movement. I honor the memory of my brother Bob who died in 2003 by speaking out against the death penalty. Being active in this important cause is life affirming and has been a very positive experience for me. I'd like to encourage others to find their voice in this movement."

## MVFR Seeks Additional Stories for "Not in Our Name—California"

After the recent success of our booklet *VOICES from California Crime Victims for Alternatives to the Death Penalty*, we have been invited to work with Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation to create a California edition of their "Not in Our Name" booklet series.

We are seeking new stories that were not included in past NION books or in the *VOICES* booklet. If you are interested in contributing to this project, please contact Aarti Kelapure at [aarti@deathpenalty.org](mailto:aarti@deathpenalty.org).

## Historic Death Penalty Hearings

(Continued from page 1)

Judy Kerr spoke on behalf of CCV about the need to spend more money on solving homicides rather than wasting it on the death penalty. The person who murdered her brother has still not been identified.

Bill Babbitt, whose brother Manny was executed and whose cousin "Butchie" was murdered, spoke for Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights (MVFHR). Derrel Myers, whose son JoJo was murdered in 1996, represented Murder Victims'

Families for Reconciliation (MVFR), addressing the need for changes in societal and economic conditions that foster violent communities.

As we eagerly wait for the Commission to release its report and recommendations on California's death penalty in late June, it is important to remember that these hearings began just one month after the New Jersey Legislature abolished their state's death penalty, a decision that was influenced by murder victims' family members opposed to the death penalty. Thank you to everyone who spoke at and attended these hearings.

**CALIFORNIA CRIME VICTIMS FOR  
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California Crime Victims for Alternatives to the Death Penalty is a coalition of families, friends, and loved ones of murder victims who oppose the death penalty. The coalition supports families, friends, and loved ones in telling their stories and being heard. CCV educates the public about alternatives to the death penalty and provides information, resources, and support to families regardless of their views on the death penalty or whether the perpetrator has been apprehended.

CCV is a joint project of Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation, Death Penalty Focus, and the ACLU of Northern California.

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## Where We've Been and Where We're Going!

The past six months have been very exciting and eventful for CCV because of the wonderful contributions its members have made. We released *VOICES from California Crime Victims for Alternatives to the Death Penalty* and CCV members provided moving testimony at all three Commission hearings on the death penalty. Many CCV members have also had the opportunity to have their voices heard in other ways. Derrel Myers spoke at the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty's annual conference, Dawn Spears and Bill Babbitt had letters to the editor published in *The Sacramento Bee*, and numerous members spoke at schools, churches, and other educational venues.

CCV would like to extend a

special thanks to every person who has contributed over the past six months. We look forward to working with you in the future.

We are currently working on many exciting events for the coming months, including a workshop to be presented at the Critical Resistance Conference in September where we will discuss the importance of victims as activists. The conference will be held September 26-28, 2008 in Oakland, CA. (<http://www.criticalresistance.org/>)

We are also looking forward to several screenings of the film *Love Lived on Death Row* throughout California. (<http://www.lovelivedondeathrow.com/>)

Please stay tuned for more information on these events including dates, times, locations, and ways to get involved!



Lisa and Carol Duncanson at Mater Dei High School in Santa Ana.