Not in Our Name
Murder Victims’ Families Speak Out Against the Death Penalty
CALIFORNIA
As a deputy district attorney in Alameda County, in early 2003, I was offered a career-making case, prosecuting Demarcus Ralls. This was a death penalty case, and it was the first time in my life I had given any real thought to the death penalty; it took me less than a minute to say yes.

When the trial began in October 2005, we went through the customary pre-trial motions in court, during which I interviewed the surviving family members. When was the last time you saw your loved one alive? How did you find out they had been murdered? How did you feel? What do you miss most about them? These were just a few of the 25 questions that I would painfully review with them. There was never a dry eye in the room.

However, the one question I never asked was, “Do you think the defendant should be executed?” I just assumed the answer would be “yes.”

The trial brought out more than just the grizzly details about the killings. The violence Ralls had inflicted closely resembled the violence he had experienced as a child. Ralls was born while his mother was in jail. His role model was his older brother, one of the cruelest killers I had ever heard about. What crystallized for me during the trial was something I had slowly been realizing over my career as a prosecutor: I was witnessing a cycle of violence.

After the two-month trial, Ralls was found guilty of four murders, numerous assaults, and 30 robberies. When it came time for me to stand up and argue for death, I had all the resources any prosecutor could want: shocking photographs, bullet casings and guns, 911 calls and testimony from the surviving families. Yet I felt more unprepared than ever.

What had become painfully clear to me was the role I was playing in the death of another human being and that I had no place there.

Despite my argument for death, the jury sentenced the defendant to permanent imprisonment. I had lost, but I knew that justice had been served.
After my experience working on this case, I applaud the work of groups like Murder Victims’ Families for Reconciliation and California Crime Victims for Alternatives to the Death Penalty who give victims a platform to speak out and share their stories. They need to have their voices heard.

The people you will meet in this booklet have each endured the heartbreaking loss of a loved one due to violence. All either live in California or their loved one was killed in California. Yet they choose to raise their voices, individually and collectively, against the death penalty and to share their most personal and painful stories.

As I have witnessed firsthand, the loved ones of murder victims often find that other people try to speak for them, as their own voices remain unheard. They are used as a reason to support the death penalty because it is assumed that all victims’ families want executions. Yet for so many victims’ survivors - like those featured in this booklet - the death penalty solves nothing and can even perpetuate their suffering through the years of lengthy appeals.

Their stories are distinct; their reasons for opposing the death penalty vary. Each story must be told.

Through my experiences with the criminal justice system, I know that the death penalty is an ineffective, cruel, and simplistic response to the complex problem of violent crime. The millions of taxpayer dollars we are currently wasting on a dysfunctional death penalty could be used for actual public safety measures.

We need to stop the cycle of violence by increasing violence prevention programs for at-risk youth, such as Ralls. We need to get more killers off of our streets by solving the nearly 25,000 unsolved homicides that remain in California. We need to provide victims with the services they need in the aftermath of a crime. We need to listen to the voices in this booklet that proclaim, “not in our name.”
I was 21 and in my senior year at UC Berkeley, when my mother told me her father was hanged in Folsom Prison in 1924. After that first conversation, she and I spoke about my grandfather very few times. When I questioned Mom, I was warned not to think about him, what he did, and the consequences. She was trying to spare me from assuming a burden of shame.

Despite my mother’s warnings, I persisted in researching her father’s story, which was well covered by newspapers from his time. I thought a lot about the effect his crime and the execution had on her and our family. The hardest for me was my very intelligent and creative mother dealing alone and silently with the image of her beloved father hanging at the end of the rope.

By becoming a member of Murder Victims’ Families for Reconciliation and Death Penalty Focus, I have found community, recognition and legitimacy. Besides meeting those who oppose the death penalty, I also met family members of the executed. I found my family shares characteristics of many families of the executed: drug abuse (my brother died of alcoholism), family disintegration (my grandfather had seven brothers and sisters—I know no one from that family), depression (my first bout was that senior year at college), violence, shame and silence.

Most importantly, my involvement in the abolition movement has helped me realize that I do not have to deny my family’s past. My grandfather murdered another human being, but he is still my grandfather.

Society assumes violence ends with executions. It does not. The ripples wash over the families of the condemned, the governors who authorize the killings and those who carry them out. Governor Friend Richardson, who denied clemency for my grandfather, was a Quaker. He had to deny tenets of his faith to carry out the killing.

How do family dissolution, addiction and spiritual alienation -- all consequences of executions -- contribute to a better society? They don’t.
I grew up during the 1960’s in a liberal, Jewish family committed to social justice in which education was everything. My father, Marvin Jawitz, a lawyer, commuted from our home in New Rochelle to his office in Harlem, which he shared with his brother, Alan.

On February 11, 1980, three young men on drugs and looking for money went on a shooting spree in my father’s office. My father was one of three people shot that day. Two days later he and another man died.

I was 17 and, like my three siblings, in college. As education was everything, we all continued on in school. I failed out of the first college, and then the second, finally graduating from the third school. I then went on to medical school and am now a podiatrist with my own practice.

The killers were apprehended and were given prison sentences, not capital punishment. I am so appreciative that our family did not have the added burden of a death sentence. A death penalty trial would have been the final blow for an already devastated family.

Not having the death penalty allowed me to grieve at my own pace, in my own time frame. It took me years to say publicly that he died and only lately, 25 years later, can I say he was murdered.

When I discovered MVFR (Murder Victims’ Families for Reconciliation) through a commentary in the Napa Valley Register, I realized I had found an avenue to share my feelings. I want no death penalty in my name. I don’t want another person dead. It would not have helped my healing. I learned well what my father was trying to teach me. Education is everything. I want money to be spent in schools, in preschools; we must tap into a child’s potential during the earliest years and work to ensure that children are given the opportunity to thrive. Help the children so they don’t have to live a life of crime.

Katrina Di Pasqua,
Napa, CA
Marvin’s daughter
I grew up in Watts in South-Central Los Angeles, an epicenter of gang violence. Each of the 10,000 victims of gang violence in Los Angeles County over the past 20 years was somebody’s daughter or son, crying out for help.

After seeing 13 friends killed in gang wars, I was inspired to bring the warring factions, the Crips and Bloods, together and end the violence. We were able to create a peace treaty between the gangs in 1992, which has sustained for over ten years—not without problems and challenges, however.

For the past 16 years I’ve continued working for peace. I believe that where the wounds are, the gift lies.

But in January 2004, this belief was seriously tested when my 18-year-old son, Terrell, was murdered. He was an unbelievable kid and after losing him, I thought, “What is the gift in this?”

The young man who killed my son wasn’t caught, but we know who he is through the street network. I had the opportunity to retaliate, but I decided that revenge shouldn’t be Terrell’s legacy. Instead I spoke to the community about why revenge doesn’t work. Terrell’s killer is a victim too — a victim of a culture that lacks compassion.

You can only kill someone if you have a callous heart; I want to know why this young man had such a callous heart. It’s not enough simply to catch him and throw him away or catch him and execute him.

We need to communicate with these individuals and touch their hearts, helping each one find their own humanity and see that violence is not the answer. It’s about igniting a conversation about life — what makes people happy or sad; what they fear; what things they can change in the neighborhood. We must be motivated by love for the human being. It’s about reverence for human life and spirit.

We have redefined what peace is and what it looks like in this community. Peace is not this utopian idea of dashing through a field of dandelions; it’s hard work. The key is that individuals consistently come back to resolve their conflicts and take the next few steps towards peace.

My work is truly an extension of me. As I resolve the wounds in my own life, I’m able to see more of what I need to do in the community I live in and love.
The death penalty has always been unthinkable to me — a dark thing of the past.

My father’s execution in China, however, forced me to confront the dreadful fact that putting someone to death is still considered justice in many parts of the world.

My father, Wo Weihan, was arrested by the Chinese Ministry of National Security and charged with passing state secrets to a Taiwanese organization. The trials were conducted behind closed doors and the lawyer, who was denied access to my father and information during the first ten months of the interrogation, was subject to state secrets laws and could share very little with our family.

I appealed for transparency and a fair, humane process through the EU Presidency, the US State Department, human rights organizations, and international media. Diplomats and human rights organizations pointed out the grave deficiencies in the handling of the case and the inhumanity of the pending execution, but their pleas were ignored.

After nearly four years without being granted visitation, I was finally allowed a half-hour supervised visit with my father. Because neither my father nor our family had been officially notified that the execution would take place the next day, this final meeting did not serve as a last goodbye and my father could not deliver a last will and testament.

Although my father’s life was taken, I hope that my family’s struggle to save him contributed some momentum toward a more humane form of justice around the world. A modern society deserves a fair and transparent justice system that respects the rights of the accused, in particular the right to life.

Capital punishment is a primitive and barbaric custom that trespasses against the democratic values and inalienable rights outlined in the US Declaration of Independence and reiterated in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

It does not restore the dignity of those who were victimized by crime and closes the door on the values we need for a stronger and more humane society: contrition, reconciliation, forgiveness and redemption. It’s time to stop using violence, revenge and the threat of death in the name of justice and order.

Ran Chen is currently a graduate student in California.
In the years before my son Norman Cleary was executed by the State of Oklahoma, I had believed strongly that our justice system was the best in the world. I believed in the death penalty for those that had taken a life. If you take a life, you should forfeit your own. Capital punishment existed so we could live in a fair society.

I have had reason to change my belief. I now know that the suffering and punishment of an execution is not so much about the convicted prisoner. The real suffering and lifelong punishment is passed on and endured by the surviving family of the convicted killer.

When my son was on death row he found God and he ministered to others while consoling my family and me. He told me that the thought of spending a lifetime in prison was more frightening to him than his death because he believed in redemption.

My son regretted two things as he prepared for his execution. He regretted the pain and suffering he caused his victim and her family and he regretted the pain and suffering his death would leave behind with his family. His father and I and his siblings and their children are the ones condemned to a life sentence of suffering and grief.

I will never get over the injustice, grief, and sorrow that my own country condemns my family and I to endure for the rest of our lives. Five years after Norman’s execution I have dedicated my life to praying that future generations of my family will not carry the same pain and punishment that I now feel.

Lyndia Faihtinger, Norman’s mother

Stockton, CA
Then, in 1994, my grandmother was murdered. She was in her eighties, and I had imagined that once you made it past 70 you didn’t have to worry about dying violently. When Nana was killed, I forgot what I told my students every day, that all killing, all revenge is wrong; I just wanted the person who killed her to die. I lived with that poison in my soul for a while, and then I had to stop thinking about it because it was getting in the way of my own life.

Had I been there when they caught my grandmother’s murderer, I would have wanted to kill her myself. I feel differently now. After the heat of the moment, you have time to think. You realize that killing the killer won’t bring back the loved one. You realize that for most criminals the death penalty is not a consideration when they’re committing their crimes, or if it is, it only inspires them to “go for broke.”

I realized that the solution was to be pro-active rather than reactive. If you have the time and the energy, you do something positive to change things. You work with at-risk kids. You work with the media and try to make them be more sensitive to the families of murder victims. You work to dispel the idea that all families want or need revenge. You work to stop the killing.

While I was growing up, I had a great many theoretical conversations about capital punishment. It always seemed like a good idea, and I didn’t consider my stance hypocritical when I started teaching youth gang members that killing is never a solution.

Robyn Hernandez,
Rohnert Park, CA
Norma’s granddaughter
My daughter, Tameca Dunbar, was beautiful inside and out. When she walked into a room, the room lit up. Tameca loved the three children she left behind. Not only was she an extraordinary mother, she was also an exceptional daughter, step-daughter, sister, step-sister, cousin, niece, aunt, and friend to many. She graduated from Georgia State University and used her degree to help people. Co-workers and clients described her as kind and committed. Despite having a heavy caseload as a Child Case Manager, Tameca found a way to give each family the attention it needed and deserved. On September 23, 2005, Tameca was murdered in her home. She was 32 years old and full of life. Tameca’s murder remains unsolved. Our family and friends will never be able to fill the void that her death has left.

I have always been opposed to the death penalty. My daughter was opposed to the death penalty. I do not believe that it is right for us to take a life. Before this tragedy hit my family, I was challenged by people who told me that if someone I loved were murdered I, too, would be for the death penalty. Now it has happened, and I can honestly say that I am still opposed to the death penalty.

I do not feel that another family should feel my daily pain because of what some feel is justice by taking another human being’s life. That is all that an execution would do, leave another family grieving.

Dawn Spears,
San Jose, CA
Tameca’s mother
My son, Donald Bruce Crutcher, was a cabinetmaker. At the young age of 22, he became a victim of homicide.

Donald and his girlfriend, Lorelei, were at a party. When Lorelei had to go get something from Donald’s car she was confronted by a group of young men. Scared, she locked herself in the car and started yelling and honking the horn, while the men were trying to break the car windows. They shot at her twice when they couldn’t get in the car.

Donald came out to find Lorelei trapped and a man slashing his car tires. When Donald neared the car, the man turned around and stabbed him in the stomach. My son was stabbed again and then shot while trying to get away. Only one of the attackers was ever charged with a crime, and that man died while assaulting another person after his release from prison seven years later.

I have always been firmly opposed to the death penalty. For me, it is a question of faith. The death penalty is a sin that violates the commandment, “Thou shalt not kill.” By allowing the death penalty, we are allowing ourselves to sin. By not fighting against it, we give our consent to murder. Morally it is wrong. According to my faith, it is wrong. I have seen nothing to justify the death penalty.

More killing would not have been the answer for Donald, or for our family. Knowing the hurt my family felt, we could imagine a mother and father going through the same thing we did. In fact, I have seen that hurt in a mother whose son was executed. He, too, was murdered, but by the State. A life is a life, and we should not allow the State to continue killing people in our name.

Vera Ramirez-Crutcher, Oxnard, CA
Donald’s mother
After my son’s murder, I realized that there were victims on both ends of the gun.

I decided to become an enemy not of my son’s killer, but of the forces that put a young boy on a dark street, holding a handgun. I reached out to Tony’s grandfather, Ples Felix, in an act of forgiveness. Ever since our initial encounter, we have worked together to break the epidemic of youth violence, through programs that teach children there is an alternative to violence.

Tony has helped us deliver this message through letters and messages he sends from prison. We use these letters in our programs and they are having a positive effect on other kids. Think of how many kids he may save. That is going to bring a lot more healing than if he had received the death penalty.

I see the effect of Tony’s message and know it would’ve been lost had Tony been punished with a government-mandated execution.

Azim Khamisa, Tariq’s dad
La Jolla, CA
Our 23 year-old son, Joshua “Jojo” White, died instantly when he was shot for no apparent reason by a young stranger. JoJo White was known for his work for peace and justice. He worked as a counselor with at-risk youth at Martin Luther King Jr. Academic Middle School in San Francisco. JoJo opposed the death penalty, believing justice, not vengeance, would make the United States, and the world, more peaceful.

We believe JoJo’s killer is not the only one responsible for this horrible crime. We think our entire society bears responsibility for the social conditions and attitudes that foster such violence in our world.

We do not believe the execution of JoJo’s killer would make the world a more just and peaceful place. To the contrary, we believe capital punishment reinforces the idea that murder is righteous when it’s used by the right people, an idea that JoJo’s killer apparently subscribed to.

If we were a truly just society, one that respected all children in all their great diversity, one that offered real opportunity, liberty, and justice for all, our son JoJo would be with us living a hopeful, loving, and generous life.

And so would the young man who killed him.

We honor JoJo’s life by working for peace and social justice – goals that were so important to him. I, Derrel, have often spoken publicly against the death penalty, including presentations at the California state legislature, Sisters of the Presentation California Conference, Northern California Conference of ACLU Youth, the National Convention of the Campaign to End the Death Penalty, and many anti-execution vigils at San Quentin Prison.

Derrell Myers and Naomi White,
San Francisco, CA
Parents of Jojo
Shortly after Bo died, I trained to become a medical doctor and I currently work at a California state prison for men. Over the years, I have come to understand that each man can rediscover the kernel of goodness inside himself. By using the death penalty as a form of punishment, we take that possibility away from him and, by extension, we all suffer.

Two years ago, I sought out the inmate, Ronnie Fields, who killed my brother. We now communicate on a regular basis by letter and in-person visits. During this journey, I have included my father, who had long harbored resentment towards the man whose actions changed his life. Now, my father has been able to have his questions answered, and his outlook has changed dramatically. He has let go of the negativity that had consumed him for the past 20 years. Had Ronnie been put to death, my father very likely would be stuck in a dark place to this day.

We can’t change the past, but we can surely change our reaction to it. I feel so sad for the families who feel that the death of another will somehow bring them satisfaction. How can another’s suffering ever really make us truly whole?

Denise Taylor, Bo’s sister
Los Osos, CA
One night, four young men broke into our home while my family and I were in bed. They were convinced that we had money in a safe. One of the men forced me to the ground with his foot on my back. They cursed the whole time as they dragged my husband, Jamie, on his knees searching for the alleged safe. Then, they pulled my seventeen-year-old daughter, Roxie, into the room, made her strip while standing on our bed, and raped her with the barrel of a shotgun in front of her Dad. What I couldn’t see, I could hear.

I guessed they were in their late twenties, but they were actually only eighteen, nineteen, and twenty. The girl who drove the getaway car was only sixteen! As strange as it may sound, I never felt afraid; although I thought I was going to die. I prayed to God for forgiveness for my sins and for strength, and then I begged the men not to hurt Roxie. They had such power lust, such a thirst for blood. After repeatedly threatening to kill his wife and daughter, Jamie couldn’t take it anymore and fought back. They shot him in the back and the gunshot killed him. After that, the intruders fled and soon sheriff’s officers filled the house.

In twenty-seven hours, all five of them were in jail. I had a wonderful gift of an amazing Sheriff (seven years later I married the arresting Investigative Sergeant). Now comes the education of a lifetime. Nine felony counts, special circumstance…death penalty. I did not believe in the death penalty…the State of California didn’t care what I believed. The District Attorney’s Office wanted to make sure I didn’t ‘screw up their case’. During the entire 22 months of trials, they made me sit in the hallway or in the District Attorney’s Office except to testify. I wanted to be seen and heard.

Finally, I was given a chance: the victim impact statement. I spoke from my heart and soul. The offenders got what I wanted: two got life in prison without parole, the one with his foot on my back, pled guilty, apologized and received 29 to life, the lookout got 25 to life, and the 16 year-old getaway driver received 15 years to life, but got to serve her time in the California Youth Authority. I have done Victim/Offender Mediation with three of the offenders. I write all of them and I am trying to do mediation with the shooter and the one that raped Roxie. Restorative Justice has become my mantra. I don’t believe in monsters, but in human beings who do monstrous things. I also believe in consequences, not vengeance. I believe in the ability for people to change.

Cheryl Ward-Kaiser, Jaime’s wife
Salinas, CA
My brother, Robert James Kerr, was found lifeless, shirtless, barefoot and without identification on July 12, 2003 in Everett, Washington. It took weeks for investigators to identify him. I spent that time becoming increasingly worried and finally alarmed when he did not arrive for a scheduled visit and when my calls to his cell phone were answered by a stranger.

Bob was brutally beaten and strangled. His financial accounts were used for weeks after his murder. Bob had given up his PIN number and other personal information on the night of the crime. The coroner’s report confirmed the horrible circumstances under which the information was obtained.

In the days and weeks that followed my brother’s murder, I was immobilized by the trauma. I craved information about who killed him. I wanted this person, this criminal, brought to justice. I wanted to be able to tell my daughter that society would find a just way to respond to this merciless act.

I am still waiting, six years later, for a suspect to be named and for justice to take its course. It has been agonizing for me to go through the pain and grief of Bob’s violent death. But the possibility of the death penalty for the murderer is an additional burden and a cruel twist that adds to my sense of victimization.

I have never, and will never, support the death penalty. I know now, more than ever, that killing is wrong. Revenge will not bring my brother back and it will not bring me peace. I honor my brother’s life and my memory of him by standing against the practice of state-killing.

Judy Kerr, Bob’s sister
Albany, CA
Forgiveness Has Power

The District Attorney assured me that the execution of the man responsible for Catherine’s murder would help me heal, and for many years I believed him. But now I know that having someone murdered by the government will not heal my pain. I beg the government not to kill in my name, and more importantly, not to tarnish the memory of my daughter with another senseless killing.

My 19-year-old daughter, Catherine Blount, was murdered in the fall of 1980. Douglas Mickey was convicted of the crime and sentenced to death. He is currently on death row in California. For 8 years following Catherine’s death, I was consumed with a desire for revenge.

And then I began a four-year spiritual search and encountered a number of books and enlightened teachers that helped me learn about forgiveness. Twelve years after Catherine’s death, I wrote a letter to Mr. Mickey telling him that I forgave him. The act of mailing that letter resulted in instant healing. I then realized that I did not need to see another person killed so that I could be healed. I found that love, compassion and forgiveness are the way to healing.

I’ve established a relationship with Mr. Mickey and consider him my friend. I travel all around this country and Europe teaching the healing power of forgiveness. My family and I oppose the death penalty in all circumstances.

Aba Gayle, Catherine’s mother
Catherine Blount resided in San Mateo county
I understand this sense of revenge is a very legitimate emotion, but it is not a legitimate basis for public policy.

In 1994, my older brother, Danny “Deuce,” was killed in a homicide. He was a Vietnam veteran who received the Bronze Star. After he returned from the war, he became a redcap at Amtrak and eventually worked his way up to engineer, commanding the route from Chicago to Los Angeles. I couldn’t believe my brother actually “drove” the train! He was an amazing guy and a fantastic big brother. His murder was a devastating blow to my family. Even though I was working as a death penalty defense lawyer at the time, I was shocked at my impulse to hunt down and kill the perpetrators myself. Eventually, they were caught, but legal technicalities led to the dismissal of the case. The cold, cruel reality I suddenly had to face was that no one was going to be held responsible for my brother’s death; there would be no “closure.”

Even if this distressing turn of events had not occurred, however, no attempt by the state to kill the persons who killed my brother would have brought him back. There was no “closure” to be had. Executing his killers, instead of honoring my brother, would have forever tied him to an act of violence that he did not initiate and would not have condoned.

All the death penalty can ever do for the victim’s survivors is bind them to more hate and more murder and keep them living in the fallacious hope that once the perpetrator is executed by the state, they will feel better. In my brother’s case, my family had no choice but to heal the pain. What we learned is the same thing society learns each time we travel the road to execution: Revenge and healing are incompatible. They are a contradiction in terms.

Aundre Herron, Danny’s sister
San Francisco, CA
We must ask what the death penalty says about us as a society, rather than focusing on the offender.

Our nation cannot afford the death penalty; the cost, both morally and financially, is too high. To execute Laura’s murderer for an act he committed while delusional with a severe disease is, to us, simply wrong. Our prisons are now filled with the mentally ill, and in many instances the only way someone can receive proper medical care is by committing a crime. The financial resources now spent on implementing the death penalty would be better spent if redirected to treatment of those with serious mental illness, thereby preventing future acts of violence.

We lost our 19-year-old daughter, Laura, when a mentally ill patient opened fire at the behavioral health clinic where she was working while home on winter break from college. For her entire life Laura had been committed to social justice, non-violence and equality. Both she and our family had always been opposed to the death penalty. Following Laura’s death, we leaned on these values and never questioned our long-held anti-death penalty beliefs.

In fact, the experience of losing our daughter served to strengthen our convictions, because we realized that years consumed by trials, appeals, and an anticipated execution would be an obstacle to our healing. Since losing Laura, we have testified in front of the California Senate in favor of a death penalty moratorium. We have advocated for improved mental health care in California. As a result of our efforts we have helped improve to victims’ and mental health services through Laura’s Law, which allows for court-ordered outpatient mental health treatment, and Proposition 63, which was a ballot initiative that resulted in increased funding for mental health services.

Nick & Amanda Wilcox, Laura’s parents
Penn Valley, CA
On the morning of December 9, 2006, a woman from the county rang the doorbell. She asked if she could speak with my husband and me about our son Paul. My thought was that Paul had been in an accident. Instead we learned Paul had been murdered. Two 18-year-old men looking for drug money assaulted Paul as he was walking home from watching a game with his co-workers. As he tried to run away, he was tripped and fatally stabbed before they took his wallet. He had no money.

Our family was devastated. Paul was the oldest of five children. His two brothers and two sisters were heartbroken. Paul was a very special person who lived his life with the highest moral and ethical standards. He was an Eagle Scout, a college graduate, and a law enforcement officer for thirteen years. As such he was respected by the community and his fellow officers for his high standards and compassion toward those he apprehended. In May 2006, Paul graduated from the University of Montana Law School with honors, passed the Montana Bar, and was clerking for a Supreme Court Justice in Helena, Montana when he was murdered.

After Paul's death, I was relieved to find that the death penalty was not being considered for Paul's murderers. I do not believe in the death penalty and have been an active member of California People of Faith Working Against the Death Penalty (CPF) since 2002. When I first became active in CPF, Paul and I had conversations about the death penalty. He quietly told me that he too opposed the death penalty. I was surprised given his many years in law enforcement, but very grateful. Paul's father and siblings also oppose it. Our family felt that justice was served when Paul's murderers received sentences of life in prison with the possibility of parole after 55 years.

Paul spent his life in service to others, and the world is poorer because he is no longer among us. Nobody in the family will ever forget or fail to mourn this good, good man.

Mary Kay Raftery,
San Jose, CA
Paul's mother
I was a supporter of the death penalty until I learned, firsthand, something I wish I didn’t know: what it’s like to lose a member of your family to execution. My brother, Manny Babbitt, turned 50 on May 3, 1999. At 12:37 am on May 4, 1999, I watched the State of California execute my brother at San Quentin State Prison. Six years later, I experienced another violent loss: my cousin, Nicholas “Butchie” Correia, was murdered in Sacramento.

In an effort to do the right thing and ensure public safety, I made the difficult decision to tell the police that I suspected my brother was involved in the death of Leah Schendel.

Manny was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia and he suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder from two tours of duty in Vietnam. When I turned Manny in, the police promised me that he would get the mental help he needed, but, instead, he was sentenced to death and eventually executed. I wanted to prevent another killing, not cause one.

I wish we lived in a society that properly treated its mentally ill citizens. Treatment and prevention, rather than execution, should be our state’s response to mental illness.

I supported the death penalty until it came knocking on my door, devastating innocent people in its path, like my mother and Manny’s daughter, Desiree. I wish I did not know what it was like to experience the execution of a beloved family member.

When my cousin Butchie was murdered, the man responsible for Butchie’s death served less than one year in prison. It’s hard to make sense of how disproportionate my brother’s punishment was compared to the punishment for the man who killed my cousin. However, I would not wish the pain my family and I have endured on Butchie’s killer’s family.

The death penalty only compounds the tragedy of murder by harming another set of families and offering a false sense of healing to victims’ families.

Bill Babbitt,
Elk Grove, CA
Manny’s brother
My twin boys were opposed to the death penalty, so I’m not taking a stance against the death penalty just for myself. Albade and Obadiah Taylor were 22 years old when they were killed while working on Obadiah’s stalled Cadillac in East Oakland. Obadiah had planned to own a barbershop someday, and Albade had recently received a promotion at the law firm where he was employed. They weren’t in gangs, they didn’t carry weapons, they didn’t sell drugs - they were innocent bystanders when they were shot and killed at close range.

My children wanted to help people and I know they wouldn’t want another family to go through the trauma of losing a child. My children knew that killing was wrong.

I can’t imagine what it must feel like to be a mother and have a child on death row.

Revenge is not justice. When my boys were killed I told people in our community that I did not want revenge. Today, I work with 1000 Mothers to Prevent Violence (www.1000mothers.org). We provide support and healing to others who have tragically lost a loved one, regardless of where they are in their healing process.

Taking another person’s life does not stop violence; there’s a contradiction in responding to murder by executing people. It’s not truthful to tell people not to use violence to deal with their problems when the state is killing people. I believe that the death penalty encourages violence. If the government really wanted to end the violence, it would take the millions of dollars it is wasting on the death penalty in California and use it for violence prevention for youth, rehabilitation, and victim services.

Lorrain Taylor, Hayward, CA
Albade and Obadiah’s mother
My life changed forever the night I received the call that my beautiful daughter and her roommate had been brutally murdered on November 1, 2004. A shroud of darkness fell over me and I could not breathe. It was inconceivable that the vibrant, shining essence which for twenty-six years had been Leslie Ann Mazzara, the light of my life, my flesh and blood, my youngest child, could be gone forever. Her beautiful and promising life was stolen that night in an act of terror; in a gruesome act of selfish anger and rage. I was thrust on a journey through hell seemingly without end, and began a mother’s mission to make meaning out of the meaningless.

My Unitarian Universalist faith teaches that all will ultimately be reconciled with God, even murderers. Remarkably, Jesus was capable of forgiving his own murderers as he suffered on the cross. As a UU minister, I seek to follow the teachings and the example of Jesus, but forgiving the murderer of my daughter for the loss of my never-to-be-born grandchildren; babies that my arms ache to hold, still seems inconceivable to me. However, I know that if I don’t walk towards that hope, I will be doomed to dwell in despair and pain forever. It is about choosing life, again and again, day after day. It’s about making our tears holy and keeping our broken hearts open. The death penalty holds us hostage, stagnating our hope, compounding the tragedy, and escalating the conflict. Revenge is an endless cycle of pain and loss resulting only in more victims.

We will begin to heal ourselves and our world when we refuse to participate in perpetuating the cycle of violence. It was then that I found I could breathe again and begin to find some peace and joy in my life.

Cathy Harrington, Leslie’s mother
Leslie resided in Napa Valley, CA
For more information or to become a member or donor of Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation:
www.mvfr.org, info@mvfr.org
877-896-4702

To get involved locally with the California Crime Victims for Alternatives to the Death Penalty:
www.californiacrimevictims.org
info@californiacrimevictims.org
415-262-0082

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