

Creating More Victims Larry Cox Executive Director of Amnesty International USA

The cruelty of the death penalty is not confined to the prisoner whose life is toyed with in the name of justice. Families of the condemned are also ensnared in the cycle of hope and despair that this degrading punishment inevitably breeds. The mistakes and inequities of the capital justice system are perpetuated not only on the defendants, but also their relatives. And in the end, for not measurable benefit, all the state achieves by an execution is one more dead body and more grieving family members.

Testimonials from “shadow families”

Irene Cartwright’s son, Richard Cartwright, was executed in Texas in 2005. Richard’s daughter Ricki was born a couple of months before Richard was sentenced, and was eight years old when he was executed. One of the hardest things I’ve had to do was pick Ricki up from school for her last visit with her father before he was killed.”

Robert Meeropol’s parents, Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, were executed in New York ( by the Federal Government in 1953). “I was 3 when my parents were arrested and 6 when they were executed. My earliest distinct memories of my parents are of visiting them on death row. Clearly, I didn’t understand what was going on, but I had a sense that “they” were very powerful, and “they” were attacking “us.” Of course I didn’t know exactly who “they “ and “we” were. So I had a generalized sense of anxiety, an incomprehensible sword of Democles hanging over me. I was frightened, angry, and grew up with a suppressed need to attack those who had attacked my family. I survived because a supportive community surrounded me, but what about other children who do not have such a support system?”

Melanie Hebert’s uncle, Spencer Goodman, was executed in Texas in 2000. “I vividly remember when Spencer was sentenced to death. It was my Dad’s birthday and we were all gathered at my parents’ house when we heard it announced on the news. I had a physical reaction; I just felt so sick...”

Bill Babbitt’s brother Manny Babbitt, was executed in California in 1999. “ The police promised me that my brother would get the help he needed. After they arrested Manny, an officer said to him, “You’re not going to go to the gas chamber or anything like that.” I believed that. My mother believed it. We never really thought he would be executed, right up until the last half hour when I watched my brother be put to death at San Quentin. For the rest of my life I have to live with the fact that I turned my mentally ill brother in and that led to his death.”

The Robinson’s have a similar story to tell. They had sought help for their son Larry, who had been diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic at the age of 21. He was routinely dismissed from hospitals after 30 day stays because he was not violent and they needed the bed. His only ever act of violence was to kill five people. In spite of his diagnosis and history of hospitalization he was judged sane. He was executed in 2000.