

ARTICLE 3



“Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.”

- Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 10, 1948

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After Exoneration: The Effect on Victims’ Families

Yolanda Littlejohn was in the courtroom two years ago when a panel of judges found Greg Taylor innocent of the murder of Jacquetta Thomas, Yolanda’s sister. Yolanda had come each day to listen to Greg’s lawyers present evidence to this North Carolina Innocence Inquiry Commission panel demonstrating that Greg could not have been the one who murdered Jacquetta Thomas back in 1991.

“Every day I went home and I think I grieved a little more,” Yolanda remembers. “When Greg was released, that was when I really grieved. I was happy for him and for his family, because it was terrible that he spent almost 17 years in prison for a murder he didn’t commit. However, on my drive home, I was thinking, *now I don’t know who killed my sister.* It felt like I was reliving the day over 18 years ago when the phone call came telling me my sister was dead. For all these years, this is the person the state of North Carolina

told me had done it, and now we’re here and we’ve got nothing.”

When the wrong person is convicted of murder, the family of the victim also suffers. “Survivors of murder victims want to know the truth,” MVFHR’s Executive Director Renny Cushing said years ago in a talk on this subject. “They want to know what happened, they want to know what their loved one’s last moments were like, they want to try to understand the story of this terrible event. When you learn that the wrong person was being punished all this time, all the facts you thought you had come to understand, the facts that helped you move forward, have all been stripped away. You have to start all over again – it’s as though the murder just took place.”

Since Greg Taylor’s exoneration, Yolanda, who recently joined MVFHR’s board of directors, has spoken out about how wrongful conviction affects victims’ families and about what could be done to help victims



Yolanda Littlejohn

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MVFHR**Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights**

Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights is an international, non-governmental organization of family members of victims of criminal murder, terrorist killings, state executions, extrajudicial assassinations, and "disappearances" working to oppose the death penalty from a human rights perspective.

Membership is open to all victims' family members who oppose the death penalty in all cases. "Friend of MVFHR" membership is open to all those interested in joining our efforts.

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Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights is a member of the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty, the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty, the U.S. Human Rights Network, Anti-Death Penalty Asia Network, the National Center for Victims of Crime, and the National Organization for Victim Assistance

Article 3

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After Exoneration: The Effect on Victims' Families*continued from page 1*

through this experience. Yolanda says that she had long felt doubt about Greg Taylor's guilt, but "It's one thing to suspect and another to get confirmation. I sat through the [Innocence Inquiry Commission] hearing because I wanted the truth. If you're telling me that this person didn't do it, then I want to hear the facts. But even in hearing those facts, and in confirming what I had wondered about for years, there was still a sense of betrayal in me. Eighteen years ago we went through the legal process; they arrested, prosecuted, and sent the individual to prison. The system had supposedly done justice. How can we be sitting here when we were assured years ago that this was over? How can we be rehashing it all? Of course, I know that an innocent person should not be in jail, but there was no one for me to talk to, no one for me to bounce these feelings off of. I had to go home each day and try to process this information myself."

Yolanda believes that a neutral victim's advocate would be valuable in cases like this. "There has to be aftercare for the victim's family when you learn that someone is innocent," she says. "For all those years, the family believed it was this person who was responsible for the murder. You want to have a neutral person who can be there for you and let you figure out how you feel about this new information."

It's also important to Yolanda that victims' families be contacted with care and sensitivity when the innocence of the person originally convicted of their loved one's murder is now being investigated.

"The Innocence Commission was very compassionate in how they presented it to me," Yolanda recalls. But in hindsight she wishes that her first contact had not been an unexpected phone call at her workplace. "Getting a sudden phone call brings back memories of getting the news of the murder," Yolanda explains. "I think the first point of contact should be a certified letter. Send the letter and let the family members respond if they want to. Not everyone will want to." It can take time for a family to be ready, Yolanda says. When she was first contacted, she didn't want to hear all the information or to become publicly involved, but eventually, "I became ready to deal with it and to hear what they had to say."

When MVFHR member Jeanette Popp found out that the wrong men had been imprisoned for her daughter's murder, she got the news only by chance.

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"My phone rang and it was my brother-in-law saying, 'You need to turn on the TV; it's about Nancy,'" Jeanette remembers. "I said, 'What? It's 12 years after the murder!' I turn on the TV and there's the District Attorney saying the men who were in prison for Nancy's murder were probably innocent."

Jeanette was stunned. For all these years, she had believed in the guilt of Chris Ochoa and Richard Danziger, who were serving life sentences for the 1988 murder of 20-year-old Nancy DePriest.

The story that Jeanette gradually learned was that, while Chris Ochoa and Richard Danziger were in one Texas prison, an inmate at another prison, Josef Achim Marino, was writing letters to the county district attorney and to then-Governor George W. Bush, saying that he was the one who had killed Nancy DePriest. Mr. Marino said that he had acted alone and had no idea why two other men had confessed. Jeanette also learned that Chris Ochoa had written to the Innocence Project at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, explaining that he was serving a life sentence for a murder he didn't commit and that the police had coerced him into confessing to the crime and implicating his roommate, Richard Danziger, as well.

DNA evidence eventually exonerated Chris Ochoa and Richard Danziger and confirmed the truth of Achim Marino's confession. Chris Ochoa and Richard Danziger were released in 2001 after spending twelve years in prison. In an additional tragedy, Richard Danziger, having suffered a severe head injury after being beaten by other prisoners, now lives with physical and mental disabilities.

"I actually felt guilty," Jeanette says now as she remembers the day she began to understand that the wrong men had been serving a life sentence for Nancy's murder. "I had sat through the trial and had listened to Chris give his testimony. He was sobbing, and at the time I took that as remorse. I didn't realize that he was crying because he was lying and had been coerced into lying. It's heartwrenching. I actually felt guilty that I didn't realize he was not telling the truth, that I didn't question what the police told me, that I took everything at face value. I thought about Richard's and Chris's mothers. I felt for

them, and I felt for my own family. We were going to have to go through this all over again. We had just started healing, and it felt as if this took all that away. I started having nightmares again. It was just horrible."

Both Yolanda and Jeanette say that their experience with wrongful conviction only strengthened their opposition to the death penalty. "I was always on the fence about the death penalty until my sister was murdered," says Yolanda. "People thought I might be for the death penalty then, but I felt that that would be another life lost. I didn't think the other family should have to suffer like we did – that's not justice in my eyes. Of course, when we learned that the man who had been convicted of my sister's murder could not actually have done it, I felt all this even more strongly."

For Jeanette, the death penalty took on acute importance when she learned that, although Chris Ochoa and Richard Danziger were wrongfully sentenced to life in prison, rather than to death, the death penalty apparently figured prominently in the events that led to the wrongful conviction. She learned that Chris Ochoa's confession followed two grueling days of police questioning, during which police openly threatened Ochoa by telling him that he would receive the death penalty if he didn't cooperate (even going so far as to jab his arm with a pen in a gesture mimicking lethal injection).

Jeanette has become an outspoken activist against the death penalty, and she specifically opposed a death sentence for Achim Marino, who was eventually convicted of Nancy's murder and given a fourth life sentence (in addition to the three he was already serving for unrelated crimes).

"I can't be part of the taking of a human life," Jeanette says. "And what if we had executed Chris and Richard?"



Jeanette Popp

Victim Opposition to the Death Penalty in the News

A recent sampling of words from or about victims' families in articles and opinion pieces

From the 9/15/11 Mississippi Clarion-Ledger, "Victim's sister: no death penalty":

The beating and killing of James C. Anderson has drawn national outrage, but his sister said his killer or killers shouldn't be executed.

"Those responsible for James' death not only ended the life of a talented and wonderful man," Barbara Anderson Young wrote in her letter Wednesday to Hinds County District Attorney Robert Shuler Smith. "They also have caused our family unspeakable pain and grief. But our loss will not be lessened by the state taking the life of another."

... In her letter, Young quoted Coretta Scott King in explaining her opposition to capital punishment: "An evil deed is not redeemed by an evil deed of retaliation. Justice is never advanced in the taking of human life."

Young wrote that the family's opposition to the death penalty is "deeply rooted in our religious faith, a faith that was central in James' life as well. Our Savior Jesus Christ rejected the old way of an eye for an eye and taught us instead to turn the other cheek. He died that we might have everlasting life and, in doing so, asked that the lives of the two common criminals nailed to the crosses beside him be spared. We can do no less."

She said the family also opposes any execution "because it historically has been used in Mississippi and the South primarily against people of color for killing whites. Executing James' killers will not help to balance the scales. But sparing them may help to spark a dialogue that one day

will lead to the elimination of capital punishment."

From a 9/21/11 Reuters story, "'Victim's son objects as Texas sets execution date in hate crime death":

As Texas prepares to execute one of his father's killers, Ross Byrd hopes the state shows the man the mercy his father, James Byrd Jr., never got when he was dragged behind a truck to his death.

"You can't fight murder with murder," Ross Byrd, 32, told Reuters late Tuesday, the night before Wednesday's scheduled execution of Lawrence Russell Brewer for one of the most notorious hate crimes in modern times.

"Life in prison would have been fine. I know he can't hurt my daddy anymore. I wish the state would take in mind that this isn't what we want."

From a 10/23/11 CNN story, "Death penalty's unlikely opponents":

Charisse Coleman has no real compassion for the man who walked into the Thrifty Liquor Store in Shreveport, Louisiana, in 1995 and put three bullets in her brother, Russell.

But she doesn't want Bobby Lee Hampton – one of more than seven dozen killers on Louisiana's death row – executed, either.

"My opposition to the death penalty has nothing to do with Bobby Lee Hampton," Coleman said. "He's a bad dude. He's never going to be a good dude. If I got a call that said Bobby Lee Hampton dropped dead in his cell last night, I don't think it would create a ripple in my pond."

She added, though, "I will be goddamned if I will let Bobby Lee Hampton make me a victim, too, by taking me down that road of bitterness and revenge."

Coleman, 50, is among the most unlikely opponents of the death penalty, people who lost loved ones to unspeakable violence yet believe executing the killer will do nothing for family members or society.

Their stance is backed by groups like Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation and Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights, and their reasons aren't as religious or political as one might think. Some feel so strongly they've spoken against the death penalty even when it wasn't an option in their loved one's case. ...

Jan Brown of Houston said she can't pinpoint why she loathes the death penalty, but she always has, even when her 9-year-old daughter's killer was executed.

A Southern Baptist until 1984, Brown said capital punishment is tantamount to "legalized murder." She said she doesn't know when she developed her disdain. The first time she considered it may have been when she told a prosecutor she didn't want James Earhart to die, she said.

"Maybe I'm just selfish," she said. "Maybe he'd tell me what her last words were. Maybe he'd tell me why she had to die. Maybe because I think it's barbaric. Maybe if one of my children ended up in the same situation, I wouldn't want them to die."

Brown, 65, said the entire process

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leading up to Earhart's lethal injection was more about the perpetrator than the victim. Brown was a suspect until police found Kandy Janell Kirtland's deteriorating body, her hands bound, in a rubbish pile in Bryan, Texas. Brown said she was further devastated when protesters staged a vigil at Earhart's 1999 execution – not for the innocent girl who never got to see fifth grade, but for her killer.

Brown said she went through 12 years of hell because a prosecutor seemed to care more about Texas' reputation for being tough on crime than about helping Kandy's family heal.

Gus Lamm said he felt the same way when his wife, Victoria Zessin, was taken at age 28. He and his daughter unsuccessfully sued the parole board – and in the process alienated themselves from Zessin's family – to make sure the state knew they felt capital punishment was repugnant. ...

From the 11/14/11 KSFY (ABC) news in South Dakota, "Victim's family reacts to state seeking death penalty for inmate":

Family members of 75-year-old Maybelle Schein are reacting to the state's decision to seek the death penalty for accused murderer James McVay.

The Minnehaha County States Attorney's office filed the paperwork on that decision Monday.

Police say 41-year-old McVay stabbed Schein to death in her Sioux Falls home and then stole her car.

We talked to Schein's cousin, Robin Prunty, on the phone. She didn't want to go on camera.

Here's what she had to say when we ask her about the state seeking the death penalty.

"That's not the direction I want it

to go. Being in prison for the rest of his life is OK and enough. Do we need to put him to death? I don't think so. It won't make me feel any better," Robin Prunty said.

From the 12/15/11 Daily Record (an Ohio newspaper), "Testimony asks state to abolish death penalty; it creates 'more victims'":

Twenty-seven years ago, Mary Jane Stout and her husband, Norman, allowed John David Stumpf and another man into their Guernsey County home to use the telephone.

In response, Stumpf shot and killed Mary Jane and attempted to kill her husband with repeated gunshots to the head.

That was in May 1984. Stumpf has been on Death Row since that year while his case works its way through the requisite state and federal appeals before an execution date is set.

On Wednesday, the couple's son asked state lawmakers to abolish Ohio's death penalty, saying the lengthy legal process has brought nothing but pain and constant reminders of the crime rather than closure.

"We need certainty, we need healing," Chris Stout told the House's criminal justice committee. "We need to not be hauled into court again and again for 27 years and ... traumatized over and over."

He added, "I need this system to stop, period. I need the death penalty to be over and I need people to listen to me when I say, do not do this to me or my family. Don't kill John David Stumpf because of me. We've been through enough, and we want it to end. All this system does is create more victims. ..."

Stout was one of more than a dozen people providing testimony in

favor of legislation that would end capital punishment in the state. ...

From a letter to the editor by Renny Cushing that was published in the 12/18/11 Kentucky Journal:

The State Journal's Dec. 9 editorial, "No room for error," suggests that "Staunch opponents of capital punishment should imagine members of their own families victimized by barbarous criminals ..."

Many opponents of capital punishment don't have to imagine the horror of a family member's murder. We've lived it – and we don't feel that another killing is what will help us. Rather than a "proportionally irreversible response," we want a response that truly addresses the many different needs victims' families have and avoids the lasting trauma that executions inflict on the criminal's innocent family members.

After two shotgun blasts took my father's life in the doorway of our family home, many people assumed that my family and I would become proponents of the death penalty. A friend said to us, "I hope they fry those people so your family can get some peace." But in the aftermath of the worst thing that had ever happened to us, my family and I did not feel that an execution would give us peace, and we didn't want the killer, having taken our father's life, to take our values too.

I founded the organization Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights so that victims' families who oppose the death penalty would be recognized and supported in that belief, and so that we could join with families of people who have been executed to publicize the devastating effects of both murder and the death penalty.

Working in Asia

MVFHR worked to spread the message of victim opposition to the death penalty, and support local abolition efforts, through events and meetings in South Korea, Mongolia, Taiwan, Japan, Malaysia, and Singapore during the fall of 2011.

In September, Renny Cushing, Jennifer Bishop-Jenkins, and Toshi Kazama traveled to Seoul, South Korea to participate in public events associated with the country's 5,000th day without an execution, events that AI Korea took the lead in organizing. The MVFHR group also met with the Chairman of the Legislative and Judiciary Committee of the South Korean National Assembly and with a small group of Korean murder victims' family members for a powerful and emotional sharing of stories and experiences. "I always feel such a sense of solidarity when we meet with victims in other countries that still use the death penalty,"

Renny recalls. "Often, the cultural response to murder and to victims' families is different in different places, but the feelings are universal."

In his speech to the Korean National Assembly, Renny Cushing said:

"The act of murder may be over in an instant, but that does not mean the hurting ends. For myself, for all survivors, we grieve and try to heal forever.

I am glad that, in Korea, Article 30

of your constitution provides that victims of crime may receive aid from the state. But I also have been told by people here in Korea who have had family members murdered that there remains a great stigma attached to being victims of crime in this country. Many feel abandoned and ostracized. Korean victims who oppose the death penalty tell me they are fearful of speaking out in public against capital punishment.

Those of us who are concerned about human rights need to be concerned about victims, about preventing further harm,



Jeanne Bishop speaks to prosecutors in Mongolia

about victims' rights. We need to not just abolish the death penalty; we need to help victims.

... It must said that dealing in the public arena, in the political arena, with the subject matter of death, of homicide and executions, is crucial human rights work, but it is not easy. For a lawmaker to take on the abolition of the death penalty as a cause means that inevitably he or she will touch upon real pain and devastation, and I know that to rise to the call of history to shape human rights policy in this area is a trust that, on

some occasions, can weigh heavily upon a lawmaker. ...

As a guest in your country, I do not presume to tell the people of Korea what to do. I do want to praise the people of Korea and the government for 5,000 days without an execution. This is an international moment., and the eyes of the world are on Korea. Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights belongs to the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty. Yesterday, on behalf of the 121 NGOs from across the world who are members of that Coalition, I delivered

a letter to Chairman Woo supporting Korea's effort to end the death penalty. With your countryman, Ban Ki Moon, heading up the United Nations, which is committed to ending the death penalty, with a vibrant human rights community and leaders and lawmakers who embrace human rights, and with legislation pending before the National Assembly to abolish capital punishment,

the world waits and watches, hopeful that Korea will take legal steps to permanently end executions."

In October, MVFHR's visit to Mongolia, organized in collaboration with AI Mongolia, coincided with World Day Against the Death Penalty on the 10th of October. For this visit, Renny Cushing and Toshi Kazama were joined by Jeanne Bishop and Bud Welch. The group gave media interviews and addressed a variety of public audiences, including an

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event attended by members of law enforcement. They met with many key stakeholders in the death penalty debate, including criminal court judges, prosecutors, and defense attorneys.

Notably, the group met with Member of Parliament Ulziisaikhian Enkhtuzshin, Chair of the Majority Party. MP Enkhtuzshin told the MVFHR members that he is in favor of repealing the country's death penalty, and said that it was very valuable for him to hear an anti-death penalty victim perspective. A couple of months after our visit,

in January, the Mongolia Parliament approved legislation to ratify the 2nd Optional Protocol to the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, aiming at the abolition of the death penalty. MP Enkhtuzshin took the lead in bringing this legislation forward, and it is likely that the MVFHR meeting helped to make this happen.

In Mongolia, as in South Korea, victim opposition to the death penalty has rarely –perhaps never – been heard in public. During the question-and-answer sessions at the public events, victims' family members in the audience stood up to tell their own stories, often for the first time. By raising up victims' voices both locally and internationally, MVFHR's visit contributed significantly to public understanding and discussion of the death penalty at a critical time in Mongolia.

From Mongolia, Renny Cushing

and Toshi Kazama then continued on to Taiwan, where they were joined by MVFHR Program Director Kate Lowenstein. There, in a series of events organized by the Taiwan Alliance to End the Death Penalty, the group addressed university audiences, gave media interviews,



The MVFHR group, with local allies, at a press conference in Taipei

and met with public officials. The U.S. MVFHR members were joined on panel presentations by Japanese murder victim's family member Mr. Harada, who founded MVFHR's affiliate group Ocean, and by a Taiwanese victim's family member who was speaking out in public for the first time. The MVFHR members also met privately with the mother of a Taiwanese airman who was executed by the military and whose innocence the government has recently acknowledged.

Toshi Kazama's solo visits to Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, and Hong Kong on behalf of MVFHR were all significant as well. In Japan, Toshi participated in a meeting of the group Ocean, and he also met with three key politicians. He was present at a symposium of the Japan Federation of Bar Associations, where the group voted in favor of abolition of the death penalty.

In Malaysia, Toshi's work

received significant press coverage, including a live radio interview that drew many listeners to the public presentation that followed. Toshi also had the opportunity to talk with a Member of Parliament and the Minister of Justice, both of which were productive meetings. This

visit to Malaysia was organized by the Chinese Commission for Civil Rights, AI Malaysia, and the human rights group Suaram.

In Singapore, Toshi's visit was organized by Second Chance, a group advocating on behalf of Yong Vui Kong, whose case has attracted

international attention because of the way it illustrates the impact of Singapore's harsh penalty for drug possession. Toshi's presentation, though advertised only through social media, attracted an overflow crowd, and the group is eager to have him return for a follow-up visit.

Finally, Toshi attended the "Conference on Capital Punishment in Asia: Progress and Prospects for Law Reform" in Hong Kong, and had the opportunity to connect with colleagues in the Taiwan Alliance to End the Death Penalty, the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty, and the Anti-Death Penalty Asia Network (ADPAN). We are grateful to all of these groups and appreciate being part of the ADPAN network, which enabled us to collaborate with our colleagues who are working so hard to abolish the death penalty in this critically important region of the globe.

Speaking Out about the Death Penalty in Africa

In conjunction with World Day Against the Death Penalty, four members of The Journey of Hope ... from Violence to Healing traveled from the U.S. to Uganda, Rwanda, and Kenya to speak out against the death penalty. The group included MVFHR board members Bill Pelke, whose grandmother Ruth Pelke was murdered in Indiana, and Bill Babbitt, whose brother Manny Babbitt was executed in California. They were joined by Randy Gardner, whose brother Ronnie Lee Gardner was executed in Utah (see MVFHR's fall 2011 newsletter), and Charity Lee, whose father was murdered when she was a young girl and whose own 4-year-old daughter, Ella, was murdered by Ella's older brother, who was only 13 years old at the time of the crime.

The group was invited to Uganda by Mpagi Edward Edmary, who was sentenced to death in 1982, when the country was under Dictator Idi Amin's rule. Amnesty International helped to spearhead a campaign that proved not only Edward's innocence but also the fact that the alleged victim was still alive. After Edward's release from prison in 2000, he launched a project – now under the auspices of the Dream One World Foundation – to build schools and orphanages for children who have lost parents in the AIDS epidemic and children who have a parent on death row. Edward also tries to publicize the terrible conditions on Uganda's death row. Though no executions have been carried

out since 1999, Edward remembers several that took place during his incarceration. “No one was ever given any notice that they would be executed,” he has written. “Each time we were taken by complete surprise. We lived in complete fear of any unusual activity from the wardens.”



Bill Babbitt meets with schoolchildren in Uganda

On their visit, the Journey of Hope group visited several schools and spoke to the audiences of children and teachers. “They were really intrigued by us,” Bill Babbitt recalls, “and surprised to hear all the problems that we have with the death penalty in the U.S.” Bill Pelke observed that because Uganda has not executed anyone in eleven years, some of the youth were not aware that the death penalty was an issue in their own country.

The JOH group visited both the women's and the men's death row units, and had the opportunity to tell their stories to the prisoners. “Visiting the prisoners on death row was a highlight of the trip for me,” says Bill Babbitt. “When we arrived, they were all singing and playing

band instruments. We saw guards embracing the inmates. I found that to be very unusual. It's not something we would see in the U.S. We also had the opportunity to meet with the warden and with the man who runs the prison school system in Uganda.”

Also in Uganda, the group visited with a woman named Robinah Namalwa, whose husband had recently been murdered. As so often happens when victims' family members meet, they were able to feel a connection as a result of their shared experiences.

From Uganda, the group traveled to Kigali, Rwanda, where the Rwandan government and the group Hands Off Cain, in collaboration with the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty, had organized an Inter-African conference against the death penalty. There Rwandan president Paul Kagame recalled the decision to abolish the country's death penalty in 2007. The JOH members spoke as part of the conference's closing ceremony.

The group concluded their tour with three days in the slums of Nairobi, Kenya, speaking to church and school groups. In so many ways, the tour offered powerful opportunities for spreading the message of victim opposition to the death penalty and forming connections with others who are working toward shared goals, and the Journey of Hope is grateful to all the MVFHR members who offered support and encouragement for the trip.

Coming Together: MVFHR's Seminar in New Orleans

On September 17, MVFHR held a seminar in New Orleans that brought together 42 victims from 21 states (AK, CA, CO, CT, DE, FL, GA, ID, KS, LA, MA, MT, NC, NH, NY, OK, OR, TN, TX, UT, WA). This victim-initiated, victim-led gathering was the largest gathering in a decade of victims' family members who oppose the death penalty and was primarily for survivors new to the abolition movement. The goal was to offer a safe space for victims' family members to come together, exchange stories, and talk about victims' voices in the abolition movement, and to provide training in speaking out against the death penalty.

MVFHR worked with our colleagues in state abolition groups to identify people who might benefit from the seminar and from the empowering experience of being with a larger group of victim-abolitionists. The seminar created a space where participants found a shared identity and solidarity in a room filled entirely with others who had experienced the killing of a family member and shared the belief that we must work together to help end the death penalty.

"We wanted to provide this seminar because we know how important it is to be with others who are like-minded and have gone through the experience we have gone through," says MVFHR Program Director Kate Lowenstein. "Being in the same room with each other, hearing each other talk about our experience of having our family member killed, and learning from

each other is what helps us feel supported."

The agenda included a history of victims in the abolition movement; an explanation of the national strategy to abolish the death penalty; discussion about the experiences and challenges of interacting and working with both the victims' movement and abolition movement; training in telling one's story and in self-care. Three breakout groups – family members of murder victims, family members of executed persons, and family members of victims of unsolved murder cases – provided people with an opportunity to exchange thoughts and experiences unique to that subset of victims. For many of the participants, the seminar was a transformational experience, inspiring them to return to their communities as more active

and effective participants in the work to repeal the death penalty. Here are a few representative comments from members who attended the seminar:

"There is nothing like a person that has walked the same path as I have. To hear how others have coped with loss helps me stay strong against the death penalty."

"I loved the relief of saying all that I felt."

"I feel more confident now in my public advocacy."

"This meeting helped us express our efforts to lead positive lives, and to plan further work toward our goal of abolishing the death penalty in the U.S. and worldwide."



The group at the conclusion of the seminar

MVFHR in Action

A sampling of recent MVFHR activities

In September, Renny Cushing represented MVFHR at Penal Reform International's conference on "Progressing toward abolition of the death penalty and alternative sanctions that respect international human rights standards." The participants, which included government officials and representatives of civil society and inter-governmental organizations from 31 countries, produced a series of recommendations called the London Declaration. MVFHR's particular contribution to this effort was this recommendation regarding victims' families: "In recognition of the suffering of victims of violent crime and their loved ones, call upon states to: ensure that all victims be treated with dignity, respect and equality throughout the criminal process, regardless of their beliefs about or position on the issue of the death penalty ..." and also this point regarding families of people who have been executed: "Mindful that the death penalty creates additional victims – the family members of those who have been executed – who are often forgotten, marginalised or stigmatised by society ..."

In October, Renny delivered the keynote address at the Families for Homicide Victims and Missing Persons conference in Colorado, and Texas MVFHR member Rena Beazley, whose son Napoleon was executed in 2002, gave a presentation, via Skype,

to an audience of law students attending a training organized by the British group Amicus. Rena, together with MVFHR Project Director Susannah Sheffer, described how the death penalty harms families of those who are executed, and talked about MVFHR's work in this area.



Photo by Mushegh Yekmalyan

Renny Cushing on the PRI conference panel with Alessandro Valdambri from the European Instrument on Democracy and Human Rights, Vera Tkachenko from the UN Office of Drugs and Crime, Maria Lensu from the European External Action Service, David Sellwood from Reprieve, and Jackie Macalasher from Penal Reform International

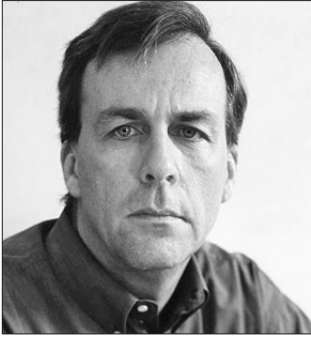
In November, MVFHR Board Chair Vicki Schieber participated in several speaking events organized by the Catholic Mobilizing Network Against the Death Penalty, including one called "Unimpeachable Voices Against the Death Penalty." Walt Everett spoke at a National Alliance on Mental Illness Criminal Justice Symposium and at a "Day of Responsibility" event held at a local prison. Around the world on November 30, several MVFHR members participated in events

observing Cities for Life - Cities Against the Death Penalty, the annual commemorative day organized by Italy's Community of Sant'Egidio. Illinois member Cathy Crino joined several others at the lighting of the Roman Colosseum, Alaska member (and MVFHR board member) Bill Pelke spoke at several events in Germany, and Massachusetts member Bob Curley spoke at the Boston College event titled "A Journey from Death to Life."

In January, both Bill Pelke and fellow MVFHR board member Bud Welch were invited to address groups in Alabama. Bud delivered the keynote speech at the Alabama Criminal Defense Lawyers Association's "Loosening the Death Belt" conference. That same weekend, Program Director Kate Lowenstein represented MVFHR at a statewide death penalty abolition summit organized

by Georgians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty, Amnesty International, and the Ebenezer Baptist Church. Kate spoke on a panel titled "Building Relationships with Those Directly Impacted by the Death Penalty." At the end of the month, New Hampshire members Arnie Alpert, Margaret Hawthorn, Laura Bonk, and Renny Cushing testified in opposition to a bill proposing to expand the state's death penalty.

Message from the Executive Director



Flying out of New Orleans after MVFHR's seminar last fall, my heart was full of the stories I had heard that weekend. Victims' family members had traveled from all over the U.S. to be together, and although I did my share of talking – about my own losses, and about what I had learned from a dozen years of work as an abolitionist – I also did a lot of listening. During one part of the day we had small-group sessions on specific topics, and the one I listened to was for family members of victims whose murder cases are still unsolved.

I've been doing this work for a long time, but even now there are times when what I learn catches me off guard and moves me as if I'm hearing it for the first time. And I was powerfully aware that for many of the participants in the New Orleans seminar, it was the first time they had come together in this way. A few weeks later, speaking with my MVFHR colleagues all the way across the globe in Mongolia, I witnessed other powerful first times as victim's family members in the audiences stood up and talked about the murder in their family – the first time they had spoken of it in public.

Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights is a small organization with big hopes. We believe we can keep making space for these powerful experiences and then raise up the voices of victims' family members so that together we can end the death penalty and take better care of each other in the aftermath of homicide.

I know you share these hopes. I know that you, too, hold this vision and this commitment. Please show your support for our work by sending us your check today – or by donating online at www.mvfhr.org.

In gratitude and solidarity,

Renny Cushing

YES, I want to support the work of Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights. Enclosed is a check with my tax-deductible contribution of

\$250 \$100 \$50 \$25 Other amount \$ _____

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

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To donate with a credit card, please visit our website, www.mvfhr.org

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Read more about MVFHR's work!



Visit our [website](http://www.mvfhr.org), with its overview of our work and projects, news of our activities around the world, Gallery of Victims' Stories, summaries of our efforts in the areas of victims' rights and human rights, and all the issues of *Article 3!* www.mvfhr.org

And for regular news and statements from families of murder victims and families of the executed throughout the United States and around the world, visit "**For Victims, Against the Death Penalty,**" named one of the top 50 human rights blogs of 2009. www.mvfhr.blogspot.com