



## Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights

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### A message for our friends and supporters:

We are pleased to present the Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights (MVFHR) annual report for 2005. During this first year of operation, Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights has earned a solid place in the anti-death penalty landscape as a vibrant organization of victim-abolitionists who are reframing the death penalty debate and helping to erode public support for executions.

MVFHR was founded in response to a recommendation, made during the victims' roundtable at the second World Congress Against the Death Penalty in October 2004, to establish an international network of survivors of murder victims that would amplify the voices of victims in the global death penalty debate. From the start, the goal was to unite survivors of victims of homicide, state execution, extra-judicial assassinations, and "disappearances" and to assert that the death penalty is a violation of the most basic of human rights.

On International Human Rights Day (December 10) 2004, the organizing board of directors, along with several allies and friends, came together at the UN Church Plaza in New York City to mark the official launch of Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights. At the end of our first year, Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights can point to a record of successful initiatives and collaborations and has established itself as an important new voice bringing together the issues of death penalty abolition, victims' needs, and human rights.

We extend our gratitude to all who helped launch this new organization and who join with us in working for victims and against the death penalty.

Sincerely,

Renny Cushing  
Executive Director

Bud Welch  
President

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## Framing the Death Penalty as a Human Rights Issue

A central goal of Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights (MVFHR) is to assert that the death penalty is a human rights violation rather than simply a criminal sanction. Toward that end, members integrate human rights language and principles into their public message and literature whenever possible.

During 2005 we had several specific opportunities to present our message within a human rights context and to work with other human rights activists. We provided a training to attendees at a conference of the U.S. Human Rights Network and participated throughout the year in the work of that group's Death Penalty Caucus, published an article titled "Human Rights and Victim Justice" in a special issue of *Peacework* magazine, and attended the annual meeting of the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva, Switzerland as part of a National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty delegation and as a representative of the World Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty. There we were able to listen to the debate that resulted in the passage of a resolution condemning the death penalty and urging nations to abolish it. There we also participated in a panel on international perspectives on the death penalty, along with the director of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights and a trustee of the Sudanese Organization for the Abolition of Torture.

## U.S. Program

### Policy Work

Because survivors of murder victims are commonly assumed to favor the death penalty, it is essential to abolition efforts that victims' family members who oppose the death penalty be ready to speak out when the issue is under review or debate. During 2005, members of MVFHR spoke against the death penalty throughout the United States: for repeal of death penalty legislation in Connecticut and Maryland; against reinstatement of the death penalty in Massachusetts and New York; at a hearing about the impact of executions in New Jersey, and at hearings on a bill that would abolish executions of juvenile offenders in New Hampshire. We worked in coalition with the Connecticut Network to Abolish the Death Penalty, New Yorkers Against the Death Penalty,

Maryland Citizens Against State Executions, Virginians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty, Massachusetts Citizens Against the Death Penalty, and the New Hampshire Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty, and we participated in regular conference calls of the Ad Hoc Death Penalty Network (a coalition of state and national groups), discussing strategy and priorities.

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**"Murder is, of course, a violation of the most basic of human rights: the right to life. Our members reject the premise that society should redress one human rights violation with another. We call upon society to act from a consistent human rights ethic in the aftermath of violence."** – from *MVFHR testimony at hearings regarding the possible reinstatement of the death penalty in Massachusetts, July 2005*

At key points throughout the year, MVFHR responded to requests from other abolition groups for a statement from victims' families in opposition to the death penalty. For example, when the 1000<sup>th</sup> execution since 1977 approached in November, a group of organizations and activists joined together to coordinate a public response to the event. MVFHR and the Journey of Hope collaborated on a victims' statement which was posted on the 1000<sup>th</sup> Execution website and read aloud at several gatherings around the country. Similarly, MVFHR worked with the death penalty caucus of the U.S. Human Rights Network to develop a statement in response to the highly publicized execution of Stanley "Tookie" Williams in California, and, at the request of the state group Death Penalty Focus, provided a statement about victim support of California's moratorium bill. At the request of Amnesty International, we participated in a training of the organization's State Death Penalty Abolition Coordinators.

## Public Education

Voices of victims who oppose the death penalty help move the minds and hearts of people who are considering the issue. Ongoing public education is a central part of our organization's work, and in 2005, members spoke at schools, universities, churches, conferences, and other gatherings in many states across the country, including Alaska, California, Connecticut, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Texas, Virginia, and Washington, DC. We addressed audiences attending "talk backs" after performances of *Dead Man Walking*, participated in a press conference that the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops held to announce the Catholic Campaign to End the Use of the Death Penalty, and brought new perspectives to audiences who commonly support the death penalty, such as the National Black Policemen's Association and the Teamsters' National Black Caucus.

As an organization of victims who oppose the death penalty, Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights is able to serve as a bridge between the death penalty abolition community and the victims' rights community, and to educate victims' service professionals about victim opposition to the death penalty. In 2005, members of our board of directors spoke at the annual conference of the National Organization of Victim Assistance, the first conference of the National Center for Victims of Crime, a Victims' Rights Week ceremony, and a training for Cook County (IL) Victim Advocates.

## Litigation

Early in 2005, MVFHR and other groups were successful in a suit regarding the right to protest the state of Connecticut's first execution in 45 years. MVFHR and three Connecticut victims' family members were the lead plaintiffs, joining with the Connecticut Network to Abolish the Death Penalty, Amnesty International, and the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty in filing a claim against the Commissioner of the Connecticut Department of Correction, the Commissioner of the Connecticut Department of Public Safety, the Commissioner of the Connecticut State Police, and the town of Enfield.

The complaint filed by the Connecticut office of the American Civil Liberties Union speaks for the rights of death penalty opponents everywhere: "This case is about the right of the public to express their views about the death penalty in general and this execution in particular – both of which are political issues of local and national importance – in a meaningful public forum rather than being corralled in a space controlled by state agencies. ..."

In November, MVFHR joined with the Gulf Regional Advocacy Center (GRACE), The Constitution Project, the Justice Policy Initiative, and other groups and individuals signing on to an *amicus* brief submitted to the U.S. Supreme Court. The brief challenged the constitutionality of a sentencing scheme under which a Texas defendant was sentenced to death. Specifically, the claim was that jurors in Texas did not have the opportunity to consider a sentence of life without parole as an alternative to the death penalty. As the brief stated, "The matter addresses the evolving standards of decency, and the emerging national consensus that jurors must be given an opportunity to incapacitate an offender without execution."

## "No Silence, No Shame" Initiative

At its first meeting in December 2004, MVFHR's board of directors decided that working with families of the executed would be one of the organization's areas of focus, and the "No Silence, No Shame" project emerged as one of the organization's major initiatives of 2005. We recruited a working group of family members of the executed with a history of activism against the death penalty, and invited the participation of other allies, including a defense attorney, a social worker with particular expertise in this area, and researchers/writers who have published books on the topic.

On October 27<sup>th</sup>, we held the official launch of the project in Austin, Texas, taking advantage of the logistical support of and public interest generated by the Journey of Hope's speaking tour and the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty's annual conference. Parents, children, siblings, nieces, and grandchildren of the executed came from Illinois, Missouri, North Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, Rhode Island, California, Massachusetts, Texas, Virginia, and Alberta, Canada to gather

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**"I'm proud to work against the death penalty with Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights, an organization that recognizes the grief caused by all kinds of killing, and I'm proud to join with other family members of the executed today as we say let there be no silence and no shame." – Bill Babbitt at the opening ceremony of the "No Silence, No Shame" project in Austin, Texas, October 2005**

for a private support and organizing meeting and then a public ceremony that received favorable press coverage, including an editorial in Austin's largest-circulation daily, the *American-Statesman*, titled "The Families Left Behind."

## Working with Colleague Organizations

As noted in the "Policy Work" section of this report, above, MVFHR worked with colleague organizations to provide victims' voices at key moments in the death penalty debate. As well, during our first year of operation we became organizational members of the U.S. Human Rights Network, the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty, the World Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty, and the National Center for Victims of Crime.

With several of our board members also serving on the board of directors of the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty, MVFHR worked closely with the NCADP to provide leadership and training in victim opposition to the death penalty, and provided speakers for victims' panels at NCADP's conference in Austin, Texas in October. Also in October, several MVFHR members participated in The Journey of Hope's two-week speaking tour throughout Texas, reaching hundreds of listeners in that critically important state.

Joining with Amnesty International, the American Bar Association, the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty, and other groups, MVFHR participated in the early planning stages of a campaign to end executions for persons suffering from mental illness. We anticipate continued involvement in this collaborative effort, and are working to secure funding to build the victims' component of the campaign.

## Media

A publicity guide put out this year by the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty listed "murder victims' family members" as chief among the key voices necessary to convey the abolition message; the guide included two photos of MVFHR press activity. In 2005, MVFHR members were interviewed for print, radio, and television news stories at critical junctures in the death penalty debate throughout the year – such as Connecticut's first execution in 45 years, the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling against juvenile executions in the *Roper v. Simmons* case, and the California execution of former gang leader Stanley "Tookie" Williams. Members published letters to the editor in local newspapers, met with newspaper editorial boards to give an in-depth briefing about victims and the abolition movement, provided background information to reporters and assignment editors, and worked with news producers to find victims' family members who could serve as spokespeople for particular stories. We also participated in a briefing about the death penalty for members of the foreign press, sponsored by the U.S. State Department.

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**“California can demonstrate its concern for victims by devoting resources to preventing violence and to addressing the real needs of victims in the aftermath of violence.”**

— *from a statement that MVFHR provided in December 2005, at the request of California anti-death penalty groups, in support of a bill that would impose a moratorium and create a commission to study the death penalty*

## International Program

Though our focus at the outset is on work within the United States, MVFHR was conceived of as an international organization and several of our founding board members did significant work outside the U.S. during 2005, speaking at the fourth annual Cities of Life conference in Rome and at other anti-death penalty events in Italy, speaking at an event organized by the Puerto Rican Bar Association's Committee Against the Death Penalty, participating in the victims' panel at the International Leadership Conference on Human Rights and the Death Penalty, held in Tokyo in December, delivering presentations against the death penalty in Japan, Turkey, and Taiwan (and in Taiwan, meeting with the president of the country to discuss the president's commitment to abolishing the death penalty in Taiwan). Through the member of our board of directors who lives in Uzbekistan, we continued to strengthen our connection with the group Mothers Against the Death Penalty and Torture. Through all of these alliances, we are laying the groundwork for further international work and, we hope, for an international gathering of victims who oppose the death penalty.

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**“It is my belief that people can compensate for their wrong-doings only when they are alive. The death penalty is too simplistic a way to settle crimes.”**

*— from an op-ed piece that Japanese MVFHR member, Masaharu Harada, brother of a murder victim, published in a Japanese news-magazine, June 2005*

## Organizational Development

An obvious priority for the founding board of directors during this first year was to develop the organization's infrastructure. We adopted Articles of Agreement, organizational bylaws, and a conflict of interest policy, and formally incorporated the organization. After preparing the application early in the year, we were recognized in October as a tax-exempt, non-profit organization under section 501(c)3 of the IRS code. We were able to hire a full-time executive director in March and two part-time program staff later in the year. We published an informational brochure and the first issue of the organization's newsletter, *Article 3*, and we developed a web presence at [www.murdervictimsfamilies.org](http://www.murdervictimsfamilies.org). We received our first four grants from institutional funders and began to build our individual donor and membership base through a successful outreach mailing in the spring.

## Looking Ahead

Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights is based on the belief that executions do not achieve justice for victims and the belief that the death penalty is, at heart, a human rights abuse rather than a criminal justice issue. Taken together, these two beliefs form a uniquely compelling message of opposition to the death penalty, which has fueled our organization's work throughout this successful first year of operation. As we look toward 2006 and beyond, we are well poised to continue building Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights into an increasingly strong and effective voice for abolition of the death penalty.

## Board of Directors and Staff

**Bill Babbitt**, member of the Board of Directors, has spoken publicly about the way the death penalty affects families of the executed since his brother was executed by the state of California in 1999. His story is told in the book *Capital Consequences* and in the documentaries *And Then One Night* and *A Question of Justice*. Babbitt has testified before legislative committees in Massachusetts and New Jersey and has addressed many college audiences about mental illness and the death penalty. He is currently involved in an initiative to promote legislation that would make it a mitigating factor in a capital case when a family member has turned the offender in to the police.

**Jennifer Bishop-Jenkins**, member of the Board of Directors, testified before the Illinois Governor's Commission on Capital Punishment and in the death penalty clemency hearings before the Illinois Prisoner Review Board. She has also spoken before state legislative committees and the Chicago City Council on issues of gun violence, crime prevention, and criminal justice reform. She serves on the board of the Illinois Coalition Against the Death Penalty and is the head of the Million Mom March/Brady Campaign in Illinois. Her story was featured in the documentary *Too Flawed to Fix* and the book *Don't Kill in Our Names*. Because her sister was murdered by a juvenile offender, Bishop-Jenkins has been outspoken about the reasons for victim opposition to the juvenile death penalty in particular, and she was interviewed about her work with MVFHR by National Public Radio and other media following the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in the *Simmons* case.

**Tamara Chikunova**, Vice-Chair of the Board, is the founder and director of the Uzbekistan-based group Mothers Against the Death Penalty and Torture. Following her son's execution in Uzbekistan in 2000, Chikunova and the other members of her group have worked on dozens of individual death penalty cases and have joined Amnesty International in campaigning against the death penalty in Uzbekistan. Chikunova has addressed a European Bank of Reconstruction and Development meeting in Tashkent, received a Colombo d'Oro in Rome in 2004 for her human rights work, and led the effort to hold an international conference against the death penalty in Tashkent in December 2003, a conference that the authorities blocked only hours before it was due to begin. Chikunova and her colleagues continue to work against the death penalty in Uzbekistan despite regular threats and harassment.

**Renny Cushing**, Executive Director, whose father was murdered in 1988, is a lifelong social justice activist and a pioneer in the effort to bridge the death penalty abolition movement and the victims' rights movement. He has testified before the U.S. Congress and several state legislatures and addressed hundreds of audiences in other venues in the U.S. and abroad regarding victim opposition to the death penalty. A former two-term New Hampshire lawmaker, Cushing sponsored a measure that would have abolished the death penalty in that state. He is the co-author of *Dignity Denied: The Experience of Murder Victims' Family Members Who Oppose the Death Penalty* and *I Don't Want Another Kid to Die: Families of Victims Murdered by Juveniles Oppose the Juvenile Death Penalty*. He is Vice-Chair of the board of the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty and also serves on the board of the American Society of Victimology and the steering committee of the World Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty.

**Reverend Walter Everett**, member of the Board of Directors, serves on the board of the Connecticut Network to Abolish the Death Penalty and has testified before the Joint Judiciary Committee of the General Assembly and spoken at numerous events surrounding the state's efforts to carry out its first execution in 45 years. Everett's son was shot and killed in 1987, and after a long struggle Everett was able to reconcile with the man convicted of the murder, to the extent that the two now speak together at prisons, universities, and churches. Reverend Everett has been active in several restorative justice organizations, including the Restorative Justice Task Force of the Christian Conference of Connecticut (for which he has served as Chair) and the Hartford-based Board of Community Partners in Action.

**Bill Jenkins**, member of the Board of Directors, is the author of *What to Do When the Police Leave: A Guide to the First Days of Traumatic Loss*, which he wrote for other victims following the murder of his own son in 1997. Jenkins serves on the Cook County (IL) Juvenile Probation Department's Victim Advisory Board and, through the Virginia Institute of Forensic Science and Medicine, trains those who work with victims of crime. He regularly gives workshops for the National Organization for Victim Assistance, Compassionate Friends, Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, and Parents of Murdered Children, bringing a dual focus on victims' rights and human rights.

**Toshi Kazama**, member of the Board of Directors, is a photographer who spent eight years gathering the images for "Youth of Death Row: A Photodocumentary Exploration." The documentary includes photos of 20 American youths on death rows across the country – photos that Kazama was able to take after being granted unprecedented access to the prisoners and the facilities – and portraits of the prisoner's family members, the victim's family members, the prison, the prison cemetery, the state's execution chamber, and the crime scene. Kazama has shown the documentary at universities, conferences, and other public forums in the United States, Japan, and Taiwan, and received considerable press coverage for the presentation and the discussions that follow.

**Kate Lowenstein**, Program Staff, is an attorney and social worker with five years of experience organizing and advocating for victims who oppose the death penalty. In 2004, Kate co-wrote *amicus curiae* briefs on behalf of victims' family members in two high-profile cases that were before the U.S. Supreme Court: *Schriro v. Summerlin* and *Roper v. Simmons*. In her work with MVFHR, Kate contributes expert knowledge about victims' rights issues and death penalty abolition work and keen sensitivity to the issues involved in working with victims and helping them to assert their rights and become effective spokespeople against the death penalty.

**Robert Meeropol**, member of the Board of Directors, is the younger son of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, who were executed by the United States government in 1953 for "conspiring to steal the secret of the atom bomb." In 1990 he founded the Rosenberg Fund for Children, which provides support to children of parents who have been harassed or jailed for their progressive beliefs. Meeropol is the author of the book *An Execution in the Family*, and he speaks widely against the death penalty, tracing the connection between the fight against Communism in the 1950s and the attacks on civil liberties and human rights in the current, post-9/11 era.

**Bill Pelke**, member of the Board of Directors, is the president and co-founder of "The Journey of Hope ... from Violence to Healing," an organization that hosts annual speaking tours led by murder victims' family members who oppose the death penalty. He is also the chair of the board of the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty and a board member of Alaskans Against the Death Penalty, and he has spoken against the death penalty in numerous forums across the United States and in 10 other countries. Initially a supporter of the death penalty, Pelke eventually became involved in an international effort to spare the life of the 15-year-old girl who was sentenced to death for the murder of Pelke's grandmother. He continued to speak out against the juvenile death penalty up until the Supreme Court's recent ruling in the *Simmons* case. He has been interviewed for numerous radio, television, and magazine stories.

**Sister Helen Prejean**, member of the Board of Directors, is the author of *Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States*, which became an international bestseller and has been translated into 10 languages and made into a film that opened many people's eyes to the issues surrounding the death penalty. Prejean has witnessed five executions in her home state of Louisiana and today travels the world educating people about the death penalty. Her new book, *The Death of Innocents*, is dedicated to Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights.

**Brian Roberts**, Chair of the Board, served as the U.S. representative to the first African conference on the death penalty last year. A criminal defense attorney with over a decade of experience in capital litigation in Texas, New York, and Washington, D.C., Roberts witnessed the execution of one of his clients. Later, Roberts' 18-year-old son was killed during a drive-by shooting in Washington, D.C., deepening Roberts' commitment to reducing violence among inner-city African-American men. He has served as the interim Executive Director and the state legislative liaison of the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty and now works as the coordinator of the Institutional Services Program for the D.C. Public Defender's office.

**Vicki Schieber**, Treasurer, has been outspoken in her opposition to the death penalty since her daughter was raped and murdered in 1998. Vicki and her husband Sylvester actively opposed the death penalty for their daughter's murderer and subsequently testified in support of a moratorium and death penalty study commission bill in Maryland and for an abolition bill in Pennsylvania. They have published op-ed pieces about the death penalty in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Washington Post*, and their story is included in an NBC film on the death penalty sponsored by the Robert Kennedy Foundation. Vicki has long been active in leadership positions in non-profits dedicated to literacy and programs for elderly, disabled, and low-income residents of Washington, DC. She holds a Masters in Business Administration and is Executive Director of the Council on Employee Benefits in Bethesda, Maryland.

**Susannah Sheffer**, Program Staff, has developed numerous written materials about victim opposition to the death penalty, including *Dignity Denied: The Experience of Murder Victims' Family Members Who Oppose the Death Penalty* and *"I Don't Want Another Kid to Die": Families of Victims Murdered by Juveniles Oppose the Juvenile Death Penalty*, both of which were co-authored with Renny Cushing. She is the author of four books, and in her work with MVFHR she draws upon two decades of experience interviewing, writing, and editing.

**Bonnita Spikes**, member of the Board of Directors, has a long history of working for social justice, including work for the NAACP, the Coalition of Labor Union Women, the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, the Teamsters Black Caucus Women Committee, and the Washington, DC and Baltimore Metro Labor Councils. The wife of a murder victim, she has testified against the death penalty in Maryland and works as an organizer for Maryland Citizens Against Sentenced Executions (CASE), which does outreach to murder victims' and prisoners' families and conducts trainings on the death penalty for religious and other organizations.

**Bud Welch**, President, became an ardent spokesperson against the death penalty after his daughter, along with 167 others, was killed in the bomb blast that destroyed the Murrah federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995. Welch has testified before 22 state legislative bodies, the U.S. House Judiciary Committee, the Russian Duma, and the British and European Parliaments, and addressed groups at universities, law schools, and religious organizations across the U.S. and Europe. He serves on the board of the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty and was a member of the board of the Oklahoma City National Memorial Foundation. For his work as an anti-death penalty activist, he has received several "abolitionist of the year" awards and other honors and been interviewed for numerous print and broadcast news stories.

## Financial Report

Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights (MVFHR) was founded in 2004 and was incorporated in the state of New Hampshire as a non-profit organization in 2005. MVFHR has received a determination letter from the Internal Revenue Service that it is a tax-exempt non-profit organization within the meaning of Section 501(c)3 of the Federal Tax Code. Donations to MVFHR may be claimed as a deduction for charitable contribution purposes on federal tax returns. Our federal tax identification number is 11-3725424. We are registered to receive online donations through the Network for Good. A copy of our Articles of Incorporation, Bylaws, and Financial Statements are available at [guidestar.org](http://guidestar.org), and our IRS Form 990 will be available there in April.

MVFHR maintains an account at Bank of America. Deposits are made at branches in New Hampshire and Maryland. The Executive Director and the Treasurer regularly review the bank statements and cash flow and consult with the organization's finance committee via monthly telephone conference calls.

The unaudited statements that appear on the following page show the organization's financial position as of December 31, 2005.

MVFHR is grateful for the support of the following foundations: Funding Exchange, Grassroots Exchange Fund, Haymarket People's Fund, Unitarian Universalist Fund for a Just Society.

Submitted by Vicki Schieber, MBA  
Treasurer

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## 2005 Financial Statement (unaudited)

<b>Ordinary Income/Expense</b>	
<b>Income</b>	
Contributions Income	76,755.07
Grants	8,400.00
<b>Total Income</b>	<b>85,155.07</b>
<b>Expense</b>	
Bank Service Charges	257.00
Equipment	2,012.80
Dues and Subscriptions	125.00
Fees and Registration	604.56
Occupancy	In-kind donation
Personnel & Payroll Expenses	47,680.42
Postage and Delivery	4,530.54
Printing and Reproduction	11,719.90
Program Expense	1,160.55
Supplies	458.87
Telecommunications	1,923.89
Travel	15,090.54
<b>Total Expense</b>	<b>85,564.07</b>
<b>Net Ordinary Income</b>	<b>-409.00</b>
<b>Net Income</b>	<b>-409.00</b>

### Balance Sheet as of December 31, 2005

Retained Earnings on 1/1/04	4,240.30
Net 2005 Income	-409.00
<b>Total Equity</b>	<b>3,831.30</b>

The Austin American-Statesman  
October 28, 2005

## The families left behind

### EDITORIAL BOARD

We hardly give them a second thought — if we notice them at all. But the family members of people who have been executed are no longer willing to suffer in silence. Their stories of survival after their parents, children or siblings were executed should give the public yet another reason to abolish the death penalty. At the very least, it should spur debate about whether executions are creating a class of victims who are being traumatized by state killing machines.

It goes without saying that family members and loved ones of murder victims deserve sympathy and support. They deserve justice from the courts, which should hold killers accountable, and if necessary, lock them away for life.

But the criminal justice system is imperfect; innocent people facing execution have been freed by post conviction DNA evidence. Some prosecutors have engaged in unethical tactics to win murder convictions; many poor defendants have been represented by incompetent lawyers; and some courts, including the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals, are focused on process — whether appeals were filed on time, for example — rather than on justice.

On Thursday, family members of people who were executed gathered in Austin to launch an initiative called, "**No Silence, No Shame.**" The event kicked off this weekend's conference of the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty.

Robert Meeropol, whose parents were executed in 1953, said no one has studied how children are affected when a parent is executed or whether society pays a cost for that. Meeropol founded the Rosenberg Fund for Children to honor his parents, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who were executed in the 1950s for conspiring to pass atomic secrets to the Soviet Union.

"Nobody ever talks about the children of those who have been executed," Meeropol said. "Nobody seems to care about them or know what impact this will have on them. I have a particular mission to bring to the attention of the American public that there are an untold number of children who are victims, and we have no idea what toll executions are taking on their lives."

If we needed another reason to abolish the death penalty, then families, particularly children, of executed people have provided a good one.