

Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights

2008 Annual Report



Contents

Introduction
p. 1

U.S. Program:
Policy Work p. 1-2
Public Education p. 2-
“Prevention, Not
Execution” p. 3
Working with Colleague
Organizations p. 3-4
Media p. 4
Listening to Each Other
p. 5

International Program
p. 5-6

Organizational
Development p. 6

Looking Ahead p. 6

Board of Directors
and Staff p. 7-9

Financial Report
p. 10-12

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Introduction

In its 2008 year-end report, the Death Penalty Information Center noted a continued downward trend in both executions and new death sentences and observed, among other conclusions, that “Victims’ families are increasingly dissatisfied with what the death penalty offers them.” More and more, victims’ families are challenging the common assumption that the death penalty offers closure and that anyone who has lost a loved one to murder will automatically be a supporter of capital punishment.

Throughout 2008, victims’ family members served on death penalty study committees, testified before legislative and commission hearings, were featured in large-circulation newspapers and magazines, and collectively addressed thousands of listeners at schools, churches, conferences, rallies, workshops, and other gatherings.

2008 was the fourth full year of operation for Murder Victims’ Families for Human Rights and marks another year of organizational growth and accomplishment, including the launch of an organizing and advocacy project that has drawn in new members and allies and is already shifting public thinking on the death penalty. As a victim-focused abolition and human rights organization, MVFHR brings together all types of survivors to declare that the death penalty, a profound human rights violation, has no place in a just society. This year’s annual report demonstrates that MVFHR continues to be an integral part of the movement against the death penalty and for victims.

U.S. Program

Policy Work

Because survivors of murder victims are commonly assumed to favor capital punishment, the voices of survivors who *oppose* the death penalty are in demand whenever the issue is under review or debate. Providing an organizational context and affiliation for individual family members to express their opposition to the death penalty, and helping victims speak out against the death at specific junctures in the debate, is a core part of MVFHR’s work.

In July, the Maryland Governor appointed MVFHR board chair Vicki Schieber to the state’s new Commission on Capital Punishment, making her the second MVFHR member to be asked to serve on a state’s death penalty study

MVFHR Annual Report

“They use the term ‘closure’ to try to persuade people that an execution will lessen their pain, perhaps end it. No way. There is just no way to end the pain, and certainly not by taking the life of another human being.”—from members’ comments in the special issue of MVFHR’s newsletter focusing on closure, Fall 2008

commission. Also in 2008, MVHFR members brought much-needed voices to the California Commission on the Fair Administration of Justice, testifying at a series of hearings, and to lawmakers in states where the death penalty was under review, such as Illinois, Montana, and New Hampshire.

As part of our “Prevention, Not Execution” project (see below), MVFHR took the initiative to convene a group of activists who are working in several states to introduce legislation that would ban the execution of people with severe mental illness. In addition to this new network, we continued to be active members of several groups and coalitions that came together to discuss strategies for opposing the death penalty: the Ad Hoc Death Penalty Network (a coalition of state and national groups), the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty affiliates, and the Northeast Regional Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty.

Public Education

Voices of victims who oppose the death penalty help move the minds and hearts of people who are considering the issue, and ongoing public education is central to our organization’s work. During 2008, MVFHR members spoke to a diverse array of audiences in a wide variety of venues: to attorneys at a special capital case defense seminar, to activists attending the U.S. Human Rights Network conference, to myriad new audiences along Pennsylvania’s “Voices of Hope, Agents of Change” tour and on the Montana Journey of Hope tour – and to hundreds of other school groups, church groups, conferences, and gatherings.

In 2008 we published a special issue of our newsletter challenging the idea of “closure,” and allies around the U.S. requested and distributed hundreds of copies of this new resource that helps advance public understanding about victims’ real needs in the aftermath of murder. We continued to add participants to our online Gallery of Victims’ Stories, and portions of the Gallery were displayed at theatrical events in New York and North Carolina. Several MVFHR members were also featured in a photo exhibit at the Texas Prison Museum.

Our “For Victims, Against the Death Penalty” blog, updated several times a week throughout the year, regularly presented our message of victim opposition to the death penalty through reports about our members’ work around the country, excerpts from their testimony, letters to the editor, op-ed pieces, and speeches, and summaries of relevant research and commentary.

MVFHR Annual Report

“Prevention, Not Execution” Project

Early in 2008, MVFHR joined forces with the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) to draw attention to the intersection between the death penalty and mental illness from the perspective of surviving family members. The project is part of a national campaign to end executions for persons with severe mental illness. NAMI, the nation’s largest grassroots organization for people with mental illness and their families, shares MVFHR’s belief that persons suffering from mental illness should be treated, not executed. Both groups are interested in preventing the conditions that lead to criminal violence and in raising public awareness about the effect of sentencing mentally ill offenders to death.

The project brings together family members of victims killed by persons with severe mental illness and family members of persons with severe mental illness who have been executed. Through their involvement with the project, family members who fit either or both of these profiles are able to give voice to their experience and, specifically, to offer a victim-based opposition to the death penalty for persons with mental illness.

After several weeks of research and outreach to families within our membership and to families new to MVFHR, we gathered a group together in San Antonio on October 3 to mark the official launch of the project. A private roundtable conversation was followed by a public ceremony and press conference. In the remaining weeks of 2008, we conducted in-depth interviews with project participants around the country, and that material will form the basis of a report that we will publish in conjunction with NAMI and release at NAMI’s annual conference in July of 2009.

The “Prevention, Not Execution” project opens up a new front against the death penalty, brings a victim perspective to a national campaign focusing on opposing death sentences for people with mental disabilities, and has attracted new members and new allies to MVFHR.

“We had no control over what happened to our daughter, but we can choose how we respond. For us, part of that response involves speaking out for violence prevention and against the death penalty for people with mental illness.”
—from the press conference announcing the launch of the “Prevention, Not Execution” project

Working with Colleague Organizations

In addition to the primary collaboration with the National Alliance on Mental Illness, the first phase of the “Prevention, Not Execution” project provided several opportunities to work closely with colleague organizations, particularly, in connection with organizing the San Antonio event, the Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty, the Texas After Violence Project, and the local Amnesty International Group. State groups in California, Florida, and Tennessee helped send participants to the event, and numerous groups around the U.S. helped to publicize it. As mentioned above (see “Policy Work”), toward the end of 2008 we convened a working group composed of those in the anti-death penalty and mental health communities who have taken a lead on this issue, and we continue to work

MVFHR Annual Report

collaboratively with those allies.

Apart from this specific project, we continued to work collaboratively with international, national, and local groups to amplify the voices of murder victims' family members and families of the executed within the death penalty debate. Whether we were working with a state group to organize victims' testimony for a hearing, referring member speakers, or participating in strategy discussions, our work throughout the year was closely connected to the work of other anti-death penalty activists in the U.S. and across the globe.

"The death penalty does not truly heal our anguish as surviving family members, and it does not make society safer. ... As victims' families, we all have reason to be angry and to work for change. I submit, however, that the death penalty serves as a distraction from victims' real needs, not a solution."

—from MVFHR's letter responding to a series of articles in Caribbean newspapers, December 2008

Colleague organizations sought out MVFHR's perspective and contribution on several specific occasions, such as the interviews that Human Rights Watch conducted with MVFHR members for its 2008 report, "Mixed Results: U.S. Policy and International Standards on the Rights and Interests of Victims of Crime," which analyzes how well the U.S. is meeting international best practices regarding treatment of crime victims, and the references to MVFHR material that are featured in Amnesty International's "campaign toolkit," released in early 2008 and titled "The Death Penalty: The Ultimate Punishment." As well, at the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty (NCADP) annual conference, MVFHR members joined with other allies to offer trainings on the victim perspective in several workshop sessions: "Family Members of Murder Victims: Stakeholders in the Debate," "Working with Murder Victims' Families," and "Case Studies of Success."

Media Work

"Families of Victims Reject the Death Penalty." "Murder victims' families say death penalty exacts toll on their lives." "Victim's Widow Testifies for bill on moratorium." "Victims' families want to redirect death penalty funding." These and other similar headlines from 2008 showcase media recognition of victim opposition to the death penalty. In addition to giving interviews to members of the print and broadcast media, MVFHR members wrote op-ed pieces and letters to the editor and were featured in films examining specific aspects of the death penalty and in National Public Radio's StoryCorps project.

Throughout the year we received frequent requests from U.S., European, and Asian journalists for a referral to a member in a particular area or for background information about victim opposition to the death penalty or the experience of families of the executed. The launch of MVFHR's "Prevention, Not Execution" project was covered by the *San Antonio Express-News* and by radio and television stations, including the Spanish-language network. Videos of MVFHR members were posted on The Hub, a site operated by the international human rights group WITNESS, through which human rights activists can share video and audio material. On World Day Against the Death Penalty, MVFHR videos were featured on the Hub's front page.

MVFHR Annual Report

Listening to Each Other, Affecting Each Other

MVFHR members participate in conferences, lectures, workshops, and other occasions of public speaking in order to educate the public and shift public policy, but meeting and exchanging stories with one another also affects our members in personal and often quite powerful ways. Notable examples from 2008 include the MVFHR panel at the U.S. Human Rights Network conference, at which a victim's family member and a family member of someone who had been executed had a powerful personal exchange in front of the audience, and the gathering that launched the "Prevention, Not Execution" project (see above), at which participants affected by murder, mental illness, and the death penalty were so moved by the exchanges that took place that one later described the occasion as "one of the most extraordinary experiences that I have had the privilege of being part of" and another said it gave her "the most serene peace I've ever felt, a kind of peace you can't get anywhere else."

Each year at MVFHR we learn more about the relationship between these private moments of exchange and the public activism in which our members engage. Our organizational role is to harness the power of these transformative conversations into action, and resource materials, that lead to change.

International Program

After the 2007 launch of our first affiliate outside the U.S., the Japanese group Ocean, MVFHR continued its work in Asia by giving workshops at the annual meeting of the Anti-Death Penalty Asia Network (ADPAN) and giving public talks in China and Japan. In July, Ocean held its first public conference, and the Japan Catholic Council for Justice and Peace, together with the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Japan and the Religious Network Against the Death Penalty, published a Japanese version of MVFHR's Gallery of Victims' Stories.

MVFHR members also spoke in Italy and Spain in connection with the Community of Sant Egidio's Cities for Life-Cities Against the Death Penalty tour, and MVFHR worked with our Amnesty International colleagues in the Caribbean – a region that is seeing a resurgence of support for the death penalty – to provide a speaker for several events in Jamaica and to submit a letter about victim opposition to the death penalty that was published in the Bahamas' largest-circulation newspaper.

Throughout the year, we continued to serve on the steering committee of the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty, and we participated in the group's 2008 General Assembly, which was followed by the World Human Rights Forum, held in Nantes, France. MVFHR was also part of a small group of U.S. activist who were invited to brief European delegates about the U.S. death penalty abolition movement. That event, held at the French embassy in Washington, DC, was the first seminar of its kind.

"On the first anniversary of the founding of Ocean, Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights would like to salute the group for its courage and dignity in serving as the collective voice of victims' family members who seek alternative responses in the aftermath of tragedy"—from MVFHR's statement at the first annual conference of Ocean, our Japanese affiliate group, July 2008

Earlier in the year, MVFHR was invited to a meeting, hosted by Amnesty International USA, with the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary, or Arbitrary executions. Several representatives from the U.S. anti-death penalty movement briefed the Special Rapporteur about issues regarding the death penalty in this country.

Organizational Development

In addition to the grants and donations that we received specifically to support the “Prevention, Not Execution” project, in 2008 MVFHR received its first long-term general operating support in the form of a grant that we will receive in installments through 2010. Coming as we approached the conclusion of our organization’s three-year start-up period, this support from an institutional funder indicates confidence in MVFHR’s ability to carry out sustained work over a longer term and to build upon our initial accomplishments.

This support enabled MVFHR to hire its first administrative staffperson, Priscilla Caputo, who comes to us with a background in non-profit work and victim support and has significantly enhanced the day-to-day operations of our Cambridge, Massachusetts office.

Looking Ahead

A couple of years ago an MVFHR member, testifying before a state legislative committee, challenged the lawmakers to learn more about the death penalty before casting their vote about it. “If, after your research, you can honestly say that the death penalty is going to be good for this state, is going to prevent murders or keep us safe, then come back and vote for it,” he suggested, but make the effort, do the research, first. Later, one of the lawmakers said that this testimony had persuaded her to change her vote from favoring the death penalty to opposing it.

As this MVFHR member did, many have suggested that the more people learn about the death penalty, the less inclined they are to support it. With this in mind, The World Coalition Against the Death Penalty has designated 2009 a year of education about the death penalty. As we head into our fifth year of operation at MVFHR, we look forward to joining in this worldwide effort to increase understanding of what the death penalty is actually like and how it affects everyone touched by it. We look forward to continuing to amplify the voices of victims and educating listeners, readers, and voters about victim opposition to the death penalty. Throughout our work, we will continue to put into action our belief that executions do not achieve justice for victims and that the death penalty is a violation of basic human rights.

We remain extremely grateful to all who support the work of Murder Victims’ Families for Human Rights.

2008 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 spoken at a press conference at the United Nations, testified before legislative committees in Massachusetts and New Jersey, and addressed many college audiences about mental illness and the death penalty.

Jeanne Bishop, Treasurer of the Board of Directors, is the sister of Nancy Bishop Langert, who was shot to death along with her husband and their unborn child in 1990. Bishop has testified before Illinois the Governor's Commission on Capital Punishment, the Illinois Prisoner Review Board, and several state legislative committees. She appears in the death penalty documentaries *The Innocent* and *Too Flawed To Fix*. Along with her sister Jennifer, she received the Brigid Award from Concern Worldwide, honoring women who exemplify justice, generosity, and compassion in their work and daily lives. Bishop serves as assistant public defender in the Office of the Cook County Public Defender and is an adjunct professor at Northwestern University School of Law in the trial advocacy program. She is the author of several law review articles and op-ed pieces, serves on the Advisory Board of the Northwestern Center on Wrongful Convictions, and volunteers for the gun violence prevention organizations Million Mom March and the Illinois Council Against Handgun Violence.

Priscilla Caputo, Administrative Staff, has worked for several years with families and victims of oppression and violence developing and directing a variety of clinical and community programs to provide support and equal access to crucial services within the medical, legal, and social service systems. She is a counselor, educator, and committed human rights advocate.

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. 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 serves on the board of the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty and the steering committee of the World Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty. He is a member of the New Hampshire State House of Representatives and of the Criminal Justice Committee of the National Conference of State Legislators.

Reverend Walter Everett, member of the Board of Directors, serves on the board of Pennsylvanians United Against the Death Penalty and speaks several times a month to audiences around the states. He has testified before the Joint Judiciary Committee of the Connecticut 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.

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 the daughter of a murder victim and an attorney and social worker with several 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: *Schrivo 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, Vice-Chair 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.

Vicki Schieber, Chair of the Board of Directors, 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 served for many years as 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 *Creating More Victims: How Executions Hurt the Families Left Behind*, 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.

Bud Welch, President of the Board of Directors, 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. 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, 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 Massachusetts. A finance committee, composed of members of the board and staff, reviews the organization's finances via teleconference call meetings.

The unaudited statements that appear on the following page show the organization's financial position as of December 31, 2008.

MVFHR is grateful for the support of the following foundations and groups in 2008: The Atlantic Philanthropies, Maverick Lloyd Foundation, Solomon Fund, MCADP Fund, Amnesty International Special Initiative Fund.

Submitted by Jeanne Bishop
Treasurer

**Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights
Profit and Loss**
January 1, 2008-December 31, 2008

Ordinary Income/Expense

Revenue

Contributions	46,465.84
Foundations	125,000.00
Total Income	171,465.84

Expense

Personnel	108,473.25
Total Personnel	108,473.25
Bank Service Charges	308.09
Computer & Electronic Equipment	5,078.62
Conferences and Meetings	1,441.96
Dues, Fees, Registration, Subscription	585.00
Insurance	493.00
Occupancy	1,100
Postage and Delivery	3,615.47
Program Expenses	580.74
Printing and Reproduction	10,458.11
Supplies and Office Equipment	1455.06
Telecommunications	3,772.29
Travel	22,557
Total Expense	159,918.59

Net Ordinary Income **11,547.25**

Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights
Balance Sheet
as of December 31, 2008

ASSETS

Current Assets	
Checking/Savings	
Certificate of Deposit	10,000.00
Checking BOA	2356.38
Savings Account BOA	25,000.00
Total Checking/Savings	37,356.38
Total Current Assets	37,356.38
TOTAL ASSETS	37356.38

LIABILITIES & EQUITY

Liabilities

Current Liabilities	
Credit Cards	
BOA Visa card	15.31
MVFHR AMEX	3,442.07
Total Credit Cards	3,457.38
Other Current Liabilities	
Payroll Liabilities	5,316.21
Total Other Current Liabilities	5,316.21
Total Current Liabilities	8,773.59
Total Liabilities	8,773.59

Equity

Opening Bal Equity	6,606.15
Retained Earnings	10,430.04
Net Income	11,546.60
Total Equity	28,582.79
TOTAL LIABILITIES & EQUITY	37356.38