



## Interview with Chris Brown, author of “Child of Grace: A Death Row Story”

Ines Aubert talked to Chris Brown in Alabama, 2020

**Chris, who are you and in which ways are you an expert on the topic “Death Penalty”?**

My father, Gary Brown, was executed by the State of Alabama on 24 April 2003, and in the sense of visiting death row for almost 17 years, I could be called an expert. During those years of visiting my father, I also had the opportunity to meet and speak with many of his friends on death row. I obviously also interacted with the Corrections Officers and others in the prison environment.

My father was a board member of an inmate-led organization called Project Hope to Abolish the Death Penalty, which still exists today. I helped him in producing a newsletter for the group and in developing their first website, and in so doing, I was exposed to many writings and ideas concerning the death penalty. Finally, near the end of his life, I was exposed to a lot of the political realities of the death penalty in a state like Alabama. He had a first execution date that was ultimately stayed by the U.S. Supreme Court less than 8 hours before he was to be executed. After that, a new governor and administration took office in Alabama, and we were put through a terrible process for requesting clemency with that administration before my father was finally executed.

**No doubt, you are an expert in many different aspects. Your father was sentenced to death when you were six years old. Can you tell us a little more about that?**

I describe all of the circumstances of my father going to death row in my book “Child of Grace: A Death Row Story”. I was 5 years old when the crime was committed and the trial took place, and I had turned 6 by the time my father went to death row. I was 22 when he was executed.

My father and 3 other men committed a robbery while they were drunk and high. The driver stayed in the car while 3 men went into the victim’s residence. The robbery wasn’t going according to plan when the ringleader of the group caused the situation to become violent. He forced my father to stab the victim many times with a small pocketknife. The ringleader then forced the other man to kill the victim with a kitchen knife, which he did. It is important to note that the man who struck the death blow served 10 years and was paroled, and the ringleader who caused the violence is still serving a life sentence. My father, the least culpable of the three, was the only one executed.

**I see that there would be a lot to ask and comment on the robbery and murder your father was involved in. But let me come first to the child that you were at the time of the crime. What are your memories of your father of the first five years of your life?**

My mother and father separated when I was a baby, and by the time I turned 3, I lived with my paternal grandparents, who legally adopted me and raised me. Because of that, I have hardly any memory of my father before he was incarcerated. He did move back in with his parents/my grandparents for a little while when I was about 4, and I have fond memories of playing with him during that brief time. Other than that, all my memory of him was during his incarceration.

**Do you remember what kind of games you played with your father?**

The only thing I specifically remember was a game we would play in the house. He would hide in one of the rooms and I would run down the hallway, where he would jump out and catch me. There are some pictures of us together during that time, but I was so young that I don't remember much.

**How and by whom were you informed about your father being locked up? Do you remember how you reacted or what you thought?**

I was too young to be told about anything that was happening during the time of my father's trial, and since he had hardly been present in my life before, I don't remember noticing his absence. I also don't specifically remember being told he had been convicted or sentenced to death, I just recall starting to make the long trips to visit at the prison when I was 6. My father converted to Christianity while he was in jail awaiting trial, and that completely changed him. From that point on there were frequent letters and phone calls, and visits as often as we were able.

**I imagine there was a moment when you realized that something was different with your father compared to other children's. Most of your school friends probably didn't make long trips to go visit their father.**

I had been adopted by my paternal grandparents, so everyone knew there was something different about my situation. There were a few other children living with grandparents or other relatives, but certainly none with stories like mine. Visiting him in prison was much different even from other children who might have to travel to visit a mother or father. I certainly realized my situation was different, but I often did not tell others exactly what the situation was.

**In what terms did people around you talk about your father and how did you talk about him?**

There were a variety of things other people said. Some wouldn't say anything about him, even if they knew all the details (most adults around me knew because it had been a sensational news story in the area). Some tried to be positive and spoke about his conversion to Christianity and the good things he now tried to do. Others of course were very negative. Some children who knew or heard about it said cruel things, and actually a few adults did as well. Some weren't overtly cruel in what they said, but made it clear

they favored the death penalty and were not bothered by the idea of my father being executed.

The way I talked about him also varied. Often I wouldn't say anything about him. If an acquaintance or someone who didn't know me well asked what my father did, I would talk about my grandfather instead. Rarely would I come out and tell someone new to me about the situation, I would just talk about my grandparents and not say anything about my biological parents. There was definitely a sense of shame, so I often avoided the topic. With people who knew me well, I might tell them a little of the situation, and I almost always spoke positively about my father and our relationship, particularly in light of his conversion to Christianity. In my rebellious teenage years, I would sometimes say something negative, or act like I was a real tough guy with my dad in prison and me just like him, but that was not very common for me. With the people I was closest to, I would talk about how much I missed having him there with me and how I hoped he wouldn't be killed.

**I believe that, as an adult, it's possible to talk with a child about difficult facts and by doing so, allowing the child to show his/her feelings. Even with a small child, I can talk about his/her father being in prison. By saying things like "It must be hard for you because I'm sure you love your father", I suggest that I understand how it must feel. The child might open up then and feel less alone. But of course, as the adult, I must come to terms with the difficult situation myself first, as otherwise I'm not authentic.**

**Do you think such an approach would have helped you when you were a child?**

I think it would have helped me to have adults I trusted to be more willing to talk about my dad. As a child, I did often feel alone, and that nobody else was able to understand what I was going through. Empathy from others would have been very good for me. Because I lived with my father's parents, they were of course struggling greatly with everything that happened, so it was difficult for them to help while they were in such deep pain themselves. Having others to turn to would have been helpful.

**In what ways was it possible for your father to be a father to you after he was incarcerated?**

My father frequently sent letters and called, and we visited as often as we could. At times, he even got people to send me birthday or Christmas presents so it was like getting a gift from him. He really did everything he could. As I became older, he truly became my confidante about everything from music to girls I liked to struggles I was having. When I began working at age 15, I paid for my own telephone line so that he could call and the two of us could talk without interruption. He was by far the family member I was closest to, and really the only adult I confided in very much. He listened well, was understanding, and gave good advice. In many ways, he was a better father from prison than many free men are.

**How does your father remain present in your life?**

The biggest way that my father is still present in my life is that he was instrumental in me ultimately becoming Christian myself. My faith is central to my life, and he had a tremendous influence on that faith. I also still have some of his Bibles and books, his study notes, and other material like that which allow me to feel close to him. Now that I have written my own book about our experience together, he has really become an important figure in my life again. I share about him in relation to the book and in relation to prison ministry volunteering that I do. And his story continues to have a positive impact on people long after his death.

**Back to the case of your father: what sentence should he have received and how would it have changed your relationship with him?**

As the least culpable in this crime, he should have received at most a parole-eligible life sentence, which would have allowed him to go before the parole board after 15 years in prison. A 20-year sentence with parole eligibility earlier would have been most appropriate.

It's hard to say how this would have changed our relationship. In the obvious sense, if he had been paroled after 15 years, he would have gotten out in time to see me graduate from college and to attend my wedding, and to know his grandchildren. I would probably still have a father now and my life would have been different in unknown ways. On the other hand, the gravity of his situation was part of what led him to fully repent and turn back to Christianity, so it's possible with a lesser sentence he may not have changed as completely as he did; I would like to believe he would have undergone that change either way, but it is impossible to know whether he still would have been the same kind of man as I remember him.

As to my relationship with him while he was incarcerated, I don't know that it would have been much different before the last few months. Death sentences take a long time to carry out, and in most cases never are carried out, so death is always lingering in the background, but it doesn't really feel imminent until the last few months. He probably would have been at a different prison much closer to home, so in a practical sense that would have been nicer.

**I find the thought that the gravity of a situation results in a positive transformation in inmates and people in general to be both sad and encouraging at the same time. I heard death row inmates say that they prefer being the person they have become in prison over being free as the person they used to be.**

I volunteer with Kairos Prison Ministry, and many times I have heard men say that prison was the best thing that ever happened to them. That is not due to anything positive about the prisons here, but rather that they were finally ready to listen to chaplains and teachers when they got to prison, and thus were able to transform their

lives. We all need to work on ways to reach these men when they are younger and give them the needed support so that it never takes imprisonment to spark change in them.

**I thank you so much, Chris, for sharing your story with your father. I wish you all the best.**

Book by Chris Brown: Child of Grace: A Death Row Story, Kindle Edition, 2019