



The Death Penalty only Creates more Hurt and Grief

By Gabi Uhl, Germany, December 2015

I became involved into the Death Penalty back in 1997, when I accompanied a friend of mine to Texas. She wanted to visit her pen pal Clifford Boggess who was on Death Row in Texas. After those visits in December 1997 I began to write to Cliff myself and that's how it all started. Although I knew him for not even six months, we became close friends. In June 1998 Cliff was executed by the state of Texas, and I witnessed his execution.

I hesitated for a while about writing again to someone on Death Row, but finally I wrote other inmates who lived on Texas Death Row, usually two or three at the same time. Twice a year I travelled to Texas to visit my friends. In 2006 and 2014 I again witnessed an execution.

Often I was asked why I cultivate friendships with people on Death Row, who are murderers. Even opponents of the Death Penalty sometimes ask this. For years I was struggling with an answer. It seemed easier to explain what my reasons were not - that I am not fascinated by murder and evil and that I do not pity "these poor murderers".

I don't want to play down or to trivialise what people on Death Row have done. I don't want to excuse their crimes. My heart feels honest sympathy with the victims and their relatives. But every human being is more than what he/she did on a certain day in his/her life.

Cliff Boggess was guilty of two brutal murders during two different robberies. But he was not born a murderer, nor did he stay the same after his crimes. When I got to know him almost 12 years after he was convicted, he had changed into a compassionate person who deeply regretted what he had done and the pain he had caused. He never was violent again, not even in self-defence in prison.

Cliff had a horrible childhood, characterised not only by neglect, but also by mistreatment and abuse. Nevertheless he never blamed anyone other than himself for becoming a murderer and ending up on Death Row. He was guilty, nobody and nothing forced him to commit the crimes. On the other hand I feel that if he had had a loving and caring childhood, most likely he would never have become a killer. It's my firm conviction that society, too, is to be held responsible for its crimes.

Kevin Kincy - I witnessed his execution in 2006 - said he was innocent. When I wrote to an inmate who claimed to be innocent for the very first time, I struggled and had to clarify with my inner self, how to deal with it. Who should I believe? I quickly came to the conclusion that I am only able to register that someone says he's not guilty. I can't judge if it's true.

Although I had no reason to mistrust Kevin, I was not able to judge in his case if he really was innocent. But what I do know is that the representation by his defence lawyer was rather bad. Kevin was in prison for about two years before his trial started, and he met his defence lawyer for the first time just three days before his trial!

Willie Trottie, whose execution I witnessed in 2014, wasn't innocent. However, his story of events was quite different from the version told by the prosecution. Willie said he acted in self-defence against his brother-in-law and that his wife was shot accidentally. Again I can't judge what really happened, but the fact that Willie never had the opportunity to tell his story in front of the jury is scandalous.

In Willie's case it was about a family drama. When he was executed his son was 22 years old. This young man lost his mother when he was a baby. Now the state of Texas took his father. It was heartbreaking to see him suffering from the execution of his father. And Willie's sisters, brothers and his father also had their own grief to deal with.

Cliff, Kevin, and Willie are among more than 530 people executed by the state of Texas since 1982. The world isn't any better since then. I am convinced that the execution of criminals only creates more hurt and grief. Sometimes I am asked what I would think if my child was murdered? I always wonder what the one asking me would think if his/her child would become a killer.