



The man I got to know was no longer the one who committed those horrible crimes

By Gabi Uhl, October 2010

Twice in my life I found myself in front of that window, staring at a man who was strapped on a gurney. And with my own eyes I saw them being killed right in front of me. I witnessed the executions of Clifford Boggess in 1998 and Kevin Kincy in 2006.

Kevin Kincy claimed he was innocent. To be honest: I can't judge if he really was. But I know for sure that the representation by his defense lawyer must have been very bad. Kevin was in prison for about two years, before his trial started. And he met his defense lawyer three days before the trial for the very first time...

Clifford Boggess, who was my first pen pal on Texas Death Row, was not innocent. He indeed was guilty of two heinous crimes. He murdered two men during two different robberies. He slashed the throat of the first one and he shot the second one. My honest sympathy is with the victims and their relatives. I do not excuse what Cliff has done in any way.

I got to know Cliff Boggess eleven years after his crimes, when he was on Death Row awaiting his execution. The man I got to know was no longer the one who committed those horrible crimes. He was compassionate, tender and caring. Although I knew what he had done, it seemed barely conceivable he had been able to kill people in such a brutal manner.

Nobody is born a murderer, and Cliff wasn't either. He was the eighth child of a manic-depressive and alcoholic drug addicted mother. When Cliff was eleven months old, all the children were taken away from their mother by the authorities, due to neglect and abuse. Only when she had sorted her life out, did she get the children back, one by one. When it came to Cliff, she declared that she had enough children, had no use for him, and waived her parental rights to the state.

After staying in two different foster homes, he was adopted at the age of two by parents who divorced two years later. At the age of four Cliff was given to the parents of his adoptive father and was raised by them. But they gave him very little love and understanding.

As a young adult he quickly felt at home in the company of drinkers and drug users, took drugs like LSD himself and drank a lot of alcohol. Because of alcohol and drug abuse he was kicked out of college and later suspended from the Army. After a failed attempt to sort out his life, he ceased to care about anyone or anything anymore, including himself. In his own words: "I went out and bought a case of beer, five hits of LSD, some ... speed ..., some cigarettes, and I began a VERY self-destructive 'spree' of drugs and crime that ended sixty-five days later with me in jail suspected (and guilty) of two murders."

Cliff never blamed his childhood for his crimes. He never blamed anyone but himself. He accepted full responsibility and said that only he himself and his actions had brought him to Death Row. But I wonder: If Cliff had experienced a better childhood, if he'd been raised by loving and caring parents – would he have become a murderer? Somehow I feel things would

have turned out differently for him. It's my belief, that not only the murderer, but society too has a responsibility.

Cliff Boggess lived on Texas Death Row for twelve years before he was executed. I am convinced he really changed during that time. According to his own statement his occupation with art and painting contributed fundamentally to this change. His painting enabled him to look inside himself, acknowledge and deal with the depth of his own nature for the first time. "His art was a way of changing himself from an angry youth to a young man who had empathy and love for people", according to his lawyer.

Another essential aspect for Cliff that contributed to his change was his faith in God, which he discovered during his years in prison. Whatever personal views one holds, the fact is that this faith gave Cliff an unbelievable amount of strength and inner peace. Out of this faith, Cliff learned and accepted that honesty was the right thing and admitted to his crimes, in the full knowledge this confession would cost him his life. I am convinced Cliff regretted his previous actions deeply with honest heart and would have done everything to have been able to undo the sorrow he had caused.

You may ask if Cliff was only play-acting. No, I don't think so. Several reports from fellow inmates confirm that he really changed and was not a pretender. One wrote about him: "Let me tell you, on more than one occasion I saw the man cry. Not because he wanted to make a show or anything... We both know Boggy was not a small man, but I also saw him more than once walk away when he was being threatened or taken advantage of. It's not very often in a place so filled with both hate and violence that you see a man like Boggy was. I just could never imagine him killing another human being."

In fact, he – like many others who are on Death Row – had committed murder. But human beings are able to take responsibility for their actions and change. The focus of Christianity is love and forgiveness, not hatred and revenge. I don't say, let murderers go free! If someone's guilty he deserves punishment and society has to be protected. But it's not necessary to kill to reach this goal. We don't live in the Stone Age anymore, but in the twenty-first century. We have high-security prisons to protect us from people who are still a danger to society.

More and more countries in our world do understand that Capital Punishment is archaic and they abolish the Death Penalty. It makes me feel sad, when I see the United States – with all its progress and being an outrider in human rights – associated for example with Iran, China, or Saudi-Arabia, when it comes to Capital Punishment.

If we want people to be convinced that killing is wrong, we should give the best example ourselves – and do without the Death Penalty. Our children learn from our actions and the way we behave. When Saddam Hussein was hanged some years ago, at least three young boys lost their lives – in Pakistan, Saudi-Arabia, and in Texas. They were accidentally killed while play-acting the execution of Saddam...

After Cliff Boggess was executed, the relatives of his victims seemed to have the same hatred in their hearts as before. I doubt that they got the inner peace and closure from his death that they

might have expected to. I even know that victims' relatives are warned by the prison staff who prepare them for witnessing an execution, not to expect too much from this experience.

I am firmly convinced that nobody gains anything from an execution. Statistics show clearly that Capital Punishment doesn't work as a deterrent. It doesn't bring the victims back to life and usually doesn't provide closure to their relatives. It only creates more hurt and grief, because the offender has a family and friends too.

In my opinion a main question remaining is this: If we believe God is able to forgive everybody who honestly and deeply regrets his actions, whatever this might have been, how can we deny someone the chance to change? People can change, even those who did the most heinous crimes. They should get a chance to change. Even staying in prison the rest of their lives, they could give something back to society – but they can't if they are killed. And if we don't detest anything more than murder, not even the state should needlessly kill anyone – not in our names!