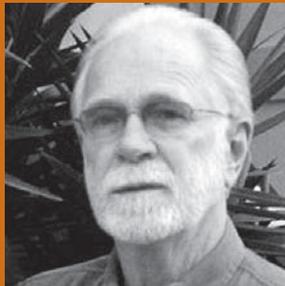




Voices

from

California Crime Victims
for Alternatives to the Death Penalty





The people you will meet in this booklet have endured unimaginable, heartbreaking loss: the murder of a child, a parent, a sibling, a friend. Despite all efforts, their wounds may never entirely heal.

Yet they choose to speak. They choose to raise their voices, individually and collectively against the death penalty and to share their most personal and painful stories of loss. Why?

Because all too often, the loved ones of murder victims find that other people purport to speak for them, while their own voices are stilled. They are invoked as a reason to support the death penalty because it is assumed that all victims' families want executions. Yet, for so many victims' survivors—like those featured in this booklet—the death penalty solves nothing and can even perpetuate their suffering.

California Crime Victims for Alternatives to the Death Penalty (CCV) is a coalition of murder victims' families, friends, and loved ones who oppose the death penalty. They have lost a family member to murder in California, or are California residents who have lost someone to murder in another state.

Members of CCV oppose the death penalty for many different reasons. Some have been lifelong opponents, while others formed their views only after being personally impacted by murder. Some CCV members were supporters of capital punishment, until they had to endure the pain and suffering associated with a long, drawn-out death penalty case. Now they feel that greater attention should be focused on the needs of victims and helping them heal. Others have been denied justice altogether: No one has ever been prosecuted for the murder of their loved one. They see resources that could be spent investigating unsolved crimes wasted on death penalty cases instead.

While the experience of each survivor may be unique, these families share a common hope—the hope that their stories will help draw attention to and support for the many victims who support alternatives to the death penalty.



The District Attorney assured me that the execution of the man responsible for Catherine's murder would help me heal, and for many years I believed him. But now I know that having someone murdered by the government will not heal my pain. I beg the government not to kill in my name, and more importantly, not to tarnish the memory of my daughter with another senseless killing.

My 19-year-old daughter, Catherine Blount, was murdered in the fall of 1980. Douglas Mickey was convicted of the crime and sentenced to death. He is currently on death row in California. For eight years following Catherine's death, I was consumed with a desire for revenge.

And then I began a four-year spiritual search and encountered a number of books and enlightened teachers that helped me learn about forgiveness. Twelve years after Catherine's death, I wrote a letter to Mr. Mickey telling him that I forgave him. The act of mailing that letter resulted in instant healing. I then realized that I did not need to see another person killed so that I could be healed. I found that love, compassion, and forgiveness are the way to healing.

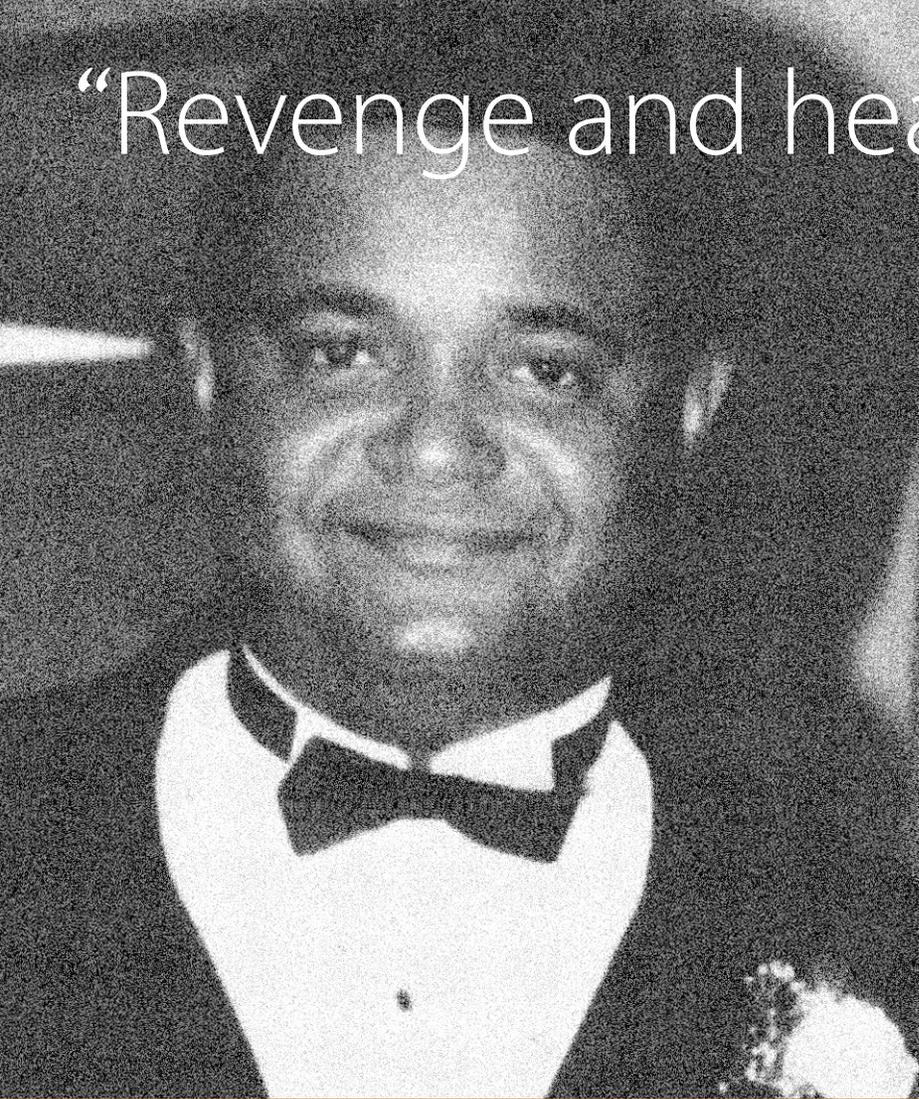
I've established a relationship with Mr. Mickey and consider him my friend. I travel all around this country and Europe teaching the healing power of forgiveness. My family and I oppose the death penalty under any circumstances.

— Aba Gayle, Catherine's mother

“Forgiveness has power.”



“Revenge and healing are incompatible.”

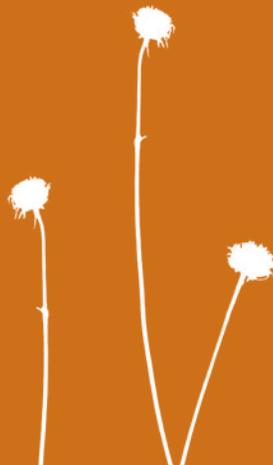


My older brother, Danny “Deuce,” was killed in a homicide in 1994. He was a Vietnam veteran who received the Bronze Star. After he returned from the war, he became a redcap at Amtrak and eventually worked his way up to engineer, commanding the route from Chicago to Los Angeles. I couldn’t believe my brother actually “drove” the train! He was an amazing guy and a fantastic big brother. His murder was a devastating blow to my family. Even though I was working as a death penalty defense lawyer at the time, I was shocked at my impulse to hunt down and kill the perpetrators myself. Eventually, they were caught, but legal technicalities led to the dismissal of the case. The cold, cruel reality I suddenly had to face was that no one was going to be held responsible for my brother’s death; there would be no “closure.”

Even if this distressing turn of events had not occurred, however, no attempt by the state to kill the persons who killed my brother would have brought him back. There was no “closure” to be had. Executing his killers, instead of honoring my brother, would have forever tied him to an act of violence that he did not initiate and would not have condoned.

All the death penalty can ever do for the victim’s survivors is bind them to more hate and more murder and keep them living in the fallacious hope that once the perpetrator is executed by the state, they will feel better. In my brother’s case, my family had no choice but to heal the pain. What we learned is the same thing society learns each time we travel the road to execution: Revenge and healing are incompatible. They are a contradiction in terms.

— **Aundré Herron, Danny’s sister**



“After the rage,
you do something
positive.”

While I was growing up, I had a great many theoretical conversations about capital punishment. It always seemed like a good idea, and I didn't consider my stance hypocritical when I started teaching youth gang members that killing is never a solution. Then, in 1994, my grandmother was murdered. She was in her eighties, and I had imagined that once you made it past 70 you didn't have to worry about dying violently. When Nana was killed, I forgot what I told my students every day, that all killing, all revenge is wrong; I just wanted the person who killed her to die. I lived with that poison in my soul for a while, and then I had to stop thinking about it because it was getting in the way of my own life.

Had I been there when they caught my grandmother's murderer, I would have wanted to kill her myself. I feel differently now. After the heat of the moment, you have time to think. You realize that killing the killer won't bring back the loved one. You realize that for most criminals the death penalty is not a consideration when they're committing their crimes, or if it is, it only inspires them to "go for broke."

I realized that the solution was to be pro-active rather than reactive. If you have the time and the energy, you do something positive to change things. You work with at-risk kids. You work with the media and try to make them become more sensitive to the families of murder victims. You work to dispel the idea that all families want or need revenge. You work to stop the killing.

—**Robyn Hernandez,**
Norma's granddaughter





My son, Tariq, was a young college student when he was shot by a 14-year-old gang member, Tony Hicks. Tony became the first juvenile in California to be tried as an adult. He was sentenced to 25 years to life. After my son's murder, I realized that there were victims on both ends of the gun.

I decided to become an enemy not of my son's killer, but of the forces that put a young boy on a dark street, holding a handgun. I reached out to Tony's grandfather, Ples Felix, in an act of forgiveness. Ever since our initial encounter, we have worked together to break the epidemic of youth violence, through programs that teach children there is an alternative to violence.

Tony has helped us deliver this message through letters and messages he sends from prison. We use these letters in our programs and they are having a positive effect on other kids. Think of how many kids he may save. That is going to bring a lot more healing than if he had received the death penalty.

I see the effect of Tony's message and know it would've been lost had Tony been punished with a government-mandated execution.

— Azim Khamisa, Tariq's father



“A message would have been lost.”



“I am still opposed to the death penalty.”

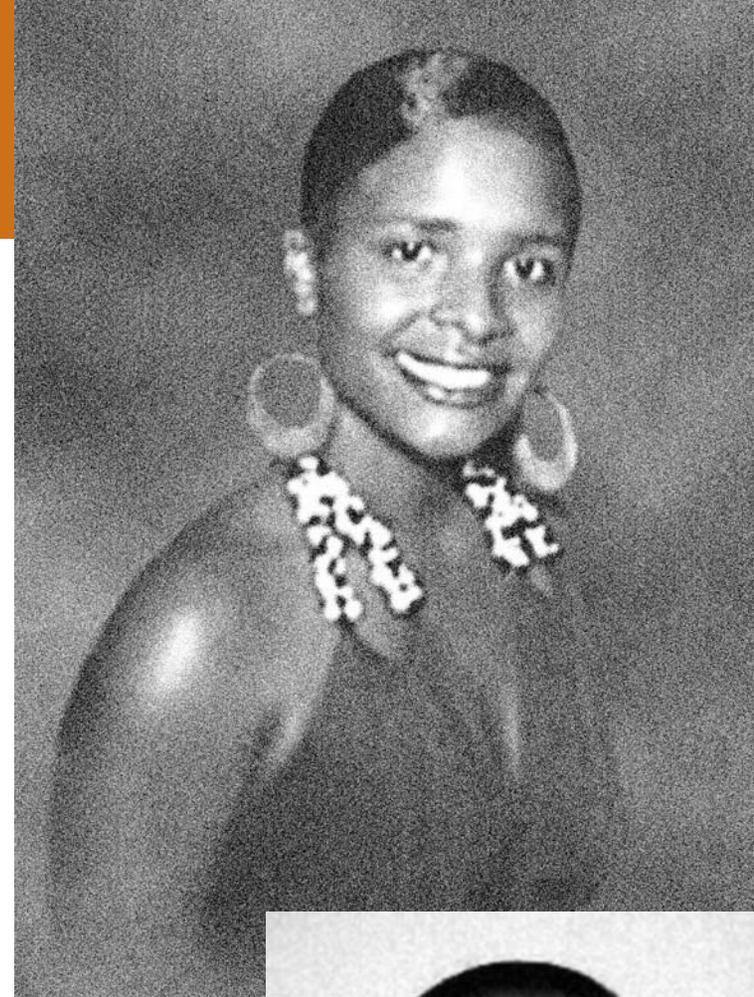
My daughter, Tameca Dunbar, was beautiful inside and out.

When she walked into a room, the room lit up. Tameca loved the three children she left behind. She was an extraordinary mother. Not only was she a wonderful mother, she was also an exceptional daughter, step-daughter, sister, step-sister, cousin, niece, aunt, and friend to many. She graduated from Georgia State University and used her degree to help people. Co-workers and clients described her as kind and committed. She worked with a heavy caseload but still found a way to give individual families attention when they needed it. On September 23, 2005, Tameca was murdered in her home. She was 32 years old and full of life. Tameca’s murder remains unsolved. Our family and friends will never be able to fill the void that her death has left.

I have always been opposed to the death penalty. My daughter was opposed to the death penalty. I do not believe that it is right for us to take a life. Before this tragedy hit my family, I was challenged by people who told me that if someone I loved were murdered I, too, would be for the death penalty. Now it has happened, and I can honestly say that I am still opposed to the death penalty.

I do not feel that another family should feel my daily pain because of what some feel is justice by taking another human being’s life. That is all that an execution would do, leave another family grieving.

— Dawn Spears, Tameca’s mother



“The death penalty reinforces the idea that murder is righteous when it’s used by the right people.”

Our 23 year-old son, Joshua “JoJo” White,

died instantly when he was shot for no apparent reason by a young stranger. JoJo was known for his work for peace and justice. He was a counselor with at-risk youth at Martin Luther King Jr. Academic Middle School in San Francisco. He opposed the death penalty, believing social justice, not vengeance, will make America and the world more peaceful.

We believe JoJo’s killer was not the only one responsible for this horrible crime. We think our entire society bears responsibility for the social conditions and attitudes that foster such violence.

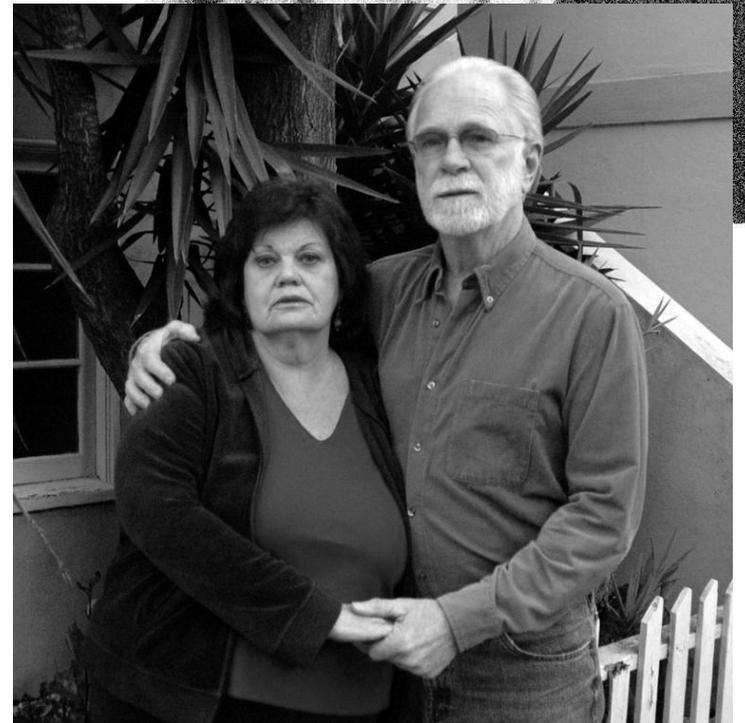
We do not think the execution of JoJo’s killer will make the world a better place. To the contrary, we believe that the death penalty reinforces the idea that murder is righteous when it’s used by the right people, an idea that JoJo’s killer apparently subscribed to.

If we were a truly just society, one that respected all children in all their great diversity, one that offered real opportunity, liberty, and justice for all, our son JoJo would be with us living a hopeful, loving, and generous life.

And so would the young man who killed him.

We honor JoJo’s life by working for peace and social justice—goals that were so important to him. I, Derrel, have often spoken publicly against the death penalty, including presentations at the California state legislature, Sisters of the Presentation California Conference, Northern California Conference of ACLU Youth, the National Convention of the Campaign to End the Death Penalty, and many anti-execution vigils at San Quentin Prison.

**—Derrel Myers & Naomi White,
JoJo’s parents**





I grew up during the 1960's in a liberal, Jewish family committed to social justice and where education was everything. My father, Marvin Jawitz, a lawyer, commuted from our home in New Rochelle to his office in Harlem, which he shared with his brother, Alan.

On February 11, 1980, three young men on drugs and looking for money went on a shooting spree in my father's office. My father was one of three people shot that day. Two days later he and another man died.

I was 17 and, like my three siblings, in college. As education was everything, we all continued on in school. I failed out of the first college, and then the second, finally graduating from the third school. I then went on to medical school and am now a podiatrist with my own practice.

The killers were apprehended and given prison sentences, not capital punishment. I realize now and am so appreciative that our family did not have the added burden of a death sentence. A death penalty trial would have been the final blow for an already devastated family.

Not having the death penalty allowed me to grieve at my own pace, in my own time frame. It took me years to say publicly that my father died and only lately, 25 years later, can I say he was murdered.

When I discovered MVFR (Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation) through a commentary in the Napa Valley Register, I realized I had an avenue to have my feelings known. I want no death penalty in my name. I don't want another person dead. It would not have helped my healing. I learned well what my father was trying to teach me. Education is everything. I want money to be spent in schools, in preschools; we must tap into a child's potential during the earliest years and work to ensure that children are given the opportunity to thrive. Help the children so they don't have to live a life of crime.

—Katrina Di Pasqua, Marvin's daughter



“A death penalty trial would have been the final blow for an already devastated family.”

“Anticipating an execution would be an obstacle to our healing.”

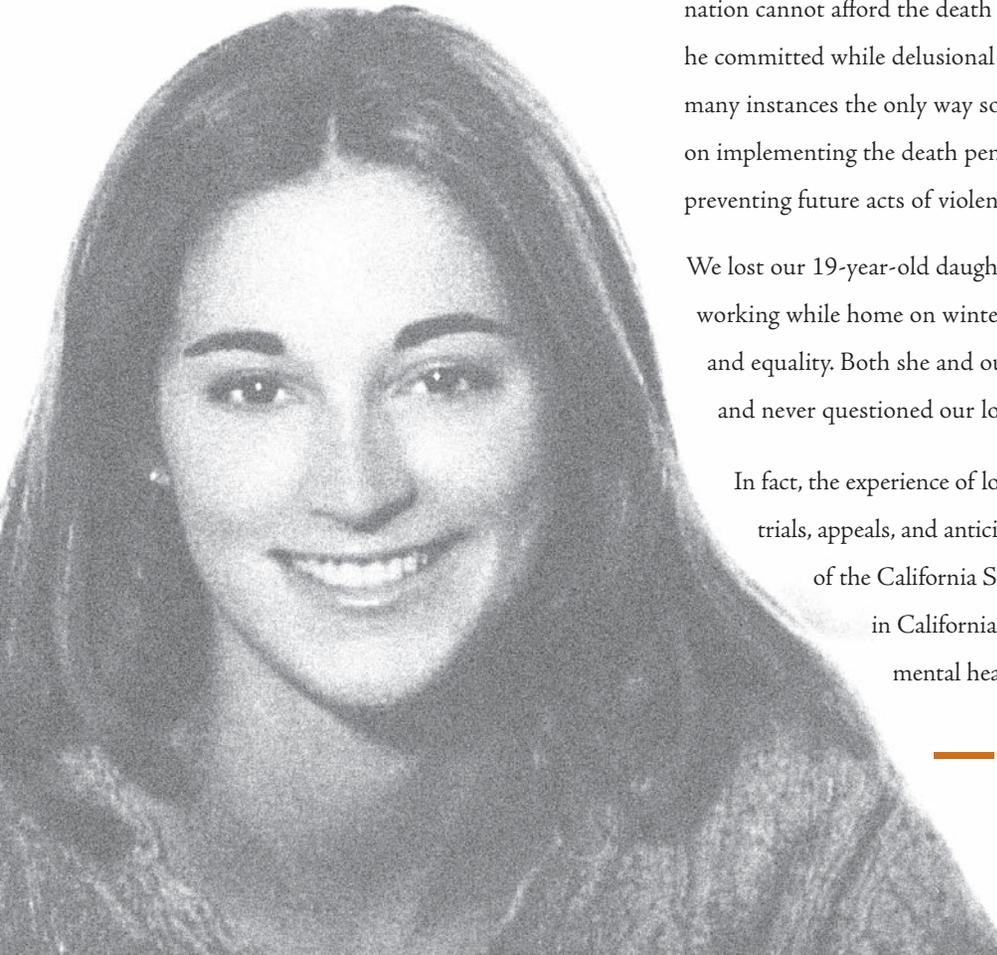


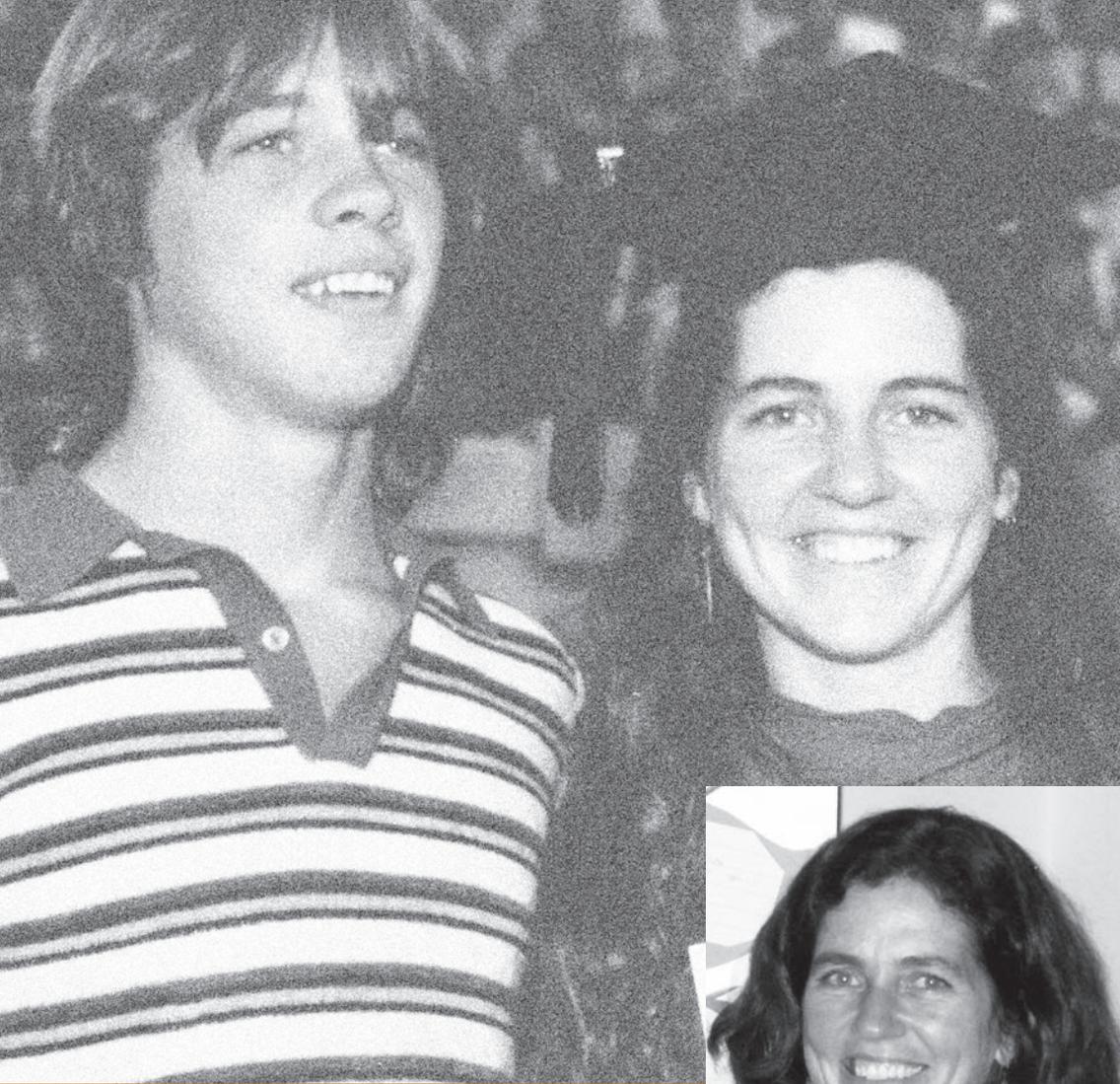
We must ask what the death penalty says about us as a society, rather than focusing on the offender. Our nation cannot afford the death penalty; the cost, both morally and financially, is too high. To execute Laura’s murderer for an act he committed while delusional with a severe disease is, to us, simply wrong. Our prisons are now filled with the mentally ill, and in many instances the only way someone can receive proper medical care is by committing a crime. The financial resources now spent on implementing the death penalty would be better spent if redirected to treatment of those with serious mental illness, thereby preventing future acts of violence.

We lost our 19-year-old daughter, Laura, when a mentally ill patient opened fire at the behavioral health clinic where she was working while home on winter break from college. For her entire life Laura had been committed to social justice, non-violence and equality. Both she and our family had been opposed to the death penalty. Following Laura’s death, we leaned on these values and never questioned our long-held anti-death penalty beliefs.

In fact, the experience of losing our daughter served to strengthen our convictions, because we realized that years consumed by trials, appeals, and anticipating an execution would be an obstacle to our healing. Since losing Laura, we have testified in front of the California Senate in favor of a death penalty moratorium. We have advocated for improved mental health care in California. As a result of our efforts we have helped pass two bills, one allowing for court-ordered, out-patient mental health treatment and a second increasing funding for mental health services.

— **Nick & Amanda Wilcox ,
Laura’s parents**





“We can’t change the past, but we can surely change our reaction to it.”



My brother, Bo, was shot and killed on September 29, 1984. The offender was quickly apprehended and never denied his guilt. Two strangers’ paths crossed and changed the course of many lives. The offender received 25 to life, and at the time I wondered if the possibility of the death penalty would have deterred the young man from shooting my brother.

Shortly after Bo died, I trained to become a medical doctor and now work at a California state prison for men. Over the years, I have come to understand that each man can rediscover the kernel of goodness inside himself. By using the death penalty as a form of punishment, we take that possibility away from him and, by extension, we all suffer.

Two years ago, I sought out the inmate, Ronnie Fields, who killed my brother. We now communicate on a regular basis by letter and in-person visits. During this journey, I have included my father, who had long harbored resentment towards the man whose actions changed his life. Now, my father has been able to have his questions answered, and his outlook has changed dramatically. He has let go of the negativity that had consumed him for the past 20 years. Had Ronnie been put to death, my father very likely would be stuck in a dark place to this day.

We can’t change the past, but we can surely change our reaction to it. I feel so sad for the families who feel that the death of another person will somehow bring them satisfaction; since how can another’s suffering ever really make us truly whole?

—Denise Taylor, Bo’s sister

My brother, Robert James Kerr,

was found lifeless, shirtless, barefoot, and without identification on July 12, 2003 in Everett, Washington. It took weeks for investigators to identify him. I spent that time becoming increasingly worried and finally alarmed when he did not arrive for a scheduled visit and when my calls to his cell phone were answered by a stranger.

Bob was brutally beaten and strangled. His financial accounts were used for weeks after his murder. Bob had given up his PIN number and other personal information on the night of the crime. The coroner's report confirmed the horrible circumstances under which the information was obtained.

In the days and weeks that followed my brother's murder I was immobilized by the trauma. I craved information about who killed him. I wanted this person, this criminal, brought to justice. I wanted to be able to tell my daughter that society would find a just way to respond to this merciless act.

I am still waiting, four years later, for a suspect to be named and for justice to take its course. It has been agonizing for me to go through the pain and grief of Bob's violent death. But the possibility of the death penalty for the murderer is an additional burden and a cruel twist that adds to my sense of victimization.

I have never and will never support the death penalty. I know now, more than ever, that killing is wrong. Revenge will not bring my brother back and it will not bring me peace. I honor my brother's life and my memory of him by standing against the practice of delivering justice through execution.

— Judy Kerr, Robert's sister



“Justice by death would only worsen my pain.”

“Revenge is not justice.”

My twin boys were opposed to the death penalty, so I’m not taking a stance against the death penalty just for myself. Albade and Obadiah Taylor were 22 years old when they were killed while working on Obadiah’s stalled Cadillac in East Oakland. Obadiah had planned to own a barbershop someday, and Albade had recently received a promotion at the law firm where he was employed. They weren’t in gangs, they didn’t carry weapons, they didn’t sell drugs – they were innocent bystanders when they were shot and killed at close range.

My children wanted to help people, and I know they wouldn’t want another family to go through the trauma of losing a child. My children knew that killing was wrong.

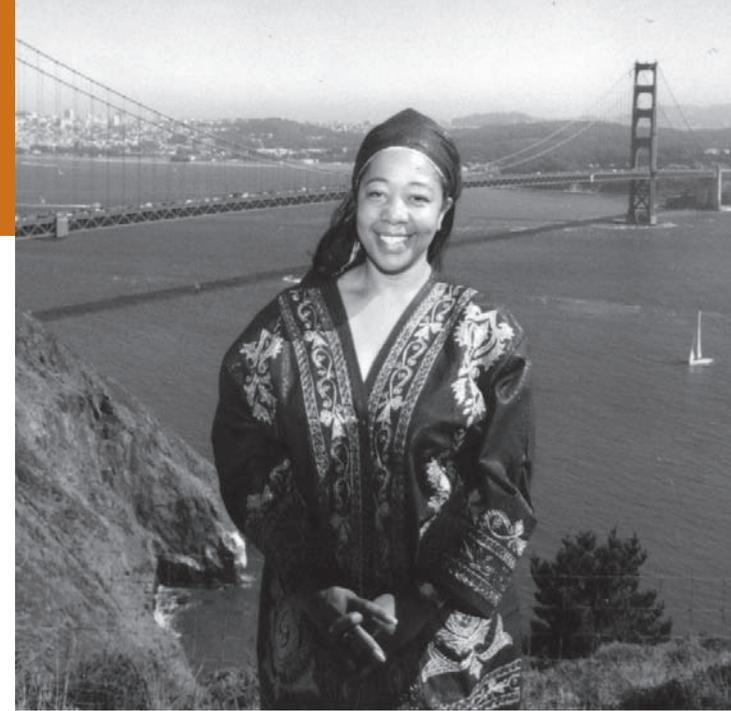
I can’t imagine what it must feel like to be a mother and have a child on death row.

Revenge is not justice. When my boys were killed I told people in our community that I didn’t want revenge.

Taking another person’s life does not stop violence; there’s a contradiction in responding to murder by executing people. It’s not truthful to tell people not to use violence to deal with their problems, when the state is killing people. I believe that the death penalty encourages violence.

If the government really wanted to end the violence, it would take the millions of dollars it is wasting on the death penalty in California and use it for violence prevention for youth, rehabilitation, and victim services.

— Lorrain Taylor, Albade & Obadiah’s mother



“A life is a life.”



My son, Donald Bruce Crutcher,

was a cabinetmaker. At the young age of 22, he became a victim of homicide.

Donald and his girlfriend, Lorelei, were at a party. When Lorelei had to go get something from Donald's car she was confronted by a group of young men. Scared, she locked herself in the car and started yelling and honking the horn, while the men were trying to break the car windows. They shot at her twice when they couldn't get in the car.

Donald came out to find Lorelei trapped and a man slashing his car tires. When Donald neared the car, the man turned around and stabbed him in the stomach. My son was stabbed again and then shot while trying to get away. Only one of the attackers was ever charged with a crime, and that man died while assaulting another person after his release from prison seven years later.

I have always been firmly opposed to the death penalty. For me, it is a question of faith. The death penalty is a sin that violates the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill." By allowing the death penalty, we are allowing ourselves to sin. By not fighting against it, we give our consent to murder. Morally it is wrong. According to my faith, it is wrong. I have seen nothing to justify the death penalty.

More killing would not have been the answer for Donald, or our family. Knowing the hurt my family felt, we could imagine a mother and a father going through the same thing we did. In fact, I have seen that hurt in a mother whose son was executed. He, too, was murdered, but by the State. A life is a life, and we should not allow the State to continue killing people in our name.

—**Vera Ramirez-Crutcher,**
Donald's mother

California Crime Victims for Alternatives to the Death Penalty (CCV) is project of
Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation, Death Penalty Focus, and the American Civil Liberties Union of Northern California.

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