



DEATH PENALTY TESTIMONIALS



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Background:

Can you tell me a bit about your school and work experiences?

I graduated from the Humphrey Institute in 2008 where I studied global policy and human rights and focused on international human rights law. For a class, I was allowed to do an internship or project with an outside group and The Advocates for Human Rights was one of my options. I worked there for two semesters and worked on the Death Penalty Project for four months. Right now, I work with three different non-profit groups. Witness for Peace is a social justice organization that deals with U.S. corporate policies in Latin America, Child Protection International focuses on child protection in Southern Sudan, and Citizens for a Safer Minnesota works on reducing gun violence.

Before working on the Death Penalty Project with The Advocates, how did you feel about capital punishment? Were you actively opposed to it or involved with any other campaigns or organizations?

I was always against capital punishment. I've been involved in human rights and social justice issues since my sophomore year of college, but I had never worked specifically on the death penalty before. I was excited because I feel it's an issue that gets overlooked within human rights. People tend to look at it as a criminal punishment issue instead of a human rights issue, especially since the federal government approves of it.

Experience with The Advocates:

Were there any noteworthy events or court cases in your experience?

There had been very quick moratorium on the death penalty on the federal level while I was with the Death Penalty Project. It was during the Baze v. Rees Supreme Court case. Two men were arguing that execution by lethal injection violated their 8th Amendment protection against cruel and unusual punishment. There was a moratorium on lethal injection for a few months, but the court eventually upheld lethal injection.

I think lethal injection makes a lot of people feel better about the death penalty. There is a belief that it is painless or fast; in reality the process is often botched and can be extremely painful. And regardless, the act is morally reprehensible. Does it really matter if the method is humane or not? What it really comes down to is whether you support the death penalty or not. Groups like Amnesty International and the Death Penalty Information Center don't support a "more humane" way of using the death penalty. Maybe you could put a stop to lethal injection by calling it cruel and unusual, but even if it weren't, the death penalty would still be fundamentally wrong.

Did any of these events change the way you looked at capital punishment and the criminal justice system?

No specific events really did, but through doing research for the Death Penalty Project, I learned a lot about different groups and movements. I was especially interested in groups such as Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation. There is a sentiment that one's feelings about capital punishment may change when faced with great trauma; I was impressed by number of people who have cause to support death penalty but choose not to. I also found it interesting, if difficult, to read the profiles of people on death row.

Personal Stance:

What component of the death penalty do you find most troubling?

There are so many things. We are the only Western country that continues to use the death penalty. Furthermore, so many of the people on death row don't have the resources or money or legal support to adequately to defend themselves. Perhaps most importantly, the death penalty is so final and irreversible. Once it's done, it's done. Passing that final judgment is problematic for



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many reasons, not the least of which is that mistakes are made and cannot be fixed. But even if we could make it 100 percent foolproof, I still wouldn't support it. Fundamentally, I'm opposed to the death penalty because I don't believe that we have the right to make that decision, and because I don't believe that it promotes peace in our society nor does it ultimately make people feel more secure. If we say we're against killing people, then we just have to be against killing people. It can't be O.K. in one circumstance and not O.K. in another.

Some who support the death penalty argue that the death penalty deters crime, that life without parole isn't enough to keep criminals off the streets, and that the death penalty is just. How would you respond to these and other pro-death penalty arguments? How would you persuade a neutral party to oppose the death penalty?

The statistics on deterrence just aren't there. More importantly, I don't think capital punishment promotes reconciliation and healing for the families who have been victimized.

Capital Punishment in the United States and Around the World:

How do you feel about documents such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which protect the right to life and prohibit inhuman punishment? Many countries have signed and/or ratified these documents but still use capital punishment. Do you feel that there is any way the global community or the United Nations can do anything to enforce these commitments to human rights?

I'm a huge advocate for international human rights laws. The international human rights treaties of the United Nations, for example, are the product of collaboration between most of the countries in the world, and are reflective, I believe, of what we want our values to be. They are not always reflective of where we are, but rather of where we aspire to go. Unfortunately, the U.N. does not have adequate power to enforce international laws, but when governments agree to adhere to these values, individuals and organizations can do a lot to push the government to defend human rights.

How can international organizations that document human rights abuses, such as Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch, facilitate this enforcement?

These groups are an example of how we can push governments to stand up for human rights. When it comes to human rights, social justice, racial justice, and gender equality, sometimes we need to push the laws beyond public opinion. I think if more states fight to get rid of capital punishment, then that will put pressure on other states to do the same.

Would it take another Supreme Court decision to ban capital punishment in the United States? Is there any other way to end federal use of the death penalty despite the Gregg v. Georgia ruling? What do you think would be the best course of action?

The Supreme Court and its decisions can have a profound effect on the protection and furtherance of human rights norms. Another potential way to eliminate the federal death penalty is to push more individual states to abolish the death penalty. If more states do get rid of capital punishment, the federal government will be under more pressure to do the same.

Is this an issue that you are still actively involved in?

Yes, but on different level. I work with Citizens for a Safer Minnesota, which works for more responsible gun policies, and involves many people who have lost family members, friends, spouses to gun violence. It's a parallel issue because there's a lot of interaction with people who have suffered as a result of violence. I think it really is important for me to keep bringing up the issue and be an anti-death penalty advocate in whatever work I do. The way that we deal with crime and punishment is fundamental to the security that people feel within our society. Ultimately, I want to live in a country and a community that supports peace, and to me that means working to end the death penalty.