

AFSC Central Region Justice Stories, Fall 2007

Confronting the Death Penalty

By Faheemah Thabit, AFSC St. Louis

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I conducted a death penalty workshop at the Illinois Yearly Meeting of Friends this summer. An older woman attending the workshop recently lost her mother, who was a resident in an assisted living facility. One of the facility workers took the lives of several residents. This person was found guilty and sentenced to many years in prison.

After viewing the film “12 Minutes,” the woman had mixed fillings. She wanted to sympathize with the young man on death row in the film, partly because he was leaving behind an innocent child. She became a little emotional because she then thought about her mom and the person that took her life. I then shared my story of several family members being killed and how I got over my anger and sadness. Everyone in the group listened to the woman and reassured her that her feelings were valid. The woman also commended me for having the courage to share my story and said that, in some ways, her heart felt a little lighter. It was a very good and healthy discussion.



Faheemah Thabit at the Illinois Yearly Meeting.

Missourians Against the Death Penalty will co-sponsor, along with MADP St. Louis Chapter, the upcoming Listening Project in the African American community on the death penalty. The MADP St. Louis chapter is working with AFSC St. Louis to map the locations in which to conduct the interviews.

The Commutation of Justice for a Lakota Man

By Richard Iron Cloud, AFSC ONERC Program on Pine Ridge

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In July, I was invited by Arnie Berkland, a retired businessman from Sioux Falls, to attend the commutation hearing for Timothy Caffery, a Lakota man who is currently serving life for manslaughter at Sioux Falls State Penitentiary. The hearing began with introductions of Tim’s supporters to the Parole Board, and then they brought Tim Caffrey into the room. He sat at the center of a table.

We waited in nervous anticipation for the Parole Board to get on with its session; they finally allowed Tim McCaffery to express himself. He acknowledged that he did not deserve anything, but wanted consideration from the Parole Board for himself. He said my family has forgiven me and that means a lot for me, my mother forgave me on her death bed, and my sister forgave me, she is now departed. He said I loved my father. Tim cried, "I didn't see any other way to get out." I recognized Tim is a Wable'nica (an orphan). He is one of many lost children of the Lakota Nation, like many other children in his situation growing up he had to do without. He was talking about his abusive foster father in Martin SD. In his own words he grew up tough and had a negative attitude. Tim is one of over 400 people from the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation who currently reside in the Sioux Falls S.D and other institutions throughout the US.

After each of Tim's supporters spoke, the Parole Board voted unanimously to commute Tim's sentence. All of us were surprised and elated. Usually the Parole Board deliberates for about a week before their decision. This was a first, voting right after the testimonies. Now it has to go to Governor Michael Rounds for final approval and his signature....

The Border is Wider than a Fence

*By Mike Gray, AFSC/IMYM Joint Service Projects
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My sabbatical has ended, but I can't get Mexico out of my mind. From Cinco de Mayo to Esmeralda Clark's quinceneara, I crossed borders and cultures many times. I struggled to understand. And I struggled to explain. The border is wider than a fence. Culture is more than a language and a set of clothes.

One of the great things about working in Mexico is the siesta. After a long morning picking fruit or mesquite beans, you can retire to a cool space, eat, visit, swim, shower, read or nap while you recover from the morning. After the heat of the day passes, you are ready to go back to work.

We have spent Thanksgiving with the Comca'ac (Seris) for many years now. This year, I have agreed to paint Berta Estrella's home. Berta is an unmarried elder. She shares her home with a wheel-chair bound brother and usually an unmarried sister. This summer, various relatives from Punta Chueca also lived with her for short periods. Berta supports herself and the house by weaving baskets. The Council of Elders suggested that we paint her house. If we finish quickly, we will also paint some other homes.