

Speakers and Workshop Presenters

Shujaa Graham was exonerated in 1981 from California's death row. As a prisoner at San Quentin in the 70's, Shujaa became part of the prison activist movement, a reflection of the struggles against racism and injustice in the outside communities. In 1973, because of his leadership in the prison movement, Shujaa was targeted and framed in the murder of a prison guard at the Deul Vocational Institute in Stockton, California. The community became involved in his defense and supported him throughout four trials. Shujaa and his co-defendant, Eugene Allen, were sent to San Quentin's death row in 1976, after a second trial in San Francisco. The district attorney had systematically excluded all African-American jurors, and in 1979, the California Supreme Court overturned the death conviction. After spending three years on death row, Shujaa and his co-defendant continued to fight for their innocence. A third trial ended in a hung jury and after a fourth trial, they were found innocent. As Shujaa often says, he won his freedom and affirmed his innocence in spite of the system. He is a member of the Journey of Hope & From Violence to Healing and Witness to Innocence. Curtis McCarty was exonerated in 2007 after serving 21 years — including 19 years on death row — for a 1982 Oklahoma City murder he did not commit. Curtis was convicted twice and sentenced to death three times based on prosecutorial misconduct and testimony from forensic analyst Joyce Gilchrist, whose lab misconduct has contributed to at least two other convictions later overturned by DNA evidence. In 1986, Curtis was convicted of a 1982 murder in Oklahoma City and sentenced to die. Citing misconduct by the prosecutor and a police lab analyst, the Court of Criminal Appeals overturned the conviction, and Curtis was retried in 1989. He was again convicted and sentenced to death. In 1995, the appeals court upheld his conviction but threw out his death sentence; in 1996, he was sentenced to death again. In 2005, the Court of Criminal Appeals again overturned his conviction, citing the continued pattern of government misconduct — and new DNA tests showing that semen recovered from the victim did not come from McCarty. He has toured and spoken about his case, along with several exonerated prisoners with the Journey of Hope & From Violence to Healing and Witness to Innocence. Ron Keine was wrongfully convicted of murder and sentenced to death in New Mexico. Ron was nine days from execution when the real murderer confessed to a preacher. Along with three co-defendants, Ron Keine was convicted of the murder, kidnapping, sodomy and rape of University of New Mexico student William Velten in 1974 and was sentenced to die in New Mexico's gas chamber. An investigation by The Detroit News after Ron and his co-defendants were sentenced uncovered lies by the prosecution's star witness, perjured identification given under police pressure, and the use of poorly administered lie detector tests. Ron spent 22 months on death row until the real killer came forward and confessed. At one point, Ron says, he was so close to going to the gas chamber that an assistant warden came to talk to him about what he wanted for his last meal. In late 1975, a state district judge dismissed the original indictments and the four men were released in 1976 after the murder weapon was traced to a drifter from South Carolina who admitted to the killing. The murder weapon, a 22-caliber pistol, was found only after a search warrant was issued to open the sheriff's safe. Not only was the murder weapon found, there was also dated evidence showing that the gun was hidden from the defense at the original trial. Since his exoneration, Ron has traveled the country to tell his powerful story of innocence with the Witness to Innocence Project. Perry Cobb spent eight years on death row in Illinois. On November 13, 1977, Melvin Kanter and Charles Guccion were shot to death during a robbery of a hot dog stand on Chicago's north side. Perry Cobb and Darby Tillis, who knew nothing of the crime, were charged with the murders and sentenced to death. No physical evidence linked either one to the killing. Perry and Darby did not know one another. The prosecution's case relied on the testimony of Phyllis Santini, who went to the police with a story implicating Perry and Darby. Both men professed their innocence, but police found a watch resembling that worn by one of the victims in Perry's room. Perry claimed that he bought the watch for \$10 from Santini's boyfriend, Johnny Brown. The first two trials resulted in hung juries. The all-white jury in the third trial sentenced both men to death. They spent more than a decade in prison. Yet, due to judicial error and blatant racial bias — blacks had been aggressively kept off of the third trial's jury — the Illinois Supreme Court reversed the case in 1983. After the reversal, Rob Warden published an article detailing the evidence in Chicago Lawyer that was read by Michael Falconer. Falconer, a recent law graduate from DePaul University, was a former co-worker of Phyllis Santini's. While working together she confided to Falconer that she and her boyfriend — Brown — once robbed a restaurant and shot someone. It was revealed that Phyllis Santini had framed Perry and Darby to cover for herself and her boyfriend. Furthermore, she received cash in exchange for her testimony against the co-defendants. A fourth trial was ordered. The fourth trial, too, ended in a hung jury. Finally, a 1987 bench trial resulted in the exoneration of Perry Cobb and Darby Tillis. They had endured a record five trials for the same charge and spent eight years on death row. Despite all the evidence against Brown and Santini, the two have never been charged. Derrick Jamison spent 17 years on death row in Ohio for a crime he did not commit. Derrick is attending as a member of Witness to Innocence. In February 2005, Ohio Common Pleas Judge Richard Niehaus dismissed all charges against Derrick after his conviction was overturned three years earlier. Jamison was convicted and sentenced to death in 1985 based largely on the testimony of Charles Howell, a co-defendant whose own sentence was reduced in exchange for testimony against Derrick. Statements were withheld that contradicted Howell's testimony, undermined the prosecution's explanation for the death, and ultimately would have incriminated other suspects for the murder. Two federal courts ruled that the prosecution's actions denied Derrick a fair trial. Today, Derrick is fully aware of the inequality of the criminal justice system. "There is a double standard when it comes to justice in our judicial system, especially with wrongful conviction," he says. "If you are a minority or a low-income citizen, the pursuit of justice can be an elusive one. But if you are rich it happens overnight." Although his resentment towards the system is subsiding, Derrick continues to express anger about

how the 17 years he spent on death row impacted his life and the lives of his family members. At the time of sentencing, he was incredibly troubled because of his unjust imprisonment. "I was very angry, furious and distraught. . . all the emotions that stir up anguish. It made me feel it was over for me. Not only did that sentence affect me, it was the demise of my mother and father." Derrick currently lives in Cincinnati, where he expresses daily gratitude for his release. "In the 21 years I experienced 'dead man walking' I never had anything to smile about," he says, "but on that day, I felt the smile come from within my heart. The sun shone down on me that day." Juan Melendez - Raised in Puerto Rico, Juan Melendez was working in Polk County as a fruit picker before he was sentenced to death in 1984 for the 1983 killing of an Auburndale beauty salon owner named Delbert Baker. A police informant implicated Melendez and another man. The second man cut a deal with prosecutors and testified against Melendez, but 12 years later, he recanted, saying he was coerced. Juan Roberto Melendez-Colon spent seventeen years, eight months and one day on Florida's death row for a crime he did not commit. Upon his exoneration and release from death row on January 3, 2002, he became the 99th death row inmate in the country to be exonerated and released since 1973. There was no physical evidence ever linking Juan Melendez to the crime and his conviction and death sentence hinged on the testimony of two questionable witnesses. Despite his innocence, Juan Melendez's conviction and death sentence were upheld on appeal three times by the Florida Supreme Court. In September of 2000, sixteen years after Juan Melendez was convicted and sentenced to death, a long-forgotten transcript of a taped confession by the real killer, was fortuitously discovered. Ultimately, it came to light that the real killer made statements to no less than sixteen individuals either directly confessing to the murder or stating that Juan Melendez was not involved. In a seventy-two page opinion in which she overturned Juan Melendez's conviction and death sentence and ordered a new trial, Judge Barbara Fleischer went to tremendous lengths to underscore the injustices that had been bestowed upon Juan Melendez and to show that an innocent man was on death row. She chastised the prosecutor for withholding "crucial" evidence pertaining to the credibility of the State's two critical witnesses and she set forth in meticulous detail the "newly discovered evidence," including numerous confessions and incriminating statements made by the real killer to friends, law enforcement officers, investigators and attorneys that substantiated the defense theory that Juan Melendez was innocent. Without admitting any wrongdoing, the State of Florida declined to pursue a new trial against Juan Melendez because one of its key witnesses had recanted and the other had died. Upon his release from death row, without bitterness, anger or hatred towards those responsible for wrongfully convicting and sentencing him to death, Juan Melendez has traveled throughout the United States speaking to audiences about his story of supreme injustice. When he is not speaking throughout the country or abroad, he works at home in Puerto Rico in a plantain field where he counsels troubled youth who work alongside him. As a former migrant farm worker, Juan Melendez's idol and inspiration was and continues to be Cesar Chavez. Bill Pelke is president of Journey of Hope ... From Violence to Healing. He recently authored a book entitled Journey of Hope...From Violence to Healing, which details the May 14, 1985 murder of his grandmother Ruth Pelke, a Bible teacher, by four teenage girls. Paula Cooper who was deemed to be the ringleader was sentenced to die in the electric chair by the state of Indiana. She was fifteen-years-old at the time of the murder. Bill originally supported the sentence of death for Cooper, but went through a spiritual transformation in 1986 after praying for love and compassion for Paula Cooper and her family. He became involved in an international crusade on Paula's behalf and in 1989 after over 2 million people from Italy signed petitions and Pope John Paul II's request for mercy, Paula was taken off of death row and her sentence commuted to sixty years. Bill, a retired steelworker, has dedicated his life to working for abolition of the death penalty. He shares his story of forgiveness and healing, and how he came to realize that he did not need to see someone else die in order to heal from his grandmother's death. He also helps organize Journey tours nationally and abroad. Bill has traveled to over forty states and ten countries with the Journey of Hope and has told his story over 5,000 times. Terri Been is the sister of Jeff Wood, who is on Texas death row convicted under the Law of Parties for a murder committed by someone else. Jeff never killed anyone. He was sitting in a car outside of a convenience store when someone else went inside and killed someone. Jeff did not know that the other person planned to rob or kill anyone, but Jeff was sentenced to death because of the Texas Law of Parties. Terri successfully lobbied the Texas House of Representatives in 2009 to pass a bill to ban executions of people convicted under the Law of Parties. The bill passed the House, but was killed in the Texas Senate after Governor Rick Perry threatened to veto it if it was approved. Delia Perez Meyer has been fighting for years to prove the innocence of and to save the life of her brother Louis Castro Perez, who is on death row in Texas. Delia is a Commissioner on the Austin Human Rights Commission. She is a member of the board of directors of Texas Moratorium Network. She also works closely with the Journey of Hope … from Violence to Healing, CEDP-Austin and many other anti-death penalty organizations. John Holbrook is a photographer from Fort Worth, Texas. Holbrook's recent photographs of Texas death row inmates began their international tour in 2008 at the Norwegian Opera house in Oslo. The tour includes an exhibit and a lecture from John about his experiences photographing death row inmates and his 17 years of experience as a Private Investigator working on Texas capital murder cases. The exhibit was shown in the Texas Capitol during the 2009 legislative session. The tour continues throughout Europe and the U.S. Steven Crimaldi is the National Coordinator of the Dead Man Walking School Theatre Project. Steven will give a presentation discussing religion and the death penalty. He will also explain the Dead Man Walking School Theatre Project and let students know how they can get involved in putting on a production of the play at their schools or in their communities. Dead Man Walking School Theatre Project integrates the power of theatre arts and academic study into the national discourse on the death penalty to replace ignorance, apathy, and cynicism among young people regarding the death penalty with information, introspection, and inspiration. Previously, Steven entered the Jesuit novitiate in Grand Coteau, Louisiana after earning a Master's in Theological Studies in Cambridge, MA. Prior to his life with the Dead Man Walking School Theatre Project and the novitiate, Crimaldi worked for Sen. Chuck Schumer in Washington, DC. He is also a poet. Susannah Sheffer of Murder Victims' Families for Human

Rights will present a workshop at Alternative Spring Break on mental illness and the death penalty and specifically on MVFHR's "Prevention, Not Execution" project. MVFHR last July issued a report entitled "DOUBLE TRAGEDIES: Victims Speak Out Against the Death Penalty for People with Severe Mental Illness". Susannah has developed numerous written materials about victim opposition to the death penalty, including "Dignity Denied: The Experience of Murder Victims' Family Members Who Oppose the Death Penalty" and "I Don't Want Another Kid to Die: Families of Victims Murdered by Juveniles Oppose the Juvenile Death Penalty", both of which were co-authored with Renny Cushing. She is the author of four books, and in her work with MVFHR she draws upon two decades of experience interviewing, writing, and editing. Brian Evans works for Amnesty International USA's Death Penalty Abolition Campaign. Before moving to Washington, DC, in 2006 and taking a job with Amnesty International, Brian was a founding member of Texas Moratorium Network. Alison Brock is Chief of Staff for Texas State Representative Sylvester Turner. She is one of the most accomplished Texas legislative aides concerning criminal justice issues. In 2006, she broke open an investigation into sexual abuse at the Texas Youth Commission. In 2007, the Texas House honored her with a resolution and standing ovation. Mary K. Poirier, B.S.W., M.S.W. (cand.) is a capital trials mitigation specialist. Her work saves people from being sentenced to death. She will talk about working on capital trial teams with lawyers and investigators, as well as how activists can support legal teams. She works for the McCallister Law Firm in Missouri and has worked on capital trials in several states, including Texas. She has been a trial mitigation specialist for 5 years and a board member for Missourians to Abolish the Death Penalty for 2 years. Visit her law firm's website by clicking here. Vincent Villano is on the staff of Campus Progress in Washington, D.C. He is a 2008 graduate of American University, where he studied Political Science and Education. Elizabeth Gilbert is a Houston teacher and playwright who befriended Texas death row prisoner Todd Willingham and is featured in the New Yorker article by David Grann about the Willingham case. She became convinced of Todd's innocence and was instrumental in helping his family find an expert fire investigator to examine his case. The investigator, Dr Gerald Hurst, found no evidence for arson and sent a report to Governor Rick Perry. However, the State failed to halt Willingham's execution in 2004. Further arson investigations have also found no evidence for arson. Garry Spitzer is a member of Campaign to End the Death Penalty - Austin Chapter who is skilled in screen printing. Ron Carlson, whose sister Deborah Ruth Carlson, Davis Thornton and Jerry Lynn Dean were murdered with a pick-ax by Karla Faye Tucker and Daniel Ryan Garrett.