

Raising Our Voices

MURDER VICTIMS' FAMILIES FOR RECONCILIATION

SPRING 2009 ■ ISSUE 27



Founded in 1976, Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation (MVFR) is a national organization of family members of victims of both homicide and executions who oppose the death penalty in all cases. MVFR includes people of many different perspectives. Because violent crime cuts across a broad spectrum of society, our members are geographically, racially and economically diverse.

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New Mexico Repeals Death Penalty

— by Viki Elkey

New Mexico's repeal bill passed the Senate floor with Senator Michael Sanchez reading from MVFR's booklet, "Not In Our Name – New Mexico."* He quoted Maurice Moya, a former Albuquerque police officer whose daughter-in-law, Norma, was abducted, raped and killed while walking her dog two summers ago. Maurice's experiences as a police officer, a Catholic and a murder victim's family member were shared with the 42 members of New Mexico's Senate after nearly 3 hours of serious debate. The bill passed 24-18. The House had earlier passed the bill with a vote of 40-28.

Joining Senator Sanchez to speak for repeal were Senators Linda Lovejoy, Mary Jane Garcia, Jerry Ortiz y Pino, Eric Griego and Cisco McSorley. Each were especially convincing with their arguments, but Senator Lovejoy's message from her Native American roots was particularly poignant. In supporting repeal Senator Lovejoy said "according to my spiritual beliefs humans exist in the world to live in harmony, (and) my traditional Navajo people do not support being in another person's spiritual realm."



Viki Elkey
MVFR member and Executive Director of NM Repeal

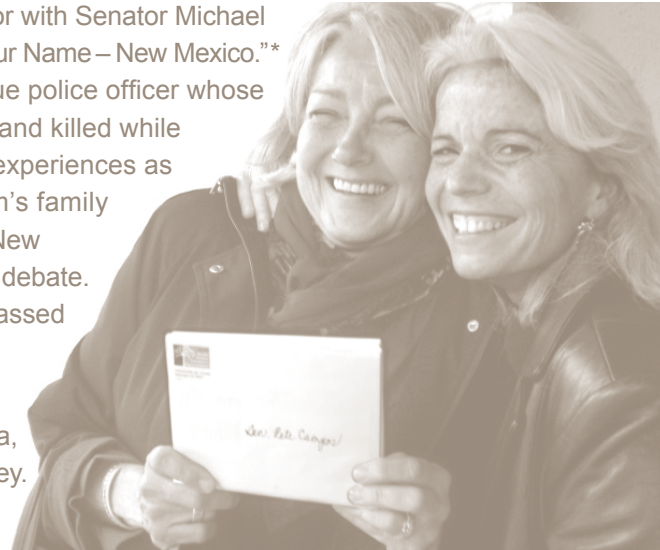
MVFR-New Mexico has played a leadership role since the inception of the New Mexico Coalition over 10 years ago. Three of the Coalition's co-chairs, Patrick Tyrell, Michelle Giger and Nancy Hewitt, are MVFR members, and its co-founder and first coordinator, Cathy Ansheles, is also a member. Recently, with the backing of the national MVFR office, local MVFR volunteers collected the photos and stories from 20 family members and a New Mexico version of "Not In Our Name" was created. The booklet was distributed to all of the legislators, the Governor and the media. MVFR's board and staff also hosted training for family members last fall, prior to the legislative session, to help members prepare for speaking to legislators, writing to newspapers and telling their stories.

As the legislative session heated up, MVFR members Michelle Giger and Andrea Vigil were key witnesses at each committee hearing along with Viki Elkey, who led the campaign as the Executive Director of NM Repeal. Dozens of other family members played critical roles – writing letters to the editors of newspapers, calling in to Senators and Representatives, signing on to the letter from victim family members, and turning key votes around by contacting on-the-fence legislators.

NM Repeal praises MVFR for playing such a vital role towards abolition in NM, and are so appreciative for all the help family members have given to repeal here and so many other places.

* Download a copy at www.mvfr.org on the resource page.

Photo by Abe Bonowitz/NCADP.org



Michelle Giger and Cathy Ansheles of Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation, after a bite to eat and a bit of celebration, on their way to deliver handwritten thank you notes to NM Senators who voted to repeal New Mexico's Death Penalty.



From the Chair



Perseverance. When I think about all that has gone into creating this moment for New Mexico to repeal the death penalty, perseverance is the word that comes to mind. It has taken many years and the efforts of many people to keep educating, mobilizing and believing that this moment was possible. We want to thank long time anti-death penalty activist and MVFR board member Cathy Ansheles, founding New Mexico MVFR member Michelle Giger, Andrea Vigil and all of the other New Mexico murder victims' family members who have told their stories over and over and over again to say "no more killing." We especially want to thank Governor Richardson, who has been willing to keep considering the issue and has shown us the importance of never giving up. Perseverance.

As we celebrate the repeal of the death penalty in New Mexico and continue to savor abolition in New Jersey, we know that victory is right around the corner in Maryland, Montana, North Carolina, Ohio, California and other states--even Texas (which will require a lot of perseverance). We also know that the role of murder victims' families will continue to be crucial in any campaign to abolish the death penalty. This is why Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation has been working so hard in many of these states to identify, recruit, educate, train and organize family members to add their voices to the call for abolition. We are pleased with the number of family members who have responded so far.

Again, congratulations to New Mexico for persevering and providing hope to the rest of us that one day it will be possible to abolish the death penalty everywhere.



Pat Clark

Chair, MVFR Board of Directors

UPCOMING

EVENTS

ACTIVIST TRAINING

- April 19, 2009
- San Leandro, CA

Sponsored by the Alameda County Coalition for Alternatives to the Death Penalty

Join us for a fun and exciting day of workshops, skills-building, and interesting speakers!

1 - 5pm Refreshments provided!

Temple Beth Shalom
642 Dolores Ave.
San Leandro, CA 94577

For more info, go to:
<http://tinyurl.com/CAACTTrain>

Space is limited.

VICTIMS' MARCH ON THE CAPITOL AS PART OF VICTIMS' RIGHTS WEEK

- April 29, 2009 at 10:00 am

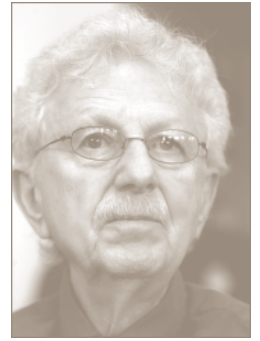
- State Capitol, West Steps, Sacramento, CA

CCV will have a table at this year's Victims' March and we need your help distributing resources. If you are already planning on attending or want to attend, please consider helping table with CCV. Call 415-243-0994 or write aarti@deathpenalty.org.

The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) will participate in the 20th Annual Victims' March on the Capitol. Staff from the Office of Victim & Survivor Rights & Services will join volunteers from various state, county, and grass-roots organizations to answer questions and share information with the hundreds of crime victims, law makers, and advocates attending the event. The March is sponsored by the California Correctional Peace Officer's Association (CCPOA) in recognition of National Crime Victims' Rights Week 2009.

Onward We March!

©John Goodwin



As we look back at 2008 and stare 2009 directly in the face, there is real hope on the horizon. With historic victories in New Jersey and New Mexico under our proverbial abolition belt, there are multiple states right on the cusp of abolition. In fact, fingers crossed, Montana may join the ranks of abolitionist states soon.

For MVFR, 2008 was both a building year organizationally but also a very productive year in terms of our work. I came on board early in the year and hit the ground running. My first task was to set a path for the organization for the coming years. MVFR Board and Staff met in NY with Shari Silberstein and Laura Porter of Equal Justice USA and hammered out a viable plan for the next three years. The core of that plan spells out that our primary work is that which we do best, recruiting, training, and mobilizing victims' family members to be effective advocates for death penalty abolition. We are taking these skills to existing state campaigns and working in conjunction with them to build state networks and put the right folks in the right place at the right time.

Along with long-term planning for the future, we continued to work in already existing campaigns in California and North Carolina.

In 2008, in California murder victims' family members delivered riveting testimony in hearings before the California Commission on the Fair Administration of Justice. This

state commission was tasked with recommending reforms for the many problems that plague California's death penalty. Three hearings were held from January through March of 2008. Murder victims' family members were included as official expert witnesses at the Commission's hearing. Family members who testified raised many serious questions about the economic and human cost of California's death penalty. The compelling presentations generated statewide media coverage and public attention. The commission concluded that California's death penalty was broken and needed to be fixed or scrapped.

In 2008, MVFR was awarded a grant by the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation to fund a coordinator, John P. Comer, for organizing in North Carolina. In 2008, John held events, recruited family members and worked in conjunction with the North Carolina Coalition for a Moratorium to bring family members where needed to speak out on the issue.

Out of the planning process, we also launched a campaign in New Mexico. As part of the work plan, local MVFR members collected family member stories and compiled them in the newest edition of our popular, "Not in Our Name" series. The booklets were distributed to each legislator early in the current legislative session. We were most pleased that New Mexico MVFR member Maurice Moya's story was shared by a Senator on the floor from the booklet just prior to the measure passing. There can be no doubt that Maurice's voice was heard and heeded by lawmakers.

In addition to New Mexico, we have launched campaigns in Texas, Pennsylvania and Ohio as well. Look to be hearing from us about work that we are doing, action that we need and for information that you need.

Thanks to many of you for your good wishes during my recent illness. Thanks also to the hard working MVFR Board and to Beth Wood for carrying on in my absence. I am happy to be back in the saddle and working for you.

Lorry Post
Executive Director

PA MURDER VICTIMS' FAMILY MEMBER MEET AND GREET

- Wednesday, May 13, 2009, 6 - 8 pm
- Pittsburg & Harrisburg, PA

Enjoy dinner and social time with fellow murder victims' family members.

For more information, call 877-896-4702 or write info@mvfr.org.

PA MURDER VICTIMS' FAMILY MEMBER MEET AND GREET

- Monday, May 18, 2009, 6 - 8 pm
- Philadelphia, PA

Enjoy dinner and social time with fellow murder victims' family members.

For more information, call 877-896-4702 or write info@mvfr.org.

Q&A

with Therese Bartholomew

Therese is a North Carolina family member. Her younger brother Steve was murdered in 2003.

How did you feel about the death penalty before your brother's murder?

Before my brother's death, I was opposed to the death penalty. For me, it's always been an issue of valuing life - ALL human life - even if there are moments of thinking *well, this guy or that guy deserves no sympathy; he deserves to die* - those moments, while valid human response and valid emotion, are always tempered with grace and compassion. This grace and compassion, and let's face it forgiveness, in the face of tremendous loss - that of a child or parent or sibling or friend - is not easy; it is painfully hard work, at times, to see humanity. But ultimately, the sense of peace that follows is worth all the hard work and all the grief.

Did your brother's murder change your views?

When my brother was killed, my views did not change. If anything, it was a true test of my moral fiber. The truth is I'm not sure that any of us *really* know "what we're made of" until we have to wrestle through the really hard stuff. It's pretty easy to say, "I have faith" if my faith is not tested. It's pretty easy to say, "I have conviction" if I never have to act on it.

What has been the most surprising thing about the experience of losing your brother?

The most surprising thing about the experience of losing my brother is that I've survived it. If someone would have told me years ago, that I would lose Steve, I would have said, "I will not survive that." Additionally, I would have never imagined myself becoming so passionate about the rights of offenders/prisoners. I would have never imagined myself so concerned about the inequities in our justice system.

We notice that you have a book and documentary coming out about this experience. Tell us about both.

The book is a collection of intertwined essays, starting with the night I got the news that my brother was shot. The essays are a first person account of the hours, days, months, and years after Steve's death. While shock and grief are very apparent, so are survival and forgiveness. Simply put, the book focuses on the feelings of victimization, the raw, emotional voice of a victim's family member. The film focuses on making sense of the crime and the perpetrator. It's about going beyond forgiveness and looking at personal and social responsibility regarding crime, victim, and offender.

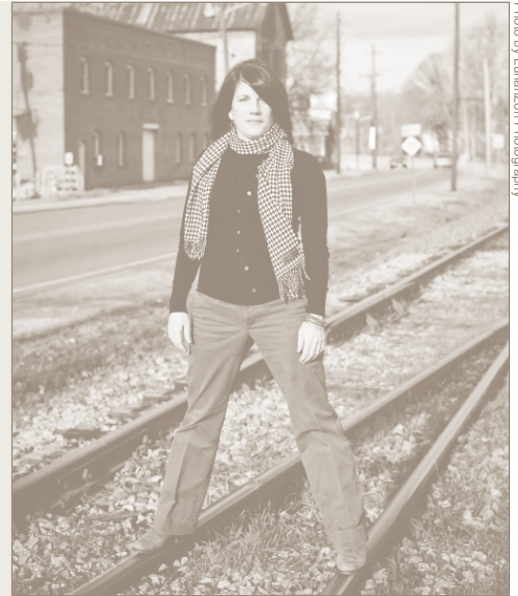


Photo by Lunatzen Photography

Were you an author/filmmaker before this experience?

Although I can remember writing stories and poems as a young child, it wasn't until I was working on my undergraduate degree that creative writing came back into my life. I wrote a lot of poetry (some of pretty bad), and went to poetry readings around Charlotte. A few years before Steve's death, I began writing a book about becoming a teenage mother. But, it was with Steve's death, that my writing seriously picked up its pace. It became an outlet, of sorts, for the pain. I found myself writing on napkins in restaurants and on scraps of paper I found in my purse. Writing was an impulse that I couldn't deny and couldn't fight. It would quite literally wake me up in the middle of the night, so it wasn't about *choosing* to write; it was about writing choosing me.

I knew absolutely nothing about filmmaking and had absolutely no aspirations to make a film. I didn't even have a video camera! But, just like the writing, the film idea woke me up in the middle of the night. Strangely the feeling, the story, that woke me was the killer's. I felt the overwhelming desire to make sense of *him*, to give *him* a voice, to meet him, to forgive him, to tell *his* story. You see, I had already done these things, or at least started doing them for me (my essays helped to make sense of me, to give me voice, to tell my story) but the killer's voice was missing. So, I got out of bed and emailed a writer friend, and we started filming a few days later.

How do people react to you when they learn that you are an MVFM and you oppose the death penalty?

One of the standard responses is: "You're a better person than I;" "I really admire what you're doing;" To both of these I usually respond that that's kind of the point: I'm not a better person than anyone. I'm just a regular person who has the, maybe unfortunate, opportunity to act on my beliefs.

How does the rest of your family feel?

I hate to speak for my family members, but if I had to, I would say that my parents have forgiven my brother's killer. Where that forgiveness comes from I am not sure. Maybe it is out of christian duty; maybe it is out of love; maybe it is out of necessity; maybe it is a mix of all of these things. My mother has always been a strong opponent of the death penalty. She has attended rallies and protests and vigils. My father has supported her in this but not himself been an activist. My brother's death, I'm sure must have challenged their beliefs. How could it not? My children have yet to forgive their Uncle's killer. I understand this and respect it 100%. My hope, of course, is that there will come a day when they are able to forgive, if for no other reason than to release themselves of that burden, that weight. They were both incredibly close to their uncle, and this tragic and violent event damaged them in ways that I cannot understand. So, again, I respect their path just as they respect mine. This is important because all of our journeys, even if they are ultimately to the same place, aren't the same, and they aren't meant to be.

What drives you to speak out as you do?

I speak out because I believe that there is no stronger voice than that of a victim's family member. People can't say, *well, you don't understand the issue, you don't get it, you've never suffered through that loss.* Because although all loss is different, all grief is different, I do know what loss feels like. I know what a middle of the night phone call feels like. I know what it feels like to not want to move forward. I know these things well.



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WHO'DA EVER THINK IT??!!

This coming June 25th will mark 36 years since I was awakened during the night while camping in Montana to discover that my youngest child, Susie, had been kidnapped from our tent and eventually, her very life stolen from her. Finally identified and arrested, the kidnapper was subject to the death penalty. I had no protest to my request for the alternative option in capital cases, a mandatory life sentence with no chance of parole.

Through no intent or desire on my part, thus began a speaking ministry regarding forgiveness and abolition of the death penalty. I was invited to speak around the country and attend conferences. In my travels, I began to meet other murder victims' family members concerned about the same issues; in time, we formed MVFR. As we grew, abolitionist organizers began to recognize the need for victims' family member voices in campaigns.

Bill Pelke and Bob Gross developed the idea of the "Journey of Hope...From Violence to Healing," a speaking tour comprised of as many MVFR members as could participate. The first one occurred in Indiana in 1993. The next year we were invited to Georgia, then on to California and Virginia; the invitations kept coming.

In 2001, Boston College hosted the first ever National Murder Victims' Family Member Conference. The Journeys continue, with speakers now being invited to present their stories in other countries also. Some have testified to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, been interviewed on the Vatican Radio and/or attended International Conferences Against the Death Penalty. More recently, the Community of Sant' Egidio, based in Rome, has been bringing speakers to European and African countries, to encourage support of the United Nation's Resolution passed in December 2007, calling for a world-wide moratorium on the death penalty.



Photo by Abe Bonowitz/NCADP.org

During the 2008 Montana Journey of Hope...From Violence to Healing, a ceremony was held in memory of Marietta Jaeger-Lane's daughter Susie. Oklahoma Death Row Exonoree Greg Wilhoit and Isaac Bonowitz helped plant a tree in Susie's memory (in the park where she was kidnapped) while (from left to right) Joanne Royston, Walt Everett, Marietta Jaeger-Lane and Bill Pelke look on.

MVFR folks' testimonies helped New Jersey to abolish the death penalty in 2007. The most recent "Journey of Hope" held during October last year in Montana is being followed by an abolition bill successfully through the Senate and a hoped for victory in the House. With New Mexico's abolition victory, hope is everywhere.

Across this country, people are hearing a powerful and persuasive perspective against the death penalty from persons who theoretically would be unlikely abolitionists. In memory of our beloved victims, we are helping to call our legislatures to enact laws which will enable us to become what we want to say we are, a truly moral, civilized country. The quality of which is determined by how we treat the least among us. We're not done yet but we're certainly on our way!!

Marietta Jaeger-Lane
Three Forks, Montana

MVFR has formed or is renewing partnerships with the Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty (TCADP), Pennsylvanians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty (PADP) and Ohioans to Stop Executions (OTSE). Together, our organizations seek to ensure that the perspectives and needs of all victims of violent crime are included in the public dialogue about the necessity and utility of capital punishment.

We invite all of our members to consider becoming involved in this collaborative effort to reach out to victims' families throughout these states in order to demonstrate growing opposition to the death penalty. You may join us in any capacity that feels comfortable to you. If you are interested, please contact the MVFR national office at 877-896-4702 or info@mvfr.org.

TEXAS

www.tcadp.org

Several MVFR members participated in the TCADP Annual Conference. In addition to meeting and greeting folks at the MVFR table, Texas member Linda White, with the assistance of Board Member, Cathy Ansheles led a murder victims' family member workshop.

Two MVFR members participated in the TCADP Lobby Day on March 10: Ron Carlson of Houston and Michael Heath of Austin. Ron testified in front of the House Subcommittee on Capital Punishment on Thursday, March 12 and spoke movingly about forgiving his sister's killer, Karla Faye Tucker, and witnessing her execution.

PENNSYLVANIA

www.padp.org

MVFR and PADP are planning three meet and greet events for Pennsylvania Murder Victims' Family members. Come enjoy dinner and social time with fellow Pennsylvania Family members. Save the Date cards are being mailed with invitations to follow. If you don't receive one but would like to come, please call or write to MVFR National at 877-896-4702 or info@mvfr.org.

- **Wednesday, May 13, 2009, 6 - 8 pm**
Pittsburg & Harrisburg
- **Monday, May 18, 2009, 6 - 8 pm**
Philadelphia

Photo by Abe Bonowitz/NCADP.org



Board Member, Cathy Ansheles and Texas member, Robert Hoelscher met and greeted folks at the annual Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty (TCADP) conference.

I'm jealous of the New Mexicans who woke up in an abolitionist state on the 19th of March.

My husband, Abe Bonowitz, and I did that in 2007 in New Jersey and there is nothing like it. Just as Celeste Fitzgerald predicted then, once one state got rid of the death penalty, the rest will follow. Both of these victories in New Jersey and New Mexico were supported by the voices of murder victims' family members. The time to speak out is now. We need your dollars to support this work of bringing voices of family members to decision makers.

Please take a moment to fill out the remittance slip to the right and send your contribution today.

Beth Wood

Yes! Together we will amplify the voices of family members

I'll help with a gift of:

\$1,000 \$500 \$100 \$75 \$50 \$25 \$_____ other

OR

I would like to be a MVFR sustainer! I would like to give \$_____ to MVFR every month.

You may go online to www.mvfr.org OR charge my gift to:

VISA Mastercard AmEx Discover

Card #: _____ - _____ - _____ - _____

Expires: _____ / _____ Security Code: _____

The security code is a 3-digit number on the back of your card; 4 digits on the front of American Express cards.

Cardholder Signature: _____

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Name: _____

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Email Address: _____

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