

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND:

ELLEN
BRYSON
2001

“The Journey of Hope: From Violence to Healing”™ is a two-week speaking tour highlighting stories of forgiveness from people who have lost loved ones to murder. The speakers are part of a nonprofit group called Murder Victims’ Families for Reconciliation. In 1999, the state of Tennessee welcomed this speaking tour and I was an intern for the host group (the Tennessee Coalition to Abolish State Killing). This internship led me to design my college career around the objective of working in the nonprofit social justice sector. In this project I will show you what I did, what I learned, and how it can help others.

There are three parts to my senior project.

- 1.) The first part is this two-part essay that will discuss how and why I became involved with the Journey of Hope: From Violence to Healing.
- 2.) The second part is a large volume that contains examples of what I accomplished and how to prepare for a Journey of Hope. It will show how to plan for an event like this one and give examples of work that I did.
- 3.) The last part is perhaps the most important. The blue book shows what I learned and how this knowledge can help others. I plan to pass this book on to other nonprofit groups that want to put on a similar speaking tour. I will also use this blue book to further the work of the “Journey of Hope: From Violence to Healing”™. I hope to make it easier for similar abolition groups to host this speaking tour in their own states.

Ellen Bryson
College Scholars Senior Project
April 2001

I. INTRODUCTION:

I found out about the “Journey of Hope: From Violence to Healing”™ through the Tennessee Coalition to Abolish State Killing (TCASK). My interest in the death penalty began a few years ago when Sister Helen Prejean came to speak at the University of Tennessee about her work with Louisiana criminals, her visits to Death Row, and her book *Dead Man Walking*. Her passion sparked a desire in me to learn more about the issue. I joined UT’s Amnesty International chapter and began to read as much as I could on Amnesty’s Death Penalty Project. Each Amnesty International campaign targets a country that is violating human rights. The United States is now under international focus because we practice death penalty. During this time I also took an honors class in the Religious Studies department called “Human Rights” where I studied the death penalty in other countries including China and Iraq. I learned that we are the only “Western” nation that still practices capital punishment. We are in league with countries whose names are synonymous with human rights abuses. This bothered me. I wanted to do something about it.

At my first TCASK meeting in December of 1998, Sara Sharpe spoke about the “Journey of Hope: From Violence to Healing” tour. She described its mission: to promote public awareness and education about alternatives to the death penalty. She told us about the speakers: people who had lost loved ones to murder, but who stood against the death penalty. They seemed like people I could support. And it was a message I

believed in. She told us that TCASK had invited the Journey to come to Tennessee in April of 1999.

Sara also mentioned that previous Journeys had relied on volunteers from the host states that sponsored the tour, but that Tennessee lacked a full-time volunteer. I took this as a sign and withdrew from UT for a semester to be an intern and full-time volunteer for TCASK. In January, Steve Earle, a Nashville musician, abolitionist, and Journey of Hope Board Member, set me up in his apartment in the city for free. In the space of a few weeks, I was living in Nashville and working as an activist. My whole direction in life had changed. I changed my emphasis in College Scholars from International Relations to social activism. Completing the internship with the Journey of Hope and TCASK only cemented my desire to pursue this field of interest.

Preparing to bring the Journey of Hope to Tennessee took months of planning and preparation. The wheels had been in motion ever since Sara went on the Texas Journey in 1998. A central committee of long-time Tennessee abolitionists met in Nashville after the Texas Journey to decide if a small group like TCASK could support the speaking tour in Tennessee. They knew it was a lot of work, especially in a region of the country known for its support of the death penalty. They decided to invite the Journey to come. From that point on we were all involved.

Sara secured a grant that enabled us to rent office space and pay the two lead organizers, herself and Anne-Marie Moyes. Kelley Walker and I were the main volunteers. I spent the first few weeks setting up the office and creating brochures and telephone lists. We solicited donations for equipment and funding. Our office shared a

building with another activist, Joe Ingle, who ran the Neighborhood Peace and Justice Center, a local mediation group. Joe was on our steering committee and had participated in hunger strikes. He also gave speeches about the death penalty. I met with the Nashville TCASK chapter soon after that. I was surprised that it was made up of people from a variety of occupations and religious backgrounds. There were many different reasons that people objected to the death penalty. Some people were pacifists, some were religiously opposed, some were defense lawyers working on capital cases, others were representatives of peace groups, and the rest were people who felt strongly that something should be done to keep Tennessee from resuming executions.

By the time I arrived in Nashville in early January, preparations had already begun for the Journey. The chapter was working on brochure layouts and T-shirt designs. I began entering information from the registration forms we were receiving into a database. Soon the master schedule for the two-week tour was finalized. Statewide, the chapters were determining the chairpersons of the various committees and some were already lining up speaking engagements. Kelley sent out a letter asking for donations, and we were planning a successful fundraising dinner with Sam Sheppard as our featured speaker. Also, tickets to Steve Earle's benefit concert were going on sale, and the media representative from Steve's record label was working on our press releases. We were off to a great start and about four months to finish everything. We referred to the Organizers' Handbook (the blue book of this project) frequently for tips and ideas. We were constantly in touch with past Journey organizers and other state activists.

Our chapter's membership continued to grow. Sara assigned me to the Outreach committee. I soon began traveling and meeting with members from chapters across the

state. In Chattanooga, we held a meeting at a Quaker church and talked with the local TCASK branch run by Joe Ingle's cousin and his wife. The Chattanooga group was the smallest one. It had ambitious plans to hold a concert in an outdoor park downtown and to line up speaking engagements at the local university, high schools, and churches. Sara lived in an area close to the meeting and we spent the night discussing how we could strengthen the group's numbers and help it with publicity and fundraising. Plans included everything up from a fundraising letter to approaching local heirs of the Coca-Cola empire who lived nearby.

At all of the TCASK meetings I attended, I took pages notes of ideas and people to call. The main part of my job in the beginning was to be in constant contact with the other chapters and to follow up on work there. Next, Sara and I traveled to see the Memphis group. We stayed with Harmon Wray's mother, Celeste Wray. She was a delightful woman with a lot of energy and years of experience in activism and volunteer work. The rest of the chapter met there with us over dinner. The Memphis group was well organized. Their members included college professors from Christian Brothers University, people from Pax Christi (a religious group that opposes the death penalty), as well as high school teachers and connections to reliable volunteers. I also traveled to a Pax Christi meeting to talk to their members about getting involved. The chapter members were planning to rent a retreat center where the whole Journey team could stay together during the Memphis tour. In the end, everything seemed set up in Memphis and we left feeling very confident.

The Knoxville group was easy to talk to. I met with my UT Amnesty International chapter and helped them plan a speaking engagement/forum on campus. I

also helped the Knoxville TCASK chapter work on securing beds for everyone and speaking engagements in the city. Since I am from Knoxville and I knew that chapter the best I visited it most often. This group was also small (about five people strong). But it had access to churches and to the University of Tennessee.

Over the course of the next dozen weeks, I spent my days in the Nashville office filling merchandise orders, confirming speaking engagements, recruiting marchers for the rally we were planning on the last day, taking ticket orders for the concert, attending meetings, filling out paperwork for rally permits, mailing out invitations for a fundraiser, posting fliers, sealing hundreds of envelopes for fundraising letters and newsletters, and running sundry errands.

I also got a chance to visit Riverbend Maximum Security Institute's Death Row. I accompanied Anne-Marie Moyes to talk to the members of TCASK who are on Death Row about the Journey and what it was all about. The experience was fun. The men were very friendly and warm, and they talked openly to me. I later had lunch in the house of Philip Workman's family. He joined us via speakerphone from Death Row. It was surreal. I got to meet area organizers, lawyers, activists, church leaders, and people from around the country who flew in to speak and help us organize.

As the weeks went by, the pace picked up. We started holding meetings more frequently, and spent longer hours in the office. In the final planning days before the Journey we worked on coordinating airport pickups and sleeping arrangements. My little apartment was soon filled with strangers and suitcases, with every available bed taken and people on the floor. I had Sam Reese Sheppard in the master bedroom and Bill Pelke

(founder of the Journey) on the futon. I also had other amazing speakers that came in a day early scattered over the rest of the apartment.

The first night of the Journey was in Nashville where we held a sold-out benefit concert at the Ryman Auditorium. After that, I traveled with the Journey for the whole two weeks, sleeping in retreat centers and on mats in every city we visited. We stayed up late every night talking and planning for the next day. I came back to Nashville one day early to finalize plans for our big march to War Memorial Plaza and to make last minute calls to recruit more marchers. The tour ended with a celebration party and a mass exodus of people to the airport. Every one of us in Nashville was exhausted. But we were successful in spreading our message. We estimate that our speakers reached close to 12,000 people in an area of the country known for its unwavering support of the death penalty. The Journey could not have come at a better time for Tennessee. We are a unique state in terms of our history with capital punishment. In the next section, I will provide some background information on the history of the death penalty and abolition movement.

II. BACKGROUND:

In 1608 in the Jamestown Colony, Virginia, George Kendall became the first person of European extraction to be lawfully punished by death in America. Since then, perhaps as many as 20,000 men and women have been put to death in our country (Bedau 3). Death penalty abolitionists such as the Quakers have been fighting capital punishment from the beginning. Civil rights and civil liberties groups have been in the forefront of the abolition movement in more recent years, and have been supported by most major religious denominations and many medical groups including the American Medical Association. "The AMA adopted a resolution stating that although one's opinion of capital punishment is a personal issue, physicians, as persons dedicated to the saving of life, could not ethically participate in a legally sponsored execution" (Paternoster 286). The movement for abolition has ebbed and flowed in America. "During times of peace and prosperity, the abolition movement has fared better" (Hanks 68). Tennessee, along with a few other states, volunteered to abolish the death penalty from 1915 until 1918 (Hanks 68). During the dark days of the Great Depression and World War II there was little progress toward ending capital punishment (Hanks 68). The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s brought the issue to light once again in terms of race.

Small concessions have been won in the movement to end capital punishment in the United States over the decades. We now have many legal safeguards such as mandatory state appellate reviews in capital cases, as well as separate trial phases for sentencing and determining punishment. Abolitionists have been able to "use the most

obvious injustices and cruelties to gain a foothold in the public's conscience. These small victories have led to a greater sensitivity to other death penalty issues" (Hanks 69). Some other abolitionist victories include: the ending of public executions (the last one being in Missouri in 1937 (Bedau 5)), the *Furman* case which temporarily ended capital punishment in 1972, the abolition of the death penalty in some states (e.g. Michigan and Iowa), a reduction in the number of crimes that can be considered "capital crimes" thus deserving of the death penalty, the adoption of more "humane" execution techniques ("...an essential aspect of preserving capital punishment in any society that regards itself as civilized" (Bedau 10)), the adoption of different degrees of murder, the provision of legal counsel for indigent defendants at both trial and appeal levels, and the granting of guided sentencing discretion (as opposed to a mandatory death sentence if someone is found guilty of murder (Paternoster 8)). Tennessee was actually the first state to start the guided discretion reform in 1838 (Paternoster 16). In certain states where there are alternative punishments to a death sentence, such as a life sentence without the possibility of parole, the jury must be informed of these alternatives. Plus there have been opinion polls that proclaim that public support for the death penalty plummets when an alternative of a "true" life sentence (no possibility of parole) plus restitution given to the victims' families is provided as a choice (Hanks 69). As Sister Helen Prejean, author of *Dead Man Walking*, often says, "Support for the death penalty is a mile wide, but only an inch deep." These victories give anti-death penalty activists some hope.

Abolitionists have accepted these reforms over the decades as "painful compromises" and "the best that could be achieved in the face of strong opposition" and at least "undeniably improvements in the right direction" (Bedau 7). But have these

concessions just entrenched capital punishment more in our society by making it more palatable? Some abolitionists say that these victories are not enough that there have been too many setbacks toward ending the death penalty. To many, the situation seems dimmer every day.

In the wake of a brief period of abolition in the early 1970s, the movement to permanently end capital punishment in America has suffered major setbacks such as: *Gregg v. Georgia*, which effectively brought back the death penalty in 1976; inadequate/ineffectual legal counsel for indigent defendants; state court rulings enforcing a rule prohibiting new evidence (even evidence of innocence) from being submitted after a certain date; and the politicization of capital punishment as an issue in the media through its higher visibility in political platforms. One source says, “For several years it has been virtually impossible for any candidate for high elective office in the states- governor, Attorney General, appellate court judge- to appear hesitant over (much less opposed to) the death penalty” (Bedau 18). Anti-death penalty candidates risk appearing “soft on crime”. Finally, the public seems to want the death penalty. In fact, since 1976 public support for the death penalty has risen to nearly 80% at times in America (Bedau 17).

Support for capital punishment is especially high in the South, as evidenced by the region’s relatively high number of executions and people on death row proportionate to the overall population. The South has had the highest number of executions of all census regions in all decades since 1800 (Harries and Cheatwood 20). “Here the death penalty thrives- many executions [are carried out] amidst clamor for more, [there are] hundreds on death row and more on the way” (Bedau 21). In 1993, there were 38

executions in the United States. Of these, 74% took place in the South (Harries and Cheatwood 30). In 1990, 58.1% of the 2,356 inmates on Death Rows were found in the South, despite the fact that only 34.3% of the total U.S. population lived in the South (Harries and Cheatwood 30). “Eight of the top ten executing states [as of 1997] are former Confederate states; the other two are Missouri and (most recently) Illinois” (Arriens 16). The death penalty seems unfairly sanctioned. If you live in the South you have a greater chance of being executed than in a bordering Northern state. A great disparity can be seen between two of the biggest death penalty states: the western state of California and the southern state of Texas. In 1999, there were 439 inmates on Texas’s Death Row and a comparable 488 inmates in California. But California has one of the least lethal Death Rows- it has only executed 4 people since 1976. During the same time period, Texas executed 141 people (Malone 153). Disparity in sentencing even exists intrastate: “... executions occur unevenly with respect to what might be expected on the basis of the geography of capital offenses ... In Tennessee differences have been noted between Memphis and East Knoxville (many [death sentences]) and Nashville (few [death sentences])” (Harries and Cheatwood 35).

A map of states actively executing people is shaded heavily in the South. Except for Tennessee. In spite of these depressing (at least for abolitionists) figures, the Southern state of Tennessee has remained unique in its relationship with the death penalty. Our state seems almost progressive in its use, or rather disuse, of the death penalty. In 1972, in the midst of de facto abolition, the Supreme Court suspended all executions in the United States in the case *Furman vs. Georgia*. The Court ruled that until capital punishment could be issued “fairly and without discrimination; it was

unconstitutional”. Four years later, the *Gregg* case resumed the legality of the death penalty. Since then, the state of Tennessee has distanced itself from its Southern neighbors by not executing anyone (until last year’s execution of Robert Glen Coe). In contrast, during the years from the *Gregg* decision (’76) until the recent past (’96), two-thirds of all executions took place in just five Southern states: Texas, Florida, Virginia, Louisiana, and Georgia (Bedau 21). In that same period of time, Tennessee did not execute any single person.

Why does Tennessee- a Southern state in the middle of the “death belt”- have such a unique relationship with capital punishment? There are many reasons. No single reason is the sole explanation; it seems to be a combination of many things.

The rate of execution nationwide reached a pinnacle in the 1930s. Executions dropped steadily in the 1950s. “The decline in executions that began in the 50’s accelerated in the early 60’s, prefacing the complete cessation of executions from 1968-1976 while the constitutionality of the death penalty was being tested in the courts” (Bedau 13). Since the reinstatement of capital punishment, the number of people under death sentence has risen, while the number of actual executions is still quite small (Bedau 13). One reason for this might be “increasing sensitivity by the federal courts to post-conviction appellate litigation on behalf of capital defendants” (Bedau 13). Another reason might be the political beliefs of circuit court judges. Studies have further shown that the length of time between sentencing and the final disposition of a capital case has lengthened greatly in many states; ours included. Some men on Death Row in Tennessee have been there for almost 20 years (Bedau 69).

A brief overview of cases in Tennessee with statistics current to 1994 shows us that from 1973 -1994 there were 163 people sentenced to death in Tennessee. Of these, four died while on Death Row, two were removed for unspecified reasons, and 57 inmates had their sentences or convictions overturned (Bedau 72). This left 100 people on Death Row by 1994. Close to the exact same number that remains today. According to these statistics, Tennessee saw 35% of convictions/sentences overturned between these years. This might be another reason our execution rate is comparatively low.

Overall, there do not seem to be any clear reasons for Tennessee's de facto moratorium in recent decades. The majority of Tennesseans support capital punishment and there are just over 100 people currently on Death Row here. We are the exception in an area known throughout the country for its execution rates, and our governors have even been proponents of the death penalty. As 1999 neared, Tennessee faced two inmates who were running out of avenues of appeal. For the first time in almost 40 years, the death penalty became a "real" issue to people.

As the two dates of the first executions in Tennessee (Robert Glen Coe and Philip Workman) grew closer, Tennessee abolitionists knew that something needed to be done to awaken the consciousness of Tennesseans about capital punishment. We had the unique opportunity to bring an educational speaking tour to the state in April of 1999.

The next two parts of this project will explain more about the "Journey of Hope: From Violence to Healing" project and what I accomplished/learned during my internship.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Arriens, Jan. *Welcome to Hell: Letters and Writings from Death Row.*

Boston: Northeastern University Press: 1997.

Bedau, Hugo Adam. *The Death Penalty in America: Current Controversies.*

New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Hanks, Gardner C. *Against the Death Penalty.*

Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1997.

Harries, Keith, and Derral Cheatwood. *The Geography of Execution: the Capital*

Punishment Quagmire in America.

Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1997.

Malone, Dan, and Howard Swindle. *America's Condemned: Death Row Inmates in*

Their Own Words.

Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 1999.

Paternoster, Raymond. *Capital Punishment in America.*

New York: Lexington Books, 1991.