

**Testimony of Arthur J. Laffin Regarding HB-6578: An Act Concerning the Penalty for a Capital Felony March 4, 2009 (Read by William Dyson)**

To the Chairman of the Judiciary Committee:

My name is Art Laffin and I am a murder victim family member. I am also a Hartford native who lives and works at a Catholic Worker house in Washington, D.C.

Nine years ago my younger brother, Paul, was murdered in Hartford, Connecticut. On September 20, 1999, as Paul was leaving Mercy, Housing and Shelter where he had worked for ten years, he was stabbed to death by a mentally ill homeless man, Dennis Soutar, who often frequented the soup kitchen at the Shelter. My family and I were consumed with a sorrow that defies words. I still can't believe what happened to my kid brother. My family and I and all who knew Paul still grieve his senseless horrific death. My brother truly gave his life for those he served.

Dennis Soutar was ultimately deemed incompetent to stand trial for killing my brother. Had he been deemed competent to go to trial, and was convicted, he could have faced the death penalty. He is now serving a 60-year sentence at the Whiting Forensic Division of Connecticut Valley Hospital in Middletown.

After Paul's highly publicized death, my dear late-Mom and I, through God's amazing grace, appealed to the public to show mercy toward Dennis Soutar and to pray for him. We recalled that Jesus said: "Blessed are the merciful for they will obtain mercy." "Forgive and you will be forgiven." As Jesus is being executed He says to his persecutors: "Father forgive them." My Mom and I were able to meet with members of the Soutar family--Dennis' brother and sister-in-law -- and asked them to convey to Dennis our prayers for his healing. I pray for Dennis Soutar's healing and that he will experience God's forgiving love. I also ask everybody here today to pray for Dennis' healing.

What happened to my brother is not uncommon, and has tragically occurred elsewhere in Connecticut and across the country. It is a societal disgrace that some of the mentally ill homeless, who fall through the cracks and are not properly cared for, end up committing violent lethal acts. During my eulogy for Paul, I asked that all necessary resources be made available to provide a continuum of care for Dennis and all other mentally ill homeless so that future tragedies like what happened to my brother might be averted.

My prayers go out to all family members throughout our society and world who are grieving the loss of loved ones who have been murdered. I know their pain and pray for their healing.

There are many people who believe that we have to kill the murderer in order to bring closure for the victim's family. I believe that killing people who kill will never bring true closure and healing. Killing Dennis Soutar will never bring my brother back. It will never bring healing or closure for me and my family. The pain of Paul's murder will always be there.

Certainly, individuals, and even corporations and governments who commit violent acts must be held accountable for their actions and make restitution to the victims' families. But we must never sanction killing those who kill, no matter how brutal the crime. Rather, we must always seek the way of restorative justice.

As of February 13, 2009, 1149 people have been executed in the United States since the death penalty was reinstated in 1976. I ask: how can we break the cycle of violence and killing? How can we promote healing for everyone who has experienced the unspeakable pain resulting from murder? I believe that the best way to honor my brother is to work for the prevention of violence, not to replicate it. I believe the way to true healing is not through vengeance and retribution, but through compassion and reconciliation. Martin Luther King, Jr., who opposed the death penalty, said that "capital punishment is society's final assertion that it will not forgive." I totally agree with Archbishop Desmond Tutu who declared: "there is no future without forgiveness." Ultimately, I oppose the death penalty because it violates God's command: "Thou shalt not kill."

I also oppose the death penalty because:

- \* It is racially biased.
- \* Innocent people are sentenced to death. Since 1973, over 130 people have been released from death row across the U.S. because of evidence showing their innocence. I've come to know a number of these people, and some are now my good friends.
- \* Poor defendants do not receive adequate legal representation.
- \* It costs more to execute a person than it does to impose a life sentence.

Fourteen states in the U.S. do not have the death penalty. Most countries worldwide, including all European countries, oppose the death penalty. It is time to abolish the death penalty in the U.S.

I lend my support to the proposed legislation in HB-6578 which prohibits the death penalty for people convicted of a capital felony.

I join many in praying that Connecticut will become the next state to follow New Jersey's lead in abolishing the death penalty.

