

Death on a Daily Basis: Bringing Criminal Justice Issues into Racial Justice Work

By Laura Partridge

Creating racial justice requires focusing on life-and-death issues daily. Addressing issues faced by oppressed peoples requires staring down violence, poverty, and all the other fallout derived from generations of struggle. We know we live in an unjust society.

Yet for me, and for many others whose life work has been focused on building racial justice, working on criminal justice issues -- especially the [death penalty](#) -- has been an extraordinary challenge. Accepting the addition of the word "death" into one's daily vocabulary requires a huge adjustment. Unfortunately, there is no survivor's manual for those seeking racial justice. One just does the work because it must be done.

On the first business day of January 2006, the name of an African American man from Kansas City, Missouri appeared on the "short list" of those to be murdered by the state. His execution, set for February 1st, was to be the first of the year. At 22 years of age he had been convicted of a terrible murder; he had been on death row for 17 years when the date of his execution was finally announced.

Finding the execution was to be carried out within a month was a great shock. Those of us working on the case somehow maintained the drive to speak at churches, ministerial alliances, and organizations, and in private meetings with community leaders. We sought letters of support everywhere we could get on the agenda.

Our strategy was to flood the governor's office with letters of support for clemency in this case. As very little counter-death-penalty work had been done in the African American community, I agreed to focus effort in my community.

African Americans I talked with generally held the same views as those of the general population. The horrendous nature of the crime coupled with the fact that the perpetrator admitted guilt, tended to outweigh for them the racist and moral factors related to the death penalty.

The data compiled clearly show the disparity in the application of the death penalty. Even for those of us who know this in a general way, seeing the actual case studies is startling. The lives of Black people, victims and perpetrators, are clearly not deemed of the same value as the lives of people of European descent.

The scheduled execution did not occur. Concurrent with the campaign to acquire clemency, the defense attorneys were addressing the constitutionality of death by lethal injection. In Supreme Court Justice Alito's first ruling, his vote allowed for a stay of execution, requiring the State of Missouri to hear the lethal injection defense arguments before proceeding with the murder. The hearing is set for late April.

Clearly there is much work to be done to increase awareness that the death penalty is an instrument of racist violence. The general public is in dire need of education about the internal workings of the US criminal justice system. The lack of knowledge of this system is alarming.

The resistance to learning about the system is not only distressing; it prevents people from serving as their own advocates. Those who find themselves enmeshed in the system stumble on their own to acquire the information they need. The pain and shame of their personal nightmare often inhibits open discussion. There are individuals who have gained some knowledge through their own required search. According to some of these people, they prefer not to have to relive the experience by sharing with others. Although this is quite understandable, it leaves an immense void.

A huge step forward would be to train neighborhood leaders in the workings and politics of the criminal justice system, so that they could assist those in their communities. Trusted allies need to be available to assist at the moment of the eruption of a personal trauma. Opportunities to share experiences and to empower one another are desperately needed.

While the racist criminal justice system endeavors once again to kill in our name, we have a responsibility to speak up.

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