

David Kaczynski | WAMC's In Conversation With

David Kaczynski & Alan Chartock

Aug 12, 2021

This week, WAMC's Alan Chartock in an award-winning encore conversation with David Kaczynski, the brother of Unabomber Ted Kaczynski. Kaczynski is the former Executive Director of New Yorkers Against the Death Penalty.

Coming up next, an encore award-winning conversation between Alan Chartock and David Kaczynski, brother of the Unabomber Theodore Kaczynski, who killed 3 people and injured 23 others through a nationwide bombing campaign.

Alan Chartock in conversation with David Kaczynski, brother of the Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski. It's next.

<https://youtube.com/watch?v=U2MAe8N2Dv4>

Alan: Hi, this is Alan Chartock. Today we have an amazing man and one of my heroes joining us. Currently he is the executive director of New Yorkers against the death penalty. But most of you know David Kaczynski for having notified the FBI in 1996 along with his wife, Linda, that he suspected his brother Ted was the Unabomber, who was responsible for a series of mail bombs that killed 3 people and injured 23 others over 17 years after Ted Kaczynski was arrested, David and Linda felt betrayed by the US justice. Department, when it broke several of its promises. And sought the death penalty. Despite Ted's mental illness. Although Ted's life was spared in a last minute plea bargain, David's opposition to the death penalty. Combined with his belief that the nation's capital justice system is dishonest and brutal, have led him to his current work with New Yorkers against the death penalty. David, thank you. For being with us today, it's a great joy to have you here.

David: Thank you Alan. It's a pleasure to be here too.

Alan: Tell me to begin with what you do for a living. Are you a trained social worker? Is that how you've come to your profession into your understanding?

David: Well, prior to accepting the job as Executive director of New Yorkers against the death penalty, I worked with Equinox incorporated here in Albany. Actually, my training was in education. I had been a secondary high school teacher really when I moved here and married Linda in 1990. I was looking around for a job and 1st worked in a group home for the mentally disabled. And through connections I established there finally got into Equinox, working with youth and their families.

Alan: What is it about that kind of work that fulfills you?

David: It's the kids. It's the humanity and people, often the kids. I would work with had been kind of rejected by their families. I began in the runaway homeless youth shelter of equinox and kids who often had been thrown out of home, thrown out of school. Many of them didn't have many friends. They show up here, kind of as a last gap before ending up on the street and found that they were human, that they had senses of humor that they were bright in many ways, that a lot of them were looking

for approval from adults. So we're willing to listen to them and care, and it was really rewarding, especially when you when you connect with some of the kids and you share a sense of humor and you can see that they're delighted by the fact that they're getting some positive attention from a positive adult. That's pretty rewarding.

Alan: Have you, for your whole life, been opposed to the death?

David: Penalty yeah, you know I. I think when I was a teenager the subject came up in high school and somehow my instinct just told me that this. Somehow it wasn't. You know the idea that we're going to use violence against a person who's already incarcerated? A person who's already been stopped from committing their further crimes? Seemed brutal in a way, it just didn't seem to me the right way to go. The right solution to the problem.

Alan: Tell me about your latest work. I know that your feeling is that the death penalty is wrong and this has led you. And obviously, we're going to spend a lot of time here today, but I want to just get this sort of on the table. This has led Jude to a fierce opposition to the death penalty. Become the head of the organization that has, you know, vowed to put a stop to it in New York. What is it about the death penalty? That is so abhorrent to.

David: You I'd prefer to say a reasonable opposition to the death penalty, but also a passionate opposition to the death penalty. I think you know, in my personal case, part of the passion comes from understanding that my brother is a human being. I carry memories of Ted in my heart. Things that we did together. He's about 7 1/2 years older than I am, but believe me I have reason to know that there is much good in this man. Despite the horrible things he did and and the good he's done in his life, obviously don't compare. To the harm he's done, but I know he's human and I know there is goodness in him and you can see how the media will present him. I saw him how he was described by prosecutors. It seemed to me that. There is something dishonest about the process in the sense that it denies the humanity of the people who get caught up in that process. Obviously they've challenged us. I mean, they've affronted human decency and intentional murder is just an awful thing. And I don't mean to minimize the harm done. The challenge ultimately though, is that these acts are done by human beings and I don't think we honor the truth or justice by denying that they're human.

Alan: Can you go into? A little bit of the human this part of this as you raise it with your brother. For example, what are those assets that you see as being so human?

David: You know I have memories from the time I was a kid. I think one of my earliest memories was when I was about 2 1/2. And our family had moved from a kind of inner city neighborhood of Chicago out to the suburbs for the first time and for the first time in my life, I was allowed to go outside in the backyard and play by myself. And we had this wooden screen door and I would like push my way through the screen door, play out in the backyard. The problem was getting back inside the house because. I was so short at 2 1/2 years old I couldn't reach the hand. And I would stand out there calling for my mom or dad or Ted to open the door. But at any rate, one day

without being asked just out of the blue, Ted showed up and he had found a wooden spool. I guess from my mom sewing kit and took a nail and a hammer and nailed it onto the door at a height where I could reach it. A kind of makeshift. Handle and you know I probably never would have thought of that except you know it. It was one of the memories that floated back in my mind when I was agonizing about what to do with the suspicions that Linda and I had. And Ted would have been about 10 years old at the time, but the fact that he would have reached out to me as his little brother that he would have had enough empathy to realize that he could do something to help me. That's one story and I, I suppose every family every close family has many such stories. That's one of the stories I remember about Ted.

Alan: When do you think that Ted went from this loving brother to basically somebody who really had severe problems? Did you see it? We read the prayer life as a journey, which is one of my favorites. Going from one thing to the other. If you were charting it emotionally, could you see it in retrospect?

David: Yet Ted's. Life journey was, you know, looking back on it was was a journey of disintegration. I think I think I got my first real clue when Ted would have been in his early 30s and out of the blue had written a letter to my parents. Claiming that they had emotionally abused him as a child, right?

Alan: Any idea where that came from?

David: No, that was. That was part of what was so surprising to me. If anything, I thought that Ted was unusually close to our parents, not distant. I had no idea he had this sort of resentment. And so I attempted to write to him. I thought, well, he was just really angry about something and found out over the course of exchanging a few letters that this was more than just anger, and that he was from my point of view, completely unreasonable, unable... It's like he had a fixed idea about...

Alan: Something had sort of just flipped inside him.

David: Yeah, yeah. Been down now. In retrospect, I was able to learn that Ted began to have apparently some breaks with reality in his early 20s when he was at the University of Michigan. Interestingly enough, he stopped going to class, began to do brilliant mathematical work, but also began to have some delusions, believed people had visited him who you know we now know had not visited him. Approached the health service asking for help, but was unable to talk about his needs and began. To believe, apparently for the first time. That the problems were not inside him. That was what he had been worried about, but began to project them outwards and believe that the problems were located outside him. Not inside him.

Alan: Was there a point at which you began to personally feel this in his relationship with you rather than his parents and with your folks? Everything I've read about your folks has been superb. You had a loving, loving mother who couldn't do enough for either of you. And to this day it feels that way.

David: Absolutely has always loved Ted with all her.

Alan: Heart yeah, but then it got transferred to you. So it was not only the antipathy towards the parents, it was also directed to you. What was that about?

David: I had feared it that that would happen eventually. For instance, when I had written to Ted trying to get him to be more reasonable and to remember a lot of the good things in our family. He had said to me that if you stick up for our parents, I'm going to cut you off at some point. To so I always felt I had to be very careful in talking to him, but he eventually cut off relationships with me at one of the most surprising times he had recently written to me and told me that I was the only person in the world that he. Loved and then a few months later I wrote him and told him that I had moved to Schenectady, NY from Texas that I had moved in with my high school sweetheart, Linda, and that we were planning to be married. I even invited him to be the best man at the wedding and he wrote back a very disturbed and angry letter complaining. That Linda was not worthy of me, a manipulative woman, he believed who didn't love me, and he'd never met Linda, so he had no basis for. Again, a kind of sort of a fixed negative idea about people that I found it impossible to explain, and at that point he said he wanted nothing more to do with me unless there were a family emergency and.

Alan: There was one story that I read somewhere that had to do with his coming back and working in a factory. That your father was a supervisor and and you were a fill in supervisor with and he was. Harassing a woman.

David: Yes, yeah yeah, it was a it was a real tough situation for our family. He had been posting some some limericks around the factory and I that had gone out with him but now had broken off the relationship.

Alan: That a woman who wouldn't go out with him.

David: And you know, I confronted him very angrily. I said Ted, you gotta stop if you don't stop, I'm going to beat you up. I mean, I was very very angry at him and I regret that because I I didn't understand how much pain he was in. I did not understand how disturbed and illogical his thinking was at that point. At any rate, he continued to post the lyrics and the Limerick, and I fired him at.

Alan: That point he's not easy to fire your.

David: Brother, yeah it was very difficult, but I was very angry at the same time so I had a kind. Of what would just say a kind of a preview of what was to happen later, in which I'd been sort of forced to. Act in a way that reined Ted in. That prevented him from behaving in a way that was abusive to another person.

Alan: So we have a letter to your mother which was really tough. We have him talking about your future wife, who he didn't know and saying she was manipulative and she was doing that and then we have this incident in the factory with this woman who wouldn't go out. With him for the third time, all obviously women, what do you make? Of it you.

David: Know I make of it something different in retrospect. Looking back than I made of it at the time, it really wasn't until Linda told me at one point and. This was actually after we'd been married about a year and a half, and there had been some subsequent communications from Ted that were a little bizarre. And she said, David, I think you should consider that your brother is ill and I said, well, you don't

understand Ted, he's different. This is the way he thinks. And and Linda said Dave, get some perspective on this this. Is not rational behavior. This is not within the range of normality. You really have to consider that this is a seriously ill per. And I think you know, in retrospect, looking back a family kind of accommodates itself to a person. There's a good side to that. It's part of respecting who they are as a person, giving them the ability to be autonomous and create themselves. But at the same time, you know during that process of accommodation over years there can be a loss of perspective. And you don't realize how far out on a limb you have gone and how troubled this person is. If I knew then what I knew now, even just about mental illness, forgetting the Unabomber case, I think we would have tried to get help for Ted at an earlier stage in his life.

Alan: That gives me a hint that you know I don't know psychiatrists or psychologists, but to this moment you feel some kind of guilt about not having done more. For him, is that true?

David: You know, I think there's a rational side to all of us and my rational side tells me, you know, I was a decent brother. Anything he asked for. I tried to give him. Him the things I had to do that were harmful to him. I believe I was kind of forced to do. I never didn't do them because I felt maliciously, but sure, you always look back, and interestingly enough, you know I've met and had some conversations with family members of murder victims. And it's interesting in many cases they will feel a kind of guilt that they couldn't. Protect their loved one. I think there's an irrational side to it. We acknowledge the irrational. Side, but at the same time understand that history might have been different if we had had just a bit more insight, just a bit more compassion at times when we were challenged.

ALAN: Let's take it back if we can. Could you reprise it for us? I mean, how did this all come about? Do you want to start at?

David: The beginning you're talking about, the Unabomber saga. Ted apparently had been planting progressively more lethal bombs, mailing progressively more lethal bombs for 17 years, and I had absolutely no idea. No hint, no clue of that. Again, it was my wife Linda who approached me. She had been reading some articles in newspaper August of 1995. There was more about the Unabomber he had submitted apparently a manifesto to the Washington Post and the New York Times and said publish this and I won't kill again. But if you you know don't give me a voice for my ideas, I will kill again and they were revealing for the first time that this person, whoever it was, apparently had a strong animus against technology.

Alan: Now your wife Linda, who it is clear you really worship and love, has a lot of training in that she's a philosophy professor at Union College. She reads papers all the time. She's trained to look for language and use of language and what students do. So she read the stuff.

David: Well, actually the manifesto hadn't been published yet, but she's she's a very intuitive person and she had been very concerned about my brother. Obviously she would be concerned with a brother-in-law who hates her without having met her.

And you know she approached me and I was dismissive of the idea. First, because I had never seen Ted violent. I'd seen him angry but never violent, and also because he lived in like \$0.12 a day in a cabin up in Montana, 1000 miles from where these bombs were being posed.

Alan: Movies are getting.

David: Money from well, my parents had been sending money for a period of years to help him out and as it turned out, one of the clues that we had is that Ted had requested money from us twice. And as you know we traced back to the checks and when we had sent them we realized both of them had preceded a bombing by about. Two months at that point, that really didn't occur to us and I was telling Linda look if they published this manifesto, I'll read it and I'll be able to tell you in the first paragraph that it's not Ted. I've received so many letters from him over the years I knew his ideas. And we eventually read it early in October.

Alan: So let me just get some perspective here. Linda knew before the manifesto was published. She had a sense of this already. The others, yeah amazing.

David: Yeah it is amazing.

Alan: That's amazing.

David: It is absolutely amazing the thing she had mentioned was that they were the FBI spokespeople were saying they thought the Unabomber was born in the Chicago area, which is where we all were born. And also that he had some connection with the University of California at Berkeley, and indeed Ted had taught there for two years, so that together with the animus toward technology, planted a seed of anxiety that ended, and our belief that Ted was struggling with a mental.

Alan: Illness how much graduate work had Ted had? Something I don't know.

David: Yeah, he actually has a pH. D in mathematics. He got his pH D. At the University of California at Berkeley. He published several original papers in the field of mathematics. High quality papers that got him a tenure track job at Berkeley, which I'm sure you realize. Was not not easy so he was brilliant but obviously quite disturbed and ill.

Alan: Picking up the story again, yeah. Sorry for the diversion.

David: Well, you know we ended up looking for a copy of the Washington Post. Did not find it went to the Union College Library and looked it up on the Internet. It was actually my first time. Ever on the Internet and I recalled sitting there looking at the screen, and Linda was sitting next to me. But I realized after a minute she wasn't looking at the screen, she was looking at my face. She realized my face was going to tell her more than the words on the screen and. I I was all set to turn to her and say see I told you so you know you know you just worried for nothing and instead? I didn't feel at that point, and perhaps it was denial, but I didn't think it was definitely him. In fact, I came away thinking well. Maybe there's one chance in 1000 and that's worth looking at, but the thing that was so chilling. And disturbing to me was that I couldn't. I couldn't say to her. It's not him, I wasn't. There was enough about it that sounded like him that I thought I thought it might be a.

Alan: Possibility do you know what the conversation was like between you and she? At that moment.

David: We did not. Talk a whole lot for one reason. We were we were in a public place. Nice, and when we returned home I think she was really upset I was up. That she understood that I was for the first time taking her fears seriously.

Alan: But there was no articulation from you about this.

David: You know, I'm thinking back and I'm trying to remember what we said and I'm I'm kind of drawing a blank on it. But I did acknowledge at this point that it was something that we had to look at. You know that it wasn't something I was any longer willing to dismiss.

Alan: And so you get.

David: Home got home began pulling out some of Ted's old letters. He was a voluminous letter writer, so I had a bunch of them stored in my desk, some in the attic. Pulled them down. And for the next few weeks we spent a lot of time almost every evening, weekends seated together on our couch side by side. One of us reading the manifesto for the umpteenth time, the other one poring through the letters, trying to find patterns of ideas or or word syntax. That matched. And I would say that our suspicions were deepening over time. At one point, I recall looking up at Linda at the breakfast table and saying, you know, I think I think it may be a 5050 chance, and she was. I mean, that was even a bit of an awakening for her because I think up to this point. I had been looking for things that could, you know, exonerate Ted and she was looking for comparisons that might tell us whether he was involved or not. And here I was acknowledging hey, it's a 5050 chance she knew.

Alan: Do you think?

David: I don't think so. I mean, I think at that point she knew that she had to depend on something outside of her own consciousness. I think she had a strong intuition. Uhm, how would you put it? You know, human minds are so complex and strange. I recall waking up some mornings and thinking that I knew. One way or the other? I mean one morning I would wake up and say to myself, you know, this can't be, you know there's 280 million people in our country. What are the chances that Ted could be the guilty party here? Be small, I'm projecting my fears. I've been worried about my brother. Another morning I would wake up and say David, the truth is staring you in the face and you're in denial about it. It must be him. Who else could it be? And typically I would wake up and you know in those first few seconds of awakening thinking man, that was a bad bad dream, only to realize a few moments later that it was no.

Alan: Dream and your heart was. Pounding, sure.

David: Sure, sure wishing somehow it would go away or there would be some magical resolution.

Alan: First, was there a consciousness that if it was and you didn't do anything, then that somebody else is going to get? Hurt sure, sure.

David: I, I mean part of it was a search for the truth about it. Was this Ted or wasn't at Ted? That was one of the issues. The other real issue that turned into a deep dilemma. As our suspicions grew, is what do we do about it? If we do nothing, some innocent person somewhere is going to open a package perhaps and be killed. My bro. On the other hand, if we do go forward, report something the New York had just passed its death penalty law. The death penalty was practiced more and more. We knew these were capital crimes. There was a chance that if we came forward, Ted might be executed and so whatever we did could lead to somebody's death. Not an easy situation.

Alan: To be in at any moment there because of his pledge. If you published this, I'll stop. Was there a sense that he might really mean that and he wouldn't do?

David: Anymore that was part of my thought. At one point I asked Linda, I said I think I should go out and visit. You can imagine what she thought about that here. She thinks this man is psychotic and a killer. What would he do if he thought his brother suspected so she was adamant against it? At one point, she said the only way I'll permit this is if you have a bodyguard with you disguised as a friend, and even then she was not enthusiastic about the idea. Anyway, as a compromise, I wrote a letter to Ted and I tried to write to that brother. I remembered, you know. The brother I was close to the brother I loved and obviously I didn't confront him with my suspicions, but I said, you know, I'd like to. I'd like to come and visit you. I've been worried about you. I'm sad about the lack of contact. I love you. Could I come out and visit and I got back in place in return a couple of weeks later. Of you know, a. Fairly bizarre letter. It wasn't just angry. It was, it was not coming from a well placed inside my brother and I think I've realized.

Alan: What it say is it basically don't come.

David: It said don't come it said don't contact me any more, get it straight that you know I really don't want anything to do with you anymore. You're not my brother. There's no bond between us that was broken a long time ago.

Alan: You ever think that in some way the brother who put the spindle at the end of the stick? Was still protecting you by saying don't come.

David: Alan, I think that's a very insightful comment on your part because. Yeah, Ted is an extraordinarily complex person, and I've searched as hard as I can for some good in these various experiences I've been through and that was one thought that in some way, perhaps Ted was protecting his family from his illness and from what he was doing by distancing himself, I don't think. It's as simple as that. I think there were real delusions and anger and all of that, but I think maybe the good part of Ted was also trying to protect. But anyway, the conclusion I drew at that moment was a wasn't going to be any good to go visit him and be that he was very ill, that he was unstable. There was no way I could trust that he would be able to keep the promise he'd made, not to send another bomb. If the manifesto were published.

Alan: So then.

David: I think we felt and Linda and I determined at some point that we were we were in this together. We were partners. You know we were going to. Whatever we did was going to be a joint decision. And I guess I feel in some way that the decent thing we did the right thing we did reflects at a pretty deep level. The depth of our relationship, the trust of our relationship.

Alan: Let me just say that if there's one thing that's becoming clear about this interview is that it's about a love story.

David: Wow well yeah I met Linda in the 7th grade and fell in love with her at 16 and once again you're right on target there. But we were concerned. I thought even you know Ted as ill as he was as paranoid as he was if he were innocent, and an FBI agent showed up on his doorstep, found him in his cabin, out there in Montana, it could be dangerous either to the agent or to Ted. I thought you know what would Ted? This very paranoid guy, thinking that you know the FBI showing up on my doorstep. I imagined him doing something desperate and I always thought if he did something desperate, it would probably be self harm of some kind. But at any rate, I felt that we had to be as careful as possible, and Linda came up with the idea again, an excellent idea that we should try to get some outside corroboration for our fears. And she is an academic realized that there are people, and I think they do this in the literary field. They will analyze manuscripts. And whatever they do, count adjectives or split infinitives or whatever and are able to tell whether Shakespeare wrote all of Shakespeare or Homer wrote all of homework.

Alan: Who wrote primary colors?

David: Or who wrote primary colors? There you go. And so through an intermediary, a friend of ours from back in Evergreen Park who was working as a private detective we found.

Alan: So you know this guy or this.

David: Woman this woman, yes, and she found someone to do a professional language analysis. They wrote back to us. She called us back after a couple of weeks. And said they would like more letters. They don't have enough to go on, so we retyped some of Ted's letters sent them. It was.

Alan: Do you have a feeling of trust with the detective and with the people who were reading the letters at this stage? Because clearly they would have to know what this was about, right?

David: Sure, we were asking them to compare the letters to the Unabomber manifesto. Our friend promised us that she would only reveal our identities if she were subpoenaed, too forced, legally to do so. So I I think we trusted her very much and obviously we used her to get some distance from the person. Actually doing the analysis. We didn't want the train to leave the station without our being on the train, and perhaps in a position to negotiate or affect the outcome or something or other.

Alan: But surely you must have known that when the third party was reading the letters, they were going to say, Holy God, this is really something sure.

David: Sure, I. I mean, in the moment that the secret left the family, we understood that there was potentially a loss of control. So in a sense, the decision was made a little bit piece meal and at every point there was always the hope that you know we'd get news back that you know it couldn't beat. Add that Ted, you know we had a different writing style. Or something or other. But anyway, on New Year's Eve of 1995 it was about to turn into 1996 and got the call from our friend. I'd gotten home early from work and she said that while she read me, the report was about 2 pages long. The conclusion was what really got to me. The conclusion said that they believed that there was a 60% chance. That the author of the manifesto was the same person who had written the letters we submitted, in other words, was Ted. And at that point, Linda and I had already determined, agreed that if there was any significant chance that we would go forward and contact the authorities and. That's what we did. It wasn't as easy to do as you might think. The first lawyers that we tried to contact to help us didn't return our phone calls. Eventually we found an attorney, Tony Bagley, who was a law school friend of our friend, the private detective, and the first thing I. Asked him to research was whether or not we could get some kind of a deal in advance. In other words. Deliver a likely candidate in the Unabomber, case, in return for a promise that the Justice Department wouldn't seek the death penalty.

Alan: I just want to put something in perspective here. You're not a rich man, your wife is a college professor. Your mother living on a pension of some kind, right? So so basically we're not talking about a family that had a lot of money.

David: Right?

Alan: To do all of this and so let me just ask you, were all of these people paid that you were going to the detective? The handwriting analysts. And how is that working?

David: The language analysts was paid, we paid them. I can't remember. It wasn't a whole lot of money. It was several \$100. Our friend, the private detective did not demand money. The lawyer actually.

Alan: What was that relationship looking like as it was going forward between you and your? Friend the private. Well it's interesting.

David: You know, we didn't tell her who we suspected, but at one point I kind of slipped when we were talking about, you know, the the report and I and I. I suddenly said Ted and I said, oh, I didn't mean to say that. And then she told me while she can have suspected that it was someone close to me and perhaps my brother, but we had complete trust in her.

Alan: Because I I'm thinking that anybody listening to this program right now has got to be projecting themselves into your situation. I mean it just got to be in saying you know how? How would I have handled this? What would I have done absolutely so? So let's move on. And so I said, I agree.

David: Sure, sure well anyway the attorney came back and he said he did not think there was any chance of getting a deal in advance.

Alan: So when you say deal, somebody may be thinking you're talking about money. You're not dumb down and you're talking about a.

David: Oh no, no. Deal about how and all the only thing we would have asked for was that he not get the death penalty. That would be all we had in mind. In terms of a deal, he told us he didn't believe it was possible. Do you want to still go ahead and we said yes. We're committed to going ahead, so he arranged an appointment a meeting he had taken up. Kind of a summary put together by our friend, the private detective. And the report from the forensic language analyst and had gotten the attention of someone he knew in the FBI. So we met with three members of the Unabom task force in Washington DC, and from that point on we had a close partnership, at least for the next two months as we gave them everything they asked for.

Alan: Can you characterize that first meeting?

David: It's interesting one of the agents sure seemed skeptical like he seemed to think it was a wild goose chase and the other who said that she was. Involved in profiling psychological profiling. Asked a lot of questions about Ted. You know, our concerns about his mental health, our family history, all of those kinds of things. And my read on the agents was that the one who was in tune with the psychological aspects was more willing to believe that this was a legitimate suspicion.

Alan: Unless they were playing good cop bad.

David: Cop who knows? Yeah yeah. And I've asked myself that question a lot.

Alan: So when you walked into that room and sat with them right away, you didn't get the feeling that they were immediately saying, Oh my God, this is it. This is what we've been looking for. There wasn't this shock of recognition, it was more gradual than that.

David: Sure, sure. I mean, I was interested in cooperating as fully as I could for various reasons. One reason is that I didn't want anybody else to be killed. If Ted were the person responsible, I wanted him. Stopped, on the other hand, I also wanted them to know who Ted was. I wanted them to know about his paranoia about the time we'd taken some of his letters to a psychiatrist. I wanted them to know that they were dealing not with some sort of political terrorist, but with someone with some pretty severe mental and emotional problems. And in fact. The feedback I got from them was that they believed this. They said that they had understood their profilers, understood from the time they read them. Phesto that there was an undercurrent of mental illness there that they were not dealing with a person who was working with a group of people. Someone working on his own with some psychological problems, and I recall one time. For instance, when we were on our way to my cabin down in Texas, where I had some more letters stored and. I was driving with the agents. One of the agents said to me, Dave, you know, I understand this is very, very difficult for you, but you should keep in mind please consider that in helping us, you're also helping your brother and she went on to describe mental health treatments that are available in federal prison. And I was not in a position where I needed to be cajoled. In other words, I was not a reluctant at all in my cooperation.

Alan: No, you can use.

David: I was I was an open book to them so they didn't have to lead me on and I took this to mean that they were seeing things in the way that we did that this tragedy central to this tragedy was a case of mental illness and that if justice. Were to be done. My brother's life would be spared.

Alan: You believe them in retrospect, or do you think that in some way they were being manipulative now?

David: I've asked myself that question a lot and you know there's a lot of things I just don't know about people, and I honestly don't know the answer to that. I've heard you know some cynically minded people, say Dave, they were. They were just leading you on.

Alan: You're blaming.

David: Then they were just playing you and another part of me says, well, there were human beings, you know, and they saw I was in pain and we were in the car for hours. Maybe they just, you know, maybe she volunteered what she was thinking at the.

Alan: Moment and how did you get to? Texas with them.

David: The FBI paid for my plane ticket down to El Paso and then we drove in a car about 6:00 or 7 hours to joerling.

Alan: How long from meet one? With the FBI to Texas.

David: That was just a week or two.

Alan: You would think that they'd be moving fairly quickly. You know at that stage, right? So it's clear, to me at least. I think it's clear to me that they still haven't fully subscribed to this, because if they had, it wouldn't have taken a week or two. It would have taken 2 hours and the hell with whatever you thought they would have been around that. Cabin, and so they really were still developing the case.

David: Probably you know it's interesting. We had gotten some promises from them, and one of the promises was that there would be a phased investigation.

Alan: Oh yes. What were those like?

David: You know, mindful of Ted's mental illness, I did not want agents showing up on his doorstep, and so they promised that they would attempt in every way possible to rule him out without his ever knowing even that he was being investigated.

Alan: You also didn't want to be identified, right?

David: Yes, that was another promise, and in fact the promise I just mentioned and we were also promised in writing that would would be treated as confidential informants. In other words, that no one would ever know that we had cooperated and in effect turned my brother in. And then there was a more casual verbal promise that we would have some advance warning if Ted were to be arrested. The premise about the phased investigation essentially kept, as far as I can tell.

Alan: They kept the other two. Yeah out the window out the window. So what happened next? You were down in Texas.

David: I think well, yeah, and things were going and they showed up at our house in Schenectady and actually took fingerprints. Got more letters, more interviews, some

interviews, and the. And finally I got a call that I was dreading from them, which was that they felt that they had been unable to rule Ted out as a suspect that phase one was over and they needed to move to phase two and that involved an interview with our mother. They had promised me that I would be allowed to be present at any interview with my mother, and I think it worked both ways I. I mean, I wanted to protect my mother. And at the same time you know, I think they wanted someone who could persuade my mother to cooperate with them. So I had the unenviable task of approaching my mom explaining to her what I feared, and also what I had done.

Alan: And her reaction.

David: Ah, you know, let me preface it by saying that you know I did not know if I was going to lose my mother's love that day. You know, I, I knew she loved Ted with all her heart. I didn't know how she was would respond knowing what what I had done that I had turned him in. I kind of took her from the beginning to the end. I recall she was sitting in her chair in her living room. I was kind of pacing the floor at some points. Tears started flowing and I just. Eventually got to the point where I said Mama, I'm really worried that Ted may be involved in these bombings, and I'm so worried. That I have gone to the FBI and contacted them and she got out of her chair and walked up to me. She put her arms around my neck. She's a very I'm over 6 feet tall. She's under 5 feet tall. She kind of pulled me down, put a kiss on my cheek and said, Dave, I can't imagine what you've been going through. I know you wouldn't have done this unless you felt. We had to and about half the weight of the universe came off my shoulders. I knew that my mom had faith in me that she still loved me. And then I said, well, as a matter of fact, mom, the FBI is outside. They'd like to come in and talk to you. And and she said, that's OK, you know. I don't believe Ted Ted could have done this and I think it's good if they investigate this and you'll see he'll be exonerated. You'll be able to sleep again.

Alan: Did she use that word exonerated?

David: She might have, you know she's she's she's. She's read more books than probably anyone I know. She's quite a bright, literate woman.

Alan: That's clear so.

David: They came up. Yep, they came up at one point, you know, after they had sort of engaged my mom and ascertained that she was willing to cooperate, they asked if she would be willing to show them letters, family pictures and. She said asked me to go to her closet she had in the living room there and take out a big trunk that she had which contained all the relics she had of. Letters over the years, even grade school and high school papers that he'd gotten in an family pictures. At one point, she took out this little book. It was a little blue book and she handed it up to the agents and said this is Ted's baby book. It's a journal I kept during the first year of his life. Do you want to see this and and they said yes, ma'am. That would be very helpful and they took it and they bagged it for evidence. But I've thought about that moment because it's agonizing, heartbreaking moment because she was saying this too. Is the person you're looking at this is this little baby. This is the child that came out of my. Womb

this is the child that you know was in the hospital during the first year of his life, and seemingly was traumatized by that. But it was that mother, saying, I'm giving you my son remember this as a human being.

Alan: So then.

David: Oh, Fast forward a couple of weeks I get a call from the attorney Mr Bagley down in Washington who said Dave you better get home? They're arresting your brother as we. Speak, in fact, it's already on the on the. News when I. Get home, protect your mother. The media will be interested in this.

Alan: So how did the media find out if you had a deal? In other words, if you had. A deal with the FBI, how did they find out?

David: Well, I of course at this moment, didn't suspect at all that the media was aware of that. I called Linda at work. We converged on my mother's apartment.

Alan: Oh, I see. In other words, get home because now your brother, I'm a little slow here.

David: Yeah, yeah.

Alan: Yeah, brother is going to be.

David: Is being arrested.

Alan: Exactly right and you will be the.

David: You know the being media being?

Alan: Brother of looking.

David: Yeah, I'm the brother. Media being what it is. You know people are going to be showing up with questions. Well, no. Sooner did Lyndon I get in the door. Tell my mom what was going on. Then you know the trucks began pulling up into the parking lot of her apartment and not too long afterwards.

Alan: Yeah, I remember that.

David: Turning on the TV and hearing one of the evening anchors say that they had arrested a suspect in the case.

Alan: I read that that was a damn rather and that you would never watch Dan rather as. A result of that.

David: Well, my mom doesn't like to watch Dan. Rather, you know, I don't resent it. I the I think the thing that we resented was his use of the word fingered because because he said the next sentence was in an interesting sidelight to this case.

Alan: Things are.

David: Kaczynski was apparently fingered by his brother David, who lives in disconnected. In New York and. You know to. To think of all, we had been through over these last few months and summed that up in the word. Fingered was a bit offensive.

Alan: Well, some some idiot must have written that, and it appeared on his. Teleprompter yeah, sure. Yeah, so that is so fascinating and now everything breaks loose. I remember being on local television and saying will you leave him alone and that they were out there. It was like Hollywood or something and that they would just awful. The media just were running up onto your porch and they were trying to take

pictures through drapes and they were trying to deliver flowers so somebody would come to the door. How did you feel about the? Media then, oh.

David: It's, you know it was so ironic. In a sense. I mean, I felt angry about the media. No question about that. On the other hand, I had very complicated emotions. I mean, in some sense. It was all surreal. It's like this can't be happening to us. Yes man, I'm thinking about my brother, you know, we see him on TV paraded out of his cabin in absolute rags and tatters and a strange look on his face. And so putting this all together, there was no. The irony is that there were no words I had to express what. I was feeling and thinking. And here was most of the world media wanting to know what I had to say about this. You know, there's nothing to say really.

Alan: What is story on this story? So now the trial occurs, we're fast forwarding. You're sitting in the courtroom, right? And there's no communication between you and your brother.

David: Yeah yeah it. It been the first time I'd seen him since 1986. He kind of walked in.

Alan: Where was the trial? I'm sorry.

David: Ramento, California. It was a federal trial and things had had gotten to, you know, a very unstable, even the legal case had kind of reached a very unstable position at this point, because my brother believed that his attorneys had. Turned against him. He was saying he wasn't ill. He did this for a political motive. They were insisting that they needed to present the experts to, you know, give an impression of his mental condition and the experts were about to say that he was suffering from schizophrenia. Interestingly, we had. He had subsequent to my brother's arrest. We had further interactions. With the government. And in one of those, the prosecutor had called, he had been recently appointed to the case called me and asked to have a meeting with my mother and me up and disconnected. He said he understood that my brother's mental state and condition was an issue in this case, and he wanted to learn more about it and I was, you know, hearing that. Is happy, I thought, you know, they're seeing things the same way we are, and perhaps they feel some gratitude for what we've done. You know there's a way to stop the killing without killing my.

Alan: Brother like you made it clear in previous interactions with the government that you didn't want your brother killed.

David: You know, I. I didn't actually. I think it was. Because I was living on hope in a certain sense, I mean the one hope that was getting really really small. At this point was the hope that Ted was not involved, that he was just plain innocent, but the other hope was that as I trolled them more in, as they learned more, they would do the right, develop a picture and do the right thing. I didn't want to hear the word. No, we cannot promise that, and that's, I think that's probably why I didn't ask.

Alan: When the prosecutor? Came did you make it plain?

David: At that point, at that point, I made it very plain and told him everything I knew that I thought might have bearing on my brother's mental. Illness but at the end of our conversation I asked him to make me a promise and the promise was that

before he made a decision about whether to recommend a death sentence or not, he would conduct a fair and impartial evaluation of my brother's mental condition. I even warned him. I said, you know, Ted's probably not going to be cooperative and we discussed how you know. They might try to develop, you know, a picture of Ted's mental illness without Ted's cooperation. But he made the promise and told me at the time something that made me feel a little bit better was that they had found better and worse. I suppose they'd found a bomb under Ted's bed. Meaning that he probably would have hurt someone else again if we had not turned.

Alan: Him in just give us a one line precis of what Ted's philosophy was. That led him even in this world of irrationality. What was the philosophy that was advanced?

David: Oh, let's see how do I sum that up? And I've been asked that before. It's a little hard to do, but I think he believed that the machines were no longer serving us. We were serving the machines. We were enslaved by technology, OK?

Alan: I'm sorry again for interrupting.

David: Well, two weeks later, I get another call from our attorney after getting the promise from the prosecutor that you know that he would get conduct a fair and impartial evaluation and learned that he had hired a psychiatrist who was well known testifying generally for the prosecution in high profile cases. It was a man by the name of. Doctor Park Dietz and he's well known in fact, he recently testified in the Andrea Yates case. The woman who had drowned her children in Texas, a capital case. Also, to the effect that this was a calculated act on her part. At that point, we realized that the playing field had nothing to do with looking for truth and justice that they were looking for a win, you know, and winning by their definition meant putting the Unabomber to death, regardless of whether he was mentally ill or not, regardless of whether any debt was owed. To our family, regardless of the message it would send to other people who might be in a position to turn in family members for serious crimes. They wanted to win the case. And I suppose when I you know when I come talking about the death penalty, when I use my personal story to talk about that, I'll say, you know, the criminal justice system isn't what we think we think there's going to be some Solomon there or somebody of wise people who are going to really be searching for truth and justice. And the right thing to do just as our. Family searched for truth and justice, and the right thing to do made it difficult. Sacrifice in turning my brother in. Instead we found a just a sharply adversarial system in which both sides are bent on win. And justice goes out the.

Alan: Window and political in the worst.

David: Sense, sure, you know. Obviously, we've seen office seekers use the death penalty for political gain. We've certainly seen elected judges elected district attorneys in some cases where there's tremendous, popular support for the death penalty using the death penalty. As a political tool, often the people who get caught up in that system.

Alan: Now they I'm sorry they ended up doing what you wanted, they end. Right, giving you what you wanted, which was no death penalty. How did?

David: That come about, I think it came about because they two things. One was that they were getting embarrassed. They were really getting hammered in the. Media, were they? Yeah yeah, New York Times all the major newspapers had editorialized against their refusal to offer a plea to my brother. And secondly, I think they were losing control of the process. I mean, to some extent it's about control. It's about looking good and as my brother attempted to fire his attorneys when the judge denied him that my brother asked to defend himself, then made a suicidal gesture in.

Alan: Was it serious?

David: I don't know. There were marks left around his neck. I don't think he came close to dying. Knowing Ted, I believe it was a serious attempt.

Alan: You said in the beginning, you know I didn't forget it and I'm sure nobody else has been listening to this. Forgot it that you always thought that in the beginning that if he did anything harmful it would be towards himself.

David: Yeah, yeah, that's right. Right, so you know, I think in that context I think there was no way to to win this as a public relations kind of even, even though they were taking polls in the town of Sacramento, where two people had been killed and a majority of the people were saying that they could. You know that life in prison would be a better sentence than death from my brother. Again, the politics. Affected the situation and I believe if the government could have put my brother to death and looked good doing so they wouldn't have batted an eye. But because they were losing control of the process because it was becoming embarrassing to them, they decided to cut their losses.

Alan: In short, it had nothing to do with morality. It had to do with, as you say, winning. Or losing or. Being perceived in one way or the other.

David: I believe so.

Alan: Tell me about the victims. I know you've been in touch with the victims and their families. Tell me about how that's all gone.

David: I've been in touch with some one. Interestingly enough, is a guy who almost died from one of my brothers bombs. Gary Wright, who lives in Salt Lake City. Just just a warm hearted person and he and I have become over the years. close friends, an unlikely friendship and the evening of September 11th, when you know when people were calling their families to find out if they were OK. Gary Wright called me. He said he knew I went down to. To New York frequently and hoped. Wanted to make sure I was OK and I thought the irony of this. Here's a guy who was almost killed by my brother reaching out to me, finding out if I was OK. Most of the victims in my brother's case have taken the time to thank us for what we've done. Something that's been important for me is to feel and believe that after a tragedy like this, some form of healing and reconciliation is possible. That families, you know that the criminal justice process seems to divide us. We're told by attorneys. Don't talk to the other side. We sit on opposite sides of the court. From, you know. But as human beings, there are victims on both sides and with certainly as a family made every effort to reach out to my brothers victims and several of them have reached back across that Gulf. I'll

tell you one story that I thought was very, very touching. After my brother's trial. We were contacted by a law enforcement chaplain who said that one of the families wanted to see my mother and me. We had rented an apartment there in Sacramento and so we went, not knowing who we would meet and it turned out to be the widow of one of the victim. And her sister and her husband, sister, and the first thing they said to us as we walked into the room was that they wanted to thank us and to let us know that the only thing that they really really cared about was that the killing would stop. And I took this to mean that they were telling us that, you know they could. Without the death penalty, that wasn't going to necessarily help them. My mom being the mom, she is loving. My brother began to try to explain to the women. And about my brother's mental illness, and I recall her kind of sitting in a chair. I was sitting behind her kind of with my hands on the top of the back of the chair, and I could see her explaining schizophrenia. And I saw the eyes of these three women, and they were. They were troubled eyes. They did not like what they were hearing. They didn't want to hear any excuse. For the man who had murdered their loved. And at one point the widow said pretty abruptly, he knew what he was doing and my mom at this moment kind of dropped her head and said, I think without most honesty at this moment, because she really probably felt she didn't have much reason to live. But she said, I wish I wish he had killed me instead of your husband. And that very much touched the woman who who came up to my mother and touched around the shoulder and said, Mrs Kozinski don't do this to yourself. You're not responsible, but you know I was carried that moment that memory because it you know there was there was a dignity and a respect among all of us there that was, I think, very, very important. And that we need to carry forward, we need to hang onto. In cases like this, there was also a golf I mean. And the realization that all of our lives were going to be changed forever. It was never going to be the same for any of us. There was no.

Alan: Closure the reward money and gave it basically to the victims. What was that about?

David: That was easy. I mean it. We were fortunate in many ways and that was one of the ways in which we were fortunate. 'cause obviously there's no way you can make up for the loss of a human life. With money I mean. But it was a way for us to say look, we in some tangible way. We care about your loss. We'll do whatever we can. It may be small, it may be apologizing. It may be giving this reward money to the people who need it to. The people who've been harmed. So that was that was a happy thing to do. That was a happy moment for. Linda and me.

Alan: Clearly you are such an articulate and wonder. Oh man, that this story should be told in many ways. You've been kind enough to do it with us here. What about a book?

David: Let me address something you've just said and it's bothered me a little bit and believe me, I don't want to be falsely humble or something like that, but I do get a little bit. Disturbed when sometimes people say Mr Kaczynski, you're a great hero or you're a wonderful person. First of all, I mean it neglects Linda role, which

was absolutely crucial. Ted probably would have killed other people if not for Linda, and secondly, it neglects the fact that we were just trying to do what was humanly right and decent. And really, this is what this all has to be about, from all sides of people involved, whether they're in the criminal justice system. Whether they're judges, whether they're in politics, whether they're human beings, whether they're sitting on it. Jury, it's about the connection between human beings at a deep spiritual level. I mean, that's the basis of ethics. It's the basis of human compassion. It's the basis of all of our faith traditions. It's made.

Alan: You adopt Buddhism. Is that right? Because that's the basic part of the Buddhist philosophy.

David: Yes, certainly that's a very. Basic tenant of Buddhism, but I don't think it's unique to Buddhism. Certainly in the other major faith there's a similar belief in the sanctity of life and the connectedness that we're all part of God's family. And that's where we need to go, and I think I strongly believe that the death penalty is an obstacle to that kind of understanding and dignity and respect and honoring of the value of a human life.

Alan: OK, so I'm going to end on one discordant note. I know you don't want to be thought of as a hero. I know Linda. May not want to be thought of. As a hero, you are heroes to me and I'm sure you're heroes to the people who have been listening to this. Ah, out of time, our guest has been David Kaczynski, the executive director of New Yorkers against the death penalty and brother of the so-called Unabomber Ted Kaczynski. Thank you so much David for taking this time with us today. I'm Alan Chartock and we'll see you all again. You've been listening to an interview with Alan Chartock and David Kaczynski, brother of Unabomber Ted Kaczynski and former head of New Yorkers, against the death penalty. Thanks for listening.

The Ted K Archive

David Kaczynski & Alan Chartock
David Kaczynski | WAMC's In Conversation With
Aug 12, 2021

<youtube.com/watch?v=U2MAe8N2Dv4>

www.thetedkarchive.com