

Group against death penalty rallies in Helena

Race & poverty play role in death row penalties, group says

Marga Lincoln
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Journey of Hope

Anti-death penalty group told personal stories of injustice and the necessity for changing the law in Helena on Friday.

‘I’m thankful to be here, so I can stand up and fight for human justice.’

— *Shujaa Graham, former death row inmate*

When Shujaa Graham tells his story of living on death row, he weeps.

Sent to death row in 1976, he lived there until he was eventually acquitted.

He was in Helena Friday with other former death row inmates and also relatives of those on death row as part of World Day Against the Death Penalty events.

The “Journey of Hope...from Violence to Healing” tour, which held 60 events this week in Montana, seeks to end the death penalty and replace it with life imprisonment without parole.

Graham grew up poor in the South. At 11, he followed his mother to California. Soon he was caught up in gangs and crime.

At 18, he received four years for robbery.

While in prison, he became active in the prison justice movement and learned to read and write.

But then on Nov. 22, 1973, a guard was killed.

Graham was charged with the crime. Perhaps it was because he was outspoken and a leader, he said.

On death row, much of his time was spent in solitary confinement. The cell was so small he could touch all the walls from where he sat on his bed.

Then, he said, there were beatings by guards.

The prison guards yelled “dead man walking” whenever they took him from his cell into the prison yard. The sea of prisoners would part for him to walk — in solitude. The words still echo in his head.

“I fought for my life,” he said, tears pouring down his face as he addressed a group of about 50 at the Lewis and Clark Library.

“I thought I knew prison,” he said. “When I went to death row, it was a whole new reality.”

The California Supreme Court eventually overturned Graham’s conviction, and in 1982, after 14 years in prison, he was acquitted and set free.

Since then, he’s tried to rebuild his life, he said. He has three children, the youngest playing baseball on scholarship at a college in Mississippi.

“I’m thankful to be here,” Graham said, “so I can stand up and fight for human justice.”

Even on his happiest days, watching his son play baseball, he’s haunted by death row memories.

“I don’t want no one to experience what I have, that’s why I fight.”

Bill Babbitt travels the country telling the story of his brother, Manny, a Vietnam vet, executed by lethal injection on his 50th birthday.

Manny served two tours of duty in Vietnam.

“But it was his third tour of duty in America — the war he fought in his head — that killed him,” said Bill.

Diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and paranoid schizophrenia, Manny was released from a mental hospital without anyone informing his family he was dangerously mentally ill, said Bill.

Bill found himself turning his brother over to Sacramento police, when he discovered Manny was responsible for Leah Shendel’s death in December 1980.

Bill feels betrayed. The police told him it was unlikely the state would pursue the death penalty against Manny.

However, the district attorney did.

It was Manny’s execution that galvanized David Kaczynski, brother of Unabomber Ted Kaczynski, to speak out against the death penalty, David told the crowd.

“We’re not executing the worst murderers,” said David. “We’re executing those with the worst attorneys.”

Race and poverty are determining factors in who winds up on death row, he said.

Both Ted and Manny were charged with first degree murder, both suffered from mental illness, both were turned over to the police by their brothers, both killed white victims, and both had all-white juries, said David.

Ted, who is white, well educated and from a privileged background, received life in prison without parole, although he committed three premeditated murders, said David.

Manny, who was black, was a sixth-grade dropout. His victim died of a heart attack following an assault Manny committed during a PTSD episode.

“Look at these two stories,” said David. “Where is the justice?”

Words engraved over the Supreme Court in Washington, D.C., state “equal justice under law.”

“These words are a profound aspiration for our culture and our democracy. But the way the death penalty is applied in this country makes a mockery of this aspiration.”

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Shujaa Graham gave an emotional speech during a death penalty abolition rally at the Lewis and Clark County Library, Graham and several other advocates are traveling the state, speaking about their views.

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By MARGA LINCOLN
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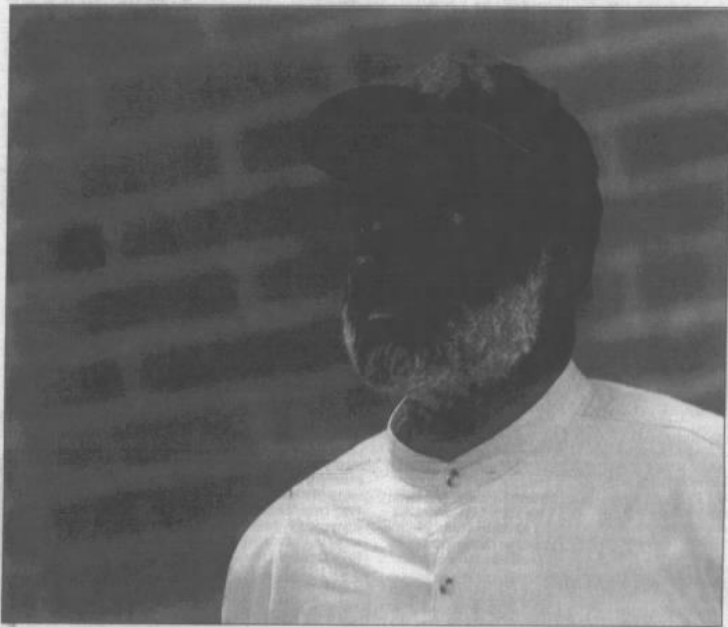
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Olus Wiley JR photo editor

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The Ted K Archive

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