

The nun, the murderer and the Oscar-winning film

*Sister Helen Prejean became famous with her book, **Dead Man Walking**, which was made into an Oscar-winning film. But her mission to end the death penalty remains her starring role.*

BY ROSETTE ROYALE
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Elmo Patrick Sonnier committed two heinous crimes.

On Nov. 5, 1977, Patrick and his brother Eddie dressed as police officers and abducted two Louisiana teenagers from a local lover's lane. After they handcuffed the 16-year-old male of the couple to a tree, the brothers raped the 18-year-old girl. Then they placed both teens face down on the ground, and, using a .22-caliber rifle, the brothers shot each teen three times in the back of the head.

Sister Helen Prejean didn't know about those crimes in January 1982, when someone from a prisoner rights group asked her to become Patrick's pen pal. At the time, Patrick was on death row at Angola, the nickname for the Louisiana State Penitentiary, the country's largest maximum security prison. So when Prejean, a Catholic nun, found out what he and his brother had done, she doubted whether she should begin a correspondence. But then she reminded herself of her commitment to stand with the poor, and she agreed to write Patrick. He wrote back. Prejean became his spiritual advisor prior to his execution in the electric chair. The role not only transformed her life, it changed the way millions of people view the death penalty.

Prejean, 74, wrote about her experiences with Patrick and another death-row inmate in "Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States." The book, published in 1993, is a spiritual examination of the practice of execution, and it incorporates the views of death row inmates, their families, the victims' families and even prison guards. It served as the basis of the Oscar-nominated film "Dead Man Walking," starring Susan Sarandon and Sean Penn and directed by Tim Robbins. Sarandon won an Oscar in 1995 as Best Actress for her portrayal of Prejean. The book has even been turned into an opera.

Prejean was recently in Seattle to participate in the Social Justice Film Festival. While there, she viewed the screening of "Central Park Five," a documentary about five black and/or Latino teens who were wrongfully convicted in 1989 of raping a white woman in New York's Central Park.

Prejean speaks with a smooth, Southern drawl that makes you feel as if you're her closest friend, the two of you seated on a porch swing, each holding a glass of sweet tea. Her sugared tones help the medicine go down, as she offers her thoughts on



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Sister Helen Prejean has been on a mission to end the death penalty, yet 32 states still have the ultimate punishment. So far this year, 28 people have been executed in the U.S.

execution, redemption, forgiveness and overcoming cowardice.

Rosette Royale: *First, I thought we would start talking about your book and the work that you do, since that's how most people know you.*

Sister Helen Prejean: I never dreamed I was going to write a book, but my eyes were opened: My eyes had seen too much, and my heart had held too much. I had accompanied, by the time I wrote "Dead Man," three people to execution and watched them die and was helpless to stop their deaths. I watched the process of the whole death penalty and their victims' families on the other side. So I had to do something to just get the word out, to bring people close to the reality, because you know how there can be these invisible walls? There can be great suffering that goes on, but people don't hear the cries, they don't hear the suffering because they're separated from it. Like we're separated from the inner city in the suburbs. And I had been brought close, so I knew I could tell the story, and that's how "Dead Man Walking" was born.

I came out of the execution chamber with Pat Sonnier, the first man I was with, April 5. It was 1984. It was right after midnight when I came out. I'd never seen anything like this in my life — and I vomited. I threw up as soon as I got outside the gate of the prison. And that's really when my mission was born.

I thought: The people are never gonna see this. It's a secret ritual, and it's done behind prison walls, and people are going to read [in the newspapers] "Oh, that was a crime; justice was done." And they're nowhere close to the reality. But I had been

there, so I had to tell the story to whoever would listen. And [the book] came out in '93.

The 90s were the zenith in the United States for the death penalty. Over 80 percent of people in the Deep South states like Louisiana believed in the death penalty, and a lot of the country did. So I had a good editor; I had really good people helping me, and it got good reviews. But it's still a book by a Catholic nun about the death penalty, and what were its chances of it going anywhere? And one of the miracles that happened: Susan Sarandon read it, and she pressed Tim Robbins for nine months until she prevailed on him to read the book because she was the first one to realize: We need another kind of film in the United States on this issue. There had been formulaic films, and the whole energy was whether the person was guilty or not. Then, "Yes, he's guilty," and it ends with the execution, and people would come away from the film and say that justice was done: "He got the ultimate penalty, he deserved what he got." But in my book, I bring people over to both sides of the issue, from the victim's family and what they suffer, from the prisoner's family and what they're going through. Then I talk about the guards, who have to do the killing. What happens to them?

R.R.: *So let's talk about the victims' family. Did you meet Pat Sonnier's victims' families?*

S.H.P.: Yes. But where I made a mistake, Rosette, I hesitated to meet the victims' families because two teenagers had been killed by these brothers, both of them. And I thought: The victims' families are not

See PREJEAN, page 9