

PREJEAN, from page 8

going to want to see me. I'm the spiritual advisor to a man who killed their kids. And I stayed away. It was really cowardice that made me stay away. I was afraid of their anger, their rejection, and then I met them at the worst possible time. It was right at the pardon board hearing, one week before Pat was executed. And they were there at the pardon board because they had been told by the D.A., "You bring all your relatives and friends, because this is the last legal hoop you gotta jump through to get your justice." And that's when they meet me. And what am I doing at the pardon board? I'm there trying to persuade the pardon board not to kill Patrick Sonnier. And so how could

way.

But some guards, like Felton Coody, he had been the supervisor on death row for years. And that was fine, he could do that. He saw there was order on the tier. But then they moved him over to the execution's slot, and after five executions, he called me in his office one day and he said, "Sister, I'ma have to quit this job. I've been there five times; and I come home afterward and, I sit in my La-Z-Boy chair, and I can't eat, I can't sleep. In my gut I know it's wrong, because they're defenseless, and we take 'em out and we kill 'em." He said, "My job isn't even to strap 'em down. Mine was just to go the cell and get their stuff, after they've been killed, like their toothbrush and their personal belongings to give to

this very heavy mesh screen — I couldn't believe how human he was. And you know what I've come to? Everybody is worth more than the worst thing we've ever done in our life. And that has stayed with me.

I shouldn't have worried and been nervous: It was two hours, and he did most of the talking. He was just so glad to have a visitor. So then I just kept visiting — and couldn't believe they were really going to kill him. This was in the '80s: He was killed in '84; I started writing to him in '82. We hadn't had an execution in Louisiana for over 20 years. There had been an unofficial moratorium across the nation starting in the '60s into the '70s. And then in '76, the Supreme Court put the death penalty back. So it was just beginning again to go

decision, and it means that if one [juror] holds out, the person isn't going to be killed. So everybody on that jury holds that person's life in their hands. And they live with that for the rest of their life.

I tell a story in "The Death of Innocents." I call it the "anguished juror." The trial was of a man in Louisiana, Robert Sawyer, and [there was] no doubt that he did the crime. Then the jury goes in, and so the foreman says, "Let's see what we're facing here." And they go around the table and "Death, death, death, death, death, death," and they come to this guy, and he goes, "Hey. Who are we to kill him? Let's let him live. He's going to be in prison. He's not going to hurt anybody."

The boy's parents came right up to me, and Lloyd LeBlanc, David's father — David was only 16 years old, and when they lost their son, Lloyd and his wife were too old to have other children: tremendous suffering. And he walked right up to me and he said, "Sister. Where have you been all this time? We've had nobody to talk to. You can't believe the pressure on us with this death penalty thing." I said, "Mr. LeBlanc, I'm so sorry. I never dreamed you'd want to see me." "Sister, you need to come walk in our shoes."

they not see me as an enemy?

There were two teenagers killed: David LeBlanc and Loretta Borque. And the girl's parents were just furious with me. We bumped into each other outside the pardon board. But the boy's parents came right up to me, and Lloyd LeBlanc, David's father — David was only 16 years old, and when they lost their son, Lloyd and his wife were too old to have other children: tremendous suffering. And he walked right up to me and he said, "Sister. Where have you been all this time? We've had nobody to talk to. You can't believe the pressure on us with this death penalty thing." I said, "Mr. LeBlanc, I'm so sorry. I never dreamed you'd want to see me." "Sister, you need to come walk in our shoes."

Actually, he's the hero of "Dead Man Walking," because he made his way through the crucible of suffering and loss. All the people kept telling him he had to be for the death penalty, and as he put it: "I went there, Sister. I did. I went there." [He] said, "Boy, I'd like to pull the switch myself. I don't care what pain it causes their momma or anything." And then he said, "I didn't like what was happening to me, because this hatred and this bitterness was taking over me. They killed our son, but I'm not gonna let 'em kill me. I'ma do what Jesus said."

He said, "Sister, people think forgiveness is weak. The way I experienced was, it was taking my life away, all this anger and bitterness. It was eating me alive. I've always been a kind person; I love to help people. So then I came back to myself, and I just said, 'No, that's not who I am.' And then he set himself to go down the road of forgiveness.

He was the first victim's family I ever met that taught me that forgiveness is, in a way, saving your own life and not [letting] the hatred take over. And that's why I call him the hero.

R.R.: And guards? What do guards think?

S.H.P.: Some guards, you know, are all hyped for it. They practice for the execution: They get a guard of the same height and weight as the one to be executed, and they do dry runs of it, where the person goes peacefully, the person fights them all the

their family." And, Rosette, he's the only one I met in the whole system that quit his job because of his conscience.

Now we have more and more people speaking out who have been intimately involved in the killing process. I don't know if you saw this in Newsweek magazine [in the Sept. 25, 2011, issue]: The title of the article is "I Committed Murder," and it's about the executioners and the guards and the people in the prisons and the people who have been most closely identified in the process. In fact the title of the article came from Jerry Givens, and he was the executioner in Virginia, and he killed 62 people. The first ones by electrocution and the rest by lethal injection. He was real honest. He had what you call an "executioner's high." He did this interview in Newsweek, and it was like a public confession to a nation.

So more and more of those people who have been so involved in the process are speaking out. That's helping us put down the death penalty. The death penalty is in diminishment. I'm out there on the road, waking up people, because it can't end too soon. Because the death penalty by its very nature is the practice of torture, because you can't put a conscious, imaginative person in a cell — like in California, it's an average of 20 years — where you wait to be killed. And you anticipate it.

Everyone I know on death row has the same nightmares: "They're coming for me, it's my time, someone's coming to get me. I'm kicking and screaming, going, 'No, no,' and then I wake up and I look around me, and I'm in my cell, and I go, 'Oh, it was just a dream.'" Patrick Sonnier, he said, "Sister, just pray my legs hold me up." Because they want to walk with dignity.

R.R.: When you met Patrick Sonnier, what did you think?

S.H.P.: When I actually went to the first visit, we'd been writing letters. I was really nervous about him, because anybody can write nice letters, but I'd never been with a real murderer before. I thought his face would look different or something, it would look harder. Then when I met him, and I looked at his face — we were separated from one another, he was on the other side of

through the legal process, so that executions could begin to happen. And I thought: Oh, my God, they are going to kill him.

[Editor's note: After the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 1972 the death penalty was "cruel and unusual," the Justices then ruled in 1976 that the death penalty was constitutional. The first person executed after the ruling was Gary Gilmore in Utah in January 1977. Gilmore's crime and execution served as the basis for Norman Mailer's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel "The Executioner's Song."]

R.R.: They are still executing people today.

S.H.P.: You better believe it.

R.R.: [On Sept. 26] Texas officials [executed] Arturo Diaz. In a TV newscast I saw, it said that for someone to receive the death penalty in Texas, jurors have to unanimously decide that someone is a future danger to society and has no redeeming value. How many people have you met in your work that you thought could never be redeemed?

S.H.P.: There were none.

We're asking the jury for something impossible: By our taking on the death penalty, one of the big crunches is on these ordinary citizens who are asked to make these godlike decisions, in which they don't have the expertise to make the decision. Future dangerousness? Criminologists have studied this. It's almost impossible to determine, because so much has to do with what a person's context is, what's around them, what's going on in their life. It's an impossible thing to answer.

Then to say you have no redeeming value? I wrote a second book, Rosette, called "The Death of Innocents" about accompanying two people to death that I believe were innocent, and I talk about this struggle of juries. The working title for a long while was "Impossible Burden." We've taken on a burden that human beings can't handle. First of all, that we're always gonna get the truth. We know that 142 wrongfully convicted people have come off death row saved by [law school] students and innocence projects, so it's very iff that we get the truth. Then it's a unanimous

Then there were a number of factors.

One was: [The juror] didn't have real knowledge then that the person wasn't going to get out of prison. Jurors for a long time weren't informed that if you don't give the death sentence, people are going to get life without parole. So [the jury may] question, "Well, maybe he'll get out on good behavior," and in good conscience, they may go, "Well, we have to give the death penalty."

So that was a factor in it. But the other was, he said, "I just gave in to pressure. 'OK, I'll vote for death, too.'" On the night Robert Sawyer was executed, this [juror] calls his lawyer, and he's drunk and he's crying, and he says, "I tell my boy, 'Son, don't cave in to pressure. Stand up for what you believe, no matter what.'"

You know that biblical story of Solomon, who's known for being wise? One of the ways they show the wisdom of Solomon — this is in the Old Testament of the Bible — two women came before Solomon, and there was a baby. Each of those women claimed to be the mother of the baby.

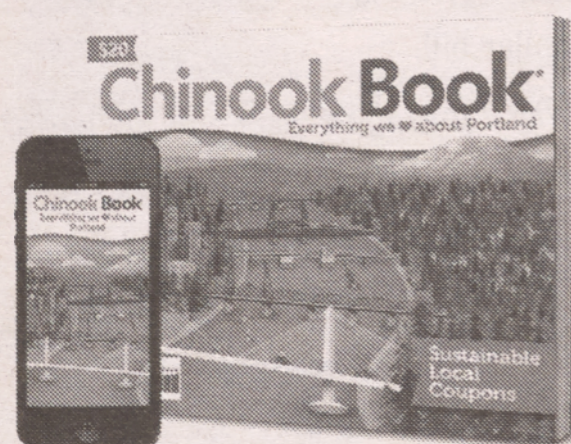
And so what Solomon said was, "Oh, well, bring me a sword, and we'll cut the baby in half. You each take a half of the baby." And the real mother went, "No, no, don't kill the child," and that's how he knew who the real mother was. I just want to say that is chicken feed [compared] to the decision these jurors make. It's just ordinary people called in to make these life-death decisions.

R.R.: You know all these names [of people involved with the cases]. How do you remember all these people?

S.H.P.: They're emblazoned in my life. How could I forget the names of these people? When you're really close and involved in all this stuff, the names are sealed forever as part of you. It's just part of me. [Pause.] What's your name again? [Laughs.] Nah, that's just a joke.

Reprinted from *Real Change News*, Seattle, Wash.

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