

## FEATURE

## 'Dead Man Walking' influence pleases SSJ author

By Patricia Zapor  
Catholic News Service

NEW ORLEANS — She says her life hasn't really changed. It's merely "intensified."

It seems an awfully understated way of describing Sister Helen Prejean's current world of international speaking tours, Academy Award nominations, prestigious prizes, and having her own life portrayed on movie screens around the world.

"It's the same life. The same basic components are all in it," she explained in an interview shortly before the Academy Awards, where the movie based on her book, "Dead Man Walking," was up for four Oscars — with Susan Sarandon winning the best actress for her portrayal of Sister Prejean. "It's just intensified."

The 56-year-old nun insists the biggest impact on her life, overriding all that has come with the success of "Dead Man Walking," was the event that led her to write the book in the first place.

"The thing that's influenced me most is watching somebody die, and seeing the pain of the murder victims' families," she said. "It's like a white-hot fire. And against that everything gets perspective."

So the "basics" for Sister Prejean include speaking about the death penalty, keeping in touch with prisoners on Louisiana's death row and making weekly visits to Hope House, the New Orleans community center offering adult education, youth programs and other services for the poor of the St. Thomas housing projects.

Hope House is welcoming, but also is in keeping with the realities of the neighborhood. Its worn wicker rockers, cheerful paint and posters — a hunger walk, Mardi Gras, a "Dead Man Walking" theater print — are framed by barred windows and an alarm system. Outside, clusters of children returning home from school chatter, sing and play loud rap music.

"This is where I get my real information about what's going on in the world and in this city," Sister Prejean said with a smile. "I need them more than they need me."

Not long ago, Sister Prejean's life was like that of the nuns who taught her as she grew up in Baton Rouge. After joining the Sisters of St. Joseph of Medaille in 1957 at the age of 18, she taught junior and senior high school, was a parish religious education director and formation director for her community.

As the 1980s began, the Sisters of St. Joseph evaluated their commitments and began more directly helping the poor. Sister Prejean moved into the St. Thomas Projects with five other nuns in June 1981.

Six months later, a friend who worked in the nearby Prison Coalition office asked her to write to a lonely death row inmate.

Her life was changed by corresponding with convicted murderer Elmo Patrick Sonnier, getting to know him, meeting his family and the families of murder victims and eventually watching Sonnier and two other men die.

Today, Sister Prejean's first-person account of her experiences as a death-row counselor tops *The New York Times* paperback best-seller list. The movie based on the book is opening across Europe this spring, while still enjoying success in the United States, where it's made more than \$25 million, a portion of which goes to the Sisters of St. Joseph.

Sister Prejean is pleasantly surprised with the difference the film and the publicity have made in the character of discussion about capital punishment.

"No more 'what about the victim?' or 'these people who do these terrible things don't deserve to live,'" she said. Now audiences at speeches say, "You

know that scene in the movie where... and then they start talking about it. They're probing the implications of things. It's an entirely different kind of discussion."

It's what Sister Prejean hoped would happen after actress Susan Sarandon met her at the Bon Ton restaurant in New Orleans a couple years ago to explain how she wanted to turn "Dead Man Walking" into a movie in which Sarandon would play the nun.

Part of what works with the film is its convincing blend of reality and fiction. The film's Sister Helen has the background, Louisiana drawl and history of the real one: a well-off lawyer's family; two siblings; loving par-



Sister Helen Prejean, SSJ, says life has been more intense since the success of her book, *Dead Man Walking*, and the movie that followed.

Reuters/CNS

ents who were "Catholic down to their DNA molecules."

Sarandon's tall, fair-haired Sister Helen bears little physical resemblance to the real nun, who's petite and dynamic, with straight, graying dark hair that persistently falls nearly into her eyes. But the actress captured the flavor of Sister Prejean's life — her quick wit, the comfortable friendship of the sisters in the community, her way of casually dropping Scripture passages into conversations, as well as the deep emotional effects of her experiences with capital

punishment.

Filming even a fictional execution by lethal injection was hard on the cast and

crew, she said.

"We watched Sean Penn 'die' for a week," she explained. "During one break Sean stayed strapped in on that gurney and I watched as Susan sat there chatting with him, holding his hand and stroking it. It was hard on all of us."

Beyond Sister Helen, others in the movie are more fictionalized. Penn's character, Matthew Poncet, and the crime portrayed were based on Sonnier and murders committed by him and his brother, who received a life sentence. The victims' parents and their reactions are composites.

"I'm far from a movie expert, but I do know a few things now, and all of them are miracles with regard to us," she said. "Who would think that in the United States people would flock into a theater for a death penalty movie. And when the film is over, the universal reaction is stunned silence. They don't move. Men cry. People share their napkins from their popcorn because they're crying. Who would've thought that you could have presented this story in this way?"

**EDITORS' NOTE:** Sister Prejean will be the subject of a *FRONTLINE* report, "Angel of Death Row," April 9 at 9 p.m. on PBS.

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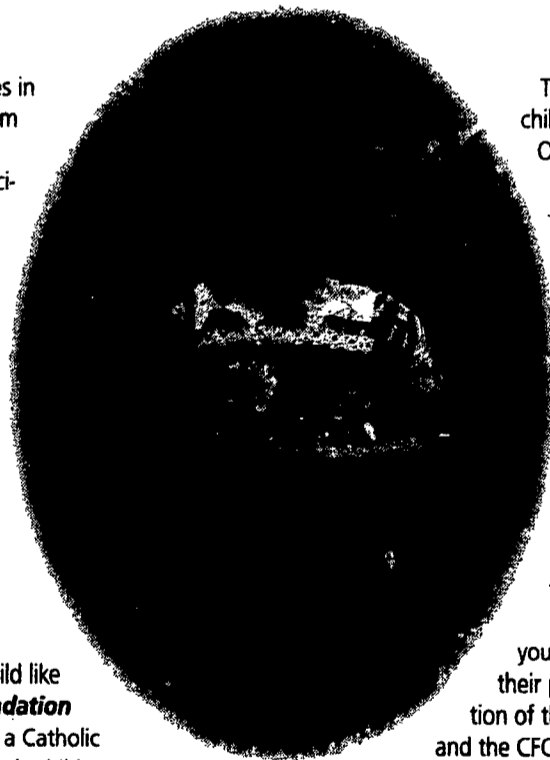
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