

Victims' parents decry death penalty

Maureen Kramlich

Perhaps the most poignant moment in the book *Dead Man Walking* is Lloyd LeBlanc's recollection of the day he identified the murdered body of his son. The author, Sister Helen Prejean, recounts:

[When] he arrived with the sheriff's deputies there in the cane field to identify his son, he knelt by his boy — "laying down there with his two little eyes sticking out like bullets" — and prayed the Our Father. And when he came to the words:

"Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us," he had not halted or equivocated, and he said, "Whoever did this, I forgive them."

The stories of the loved ones of murder victims are too often untold. The stories of family members of victims who advocate against the death penalty are rarer still. Two of these inspiring stories follow.

A FATHER'S STORY

Julie Welch, a recent Marquette University graduate, served as a translator for the Social Security Administration at the Alfred E. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. On April 19, 1995, she attended morning Mass before heading for work. At 9:02 a.m., she greeted her first clients. Then a bomb reduced the building to rubble. She, along with 167 others, was killed that day.

Julie's father, Bud Welch, had always opposed the death penalty but he recalled acquaintances saying, "if it ever happens to you, you will change your mind." When it happened to him, he did change his mind. He wanted the Oklahoma City bombers "fried."

Then he remembered a conversation he had with Julie during a road-trip home from Marquette. A news report on the radio announced that the state of Texas had carried out an



Liz Quirin/CNS

Families of murder victims, including Bud Welch (front), plant a tree in memory of their loved ones at Boston College in June 2001. Welch, who lost his daughter in the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, opposes the death penalty.

execution the previous night. Julie turned to her father and said, "Dad, that makes me sick what they are doing down in Texas. All they are doing is teaching hate to their children and it has no redeeming social value."

In his mind, the question was answered. He did not want executions, and shortly thereafter Welch became an eloquent spokesman against the death penalty.

A MOTHER'S STORY

Brian Muha had just completed his freshman year at Franciscan University in Steubenville, Ohio. At the end of the semester he returned home, but the stay was brief because he planned to attend summer classes at Franciscan. Before returning to school, he arranged to send roses to his mother. Rachel Muha received them the day after he left and called to thank him. He wasn't home. Later

that afternoon, the police informed the Muha family that Brian and his friend Aaron were missing. After nearly a week, their bloodied bodies were found on a hill. Three suspects were arrested.

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During that week when Brian's status went from missing to murdered, Rachel Muha relied on prayer. She prayed the Lord's Prayer, asking herself, "Can I pray this? What is this forgiveness that God wants?"

She forgave Brian's killers, even after she learned that Brian was kidnapped, beaten with a gun and forced to march up a hill to his death.

"To forgive someone," she says, "does not mean to excuse them. It means giving up anger, hatred, revenge and bitterness towards someone who has hurt you. It means to have good will, to want what is best for that person and to help them get it."

By rejecting the death penalty, she embraces life. "We need to be radical witnesses for life," she says, "including very guilty life so that we can turn the tide toward a culture life."

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