

Death Row Support Project Quilt
Inspired by Rachel Gross
Artist Statement by Anna Lisa Gross

For over 30 years my mother, Rachel Gross, has been running the Death Row Support Project, finding people to write to people on death row. She has done this work as a volunteer, with limited funding for expenses from the Church of the Brethren and occasional volunteer assistance. This quilt is an expression of gratitude for her enormous love and hope.

The quilt is framed in *prison cell bars*, because the “justice” system is a mighty beast controlling millions of lives. There are **over 3000 people on death row** in the United States, and **over 2 million people in prison**. The United States locks up a higher proportion of its citizens than any other country in the world.

Imprisoned on the quilt are the *tools of death*: electric chair, hanging noose and syringe. Bloody hands drip on these tools, because our hands are bloody when the state executes in our name – literally. Cases of “the United States vs. Potential Death Row Inmate” are tried on *our* behalves, as citizens, and with our tax dollars. Since 1608 over 16,000 human beings have been killed in the most calculated, pre-meditated way by the U.S. government.

“There is all this uproar about burning flags, which can always be replaced no matter how many are burned. But they go right ahead and burn people, people who cannot be replaced,” wrote Ronnie Dunkins who was executed by the state of Alabama in 1989. Ronnie spent nearly 20 minutes being electrocuted before he died. The electric chair had been plugged in wrong. After smoke rose from his body and doctors pronounced him dead, the “presiding prison dignitary announced into the telephone, ‘It has been carried out,’” writes Dale Aukerman, one of Ronnie's penpals.

A lone figure sits in silhouette – most people on death row spend at least 23 hours every day alone in a cell. The prison system is designed to silence inmates. It is designed to dehumanize – people are given numbers rather than

names for identification. It is designed to distinguish individuality, hope, expression and productivity. It is designed to torture – the average death row stay is 12 years, and many people on death row have no way to predict when they will be killed. In fact, many people on death row have chosen to end their appeals in order to avoid the spiritual and psychological damage of having the date of their death set and changed, over and over and over.

“Putting into words what it's like to wrestle day and night with the possibility of being executed is really hard. Little by little, it pulls apart your self-image, your self-esteem, your hope of surviving. It frightens you and robs you of any feelings of self-worth you may have left after hearing the closing arguments of your trial.

Usually the prosecuting attorney has convinced the jury, as well as part of you, that you are worthless and need to be put to death. You're made to feel that if you were decent, you'd gladly accept your death sentence as deserved payment for your condition. I arrived on death row feeling worthless, scared, angry at myself and everybody – and very confused” writes Anthony O'Hara Johnson, formerly sentenced to death in Alabama, now serving a life sentence.

The *sun is the central message* of the quilt. The Death Row Support Project uses the sun to symbolize the hope, life and light brought to the lives of people on death row through the letters and care they receive and return. The sun is not barred in – its warmth and light are unfettered.



DRSP Logo

William Hance, executed in 1994 by the state of Georgia, wrote to Rachel Gross about the penpals she gave him, *“At first I thought that everyone had forgotten all about me, but I was wrong. The Thompson family has really lifted my spirits. It's nice to know that there are people who care.”* Death row inmates give light back to the people who write to them. *“Samuel McDonald and I became close friends. Despite my notion at the beginning of our correspondence that I would be the one giving to Sam, it turned out that*

I received much more from him than I gave,” writes William Trollinger of his penpal Sam, who was executed by the state of Missouri in 1997.

People on death row share light with one another, as well. Arthur Boyd's last letter to his penpal Thomas Hanks before his execution by the state of North Carolina in 1999 was a request that Thomas begin writing to another young man in his prison. He closed the letter with a prayer for Thomas' own wellbeing.

“The other guys on death row saved my life. I felt death would stop the hurt, pain and confusion. But they encouraged me not to give up, to struggle for life. It's not a question of whether you are an angel or a devil. It's a question of whether you are a human being. And you are. Whether you are rich or poor, Black or White, your life is priceless. It should not be taken from you,” continues Anthony O'Hara Johnson.

The *butterfly is flying to a new way*. It emerges from the letters and care between people on death row and their penpals. It flies out of the quilt and out of the prison system.

Jusan Fudo (Frankie Parker), executed by the state of Arkansas in 1996, wrote an hour before his death, *“For eight years I have worked on kindling a small light of compassion out of deep remorse for the pain I have caused. This little light is now extinguished...I pray that others who have committed heinous crimes may find that the small light that I have kindled is an inspiration and spread the flame of compassion to illuminate the entire universe so that all beings may realize the fundamental compassionate nature that resides in all of us. Thank you.”*

birthday on deathrow by H.L. “Wili” Otey from and me i am like the leaf

i dim my eyes (to shut them could be cataclysmic)
to greet one more birthday
replete with

paper hopes, plastic thoughts
and twinkled-square tomorrows

reminiscing (i am)
the sweetened smiles
mama's hug
the former old man's shrug
and ice cream on the linoleum rug

impractical (we were)
sweat-money so thriftless spent
to march in step
with the equilibrium
of common now abuses
just to prove that
one day each year
we forget
about dying here
in this boxed-in today.

*an impractical reality (death poem) by H.L. "Wili" Otey from singing
for mooncrumbs*

could you walk unescorted to your death
could you pass that group of strangers and not bat an eye
could you ingest the volts & volts that make you jerk and contort
and not cry out
could you wait years & years envisioning you strapped in that chair
would you ever close your eyes afraid you missed a moment of life
would you give a damn that they murdered you
would you care
i say i will not flinch
will not sob
will not faint
i say i will not ask anyone i love(d) to be there
will not eat their offering of a special meal

will not write anybody good-bye
i say i will not want any tears shed
will not hear any prayers
will not beg any god to save me
i say drink wine and dance/party
when they murder me
'cause the next time
i say