

Messenger

'I was in prison and you visited me'
Letters to death row



Messenger

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Behold the man

On the cover: The print by Ruth Aukerman is rich in symbolism and rich in connection to this month's cover story on the Death Row Support Project, a letter-writing ministry to prisoners on death row (p. 10). It was through DRSP that Ruth and her husband, the late Dale Aukerman, began writing to Ronnie Dunkins on death row. The correspondence continued eight years. "He was like a son to us," Ruth said. Dale Aukerman went to witness Dunkins' execution in the Alabama electric chair on July 14, 1989. An op-ed article he wrote for the *Washington Post* describing the botched electrocution—it had to be done twice—caused a furor.

Ruth reacted to Dunkins' execution by creating this work of art. Included in the print are both the cross and stones, two forms of execution used in Jesus' day. The legend on the work is "Ecce homo," Latin for "Behold the man." These were Pilate's words when he presented Jesus, with whom he could find no fault, to the angry crowd (John 19:5). The words suggest the complicity of the crowd and the complicity of us all. "Christ is always standing with the victim," Ruth says. "Whenever anyone is executed, we are there as ones who are also to blame."



Though losing friends is painful—her second death row correspondent was executed last year—she continues, now writing to a third condemned man. She encourages others to volunteer for the Death Row Support Project. "We gain more from it than we give," she says. "They are so grateful. A lot of them are there because of a lack of love in their lives."

Ruth Aukerman, of Union Bridge, Md., is a professional artist and art teacher. She is a member of Westminster (Md.) Church of the Brethren.

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For more than 20 years, Rachel Gross has been connecting volunteer correspondents with "pen pals" on death row through DRSP, a ministry of the General Board. Simple letter-writing not only comforts prisoners, it raises consciousness as well.

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Maintaining a database of more than 3,600 people on death row and matching them with volunteer correspondents is the work of Rachel Gross, director of the Death Row Support Project, a ministry of the General Board's Office of Brethren Witness.

Writing to death row

The Death Row Support Project has been ministering to prisoners for more than 20 years

BY GREG LASZAKOVITS

Thank you for sending my name to the Thompson family. I have been on death row. . . and at first I thought everyone had forgotten about me."

The cornfields of Indiana are a long way from the lonely halls of death row. Yet this Midwestern rural landscape is much closer than you might imagine to the steel and gray one finds in the iron bars and echoing halls of prison. This soybeans and Brethren territory, just outside the small town of Liberty Mills, houses one of the best support systems for death row prisoners, Death Row Support Project (DRSP).

Director Rachel Gross stands in her farmhouse kitchen preparing lunch, comfortably answering questions and throwing out statistics:

As of Sept. 1, 1999, there were 3,625 people on death row in the United States. The mission of Gross and the DRSP is to see that each and every one of those persons receives a letter, and gains an ongoing relationship, while life still exists.

DRSP, a Church of the Brethren General Board ministry sponsored by the Brethren Witness office, matches the people on death row with "pen pals." Yet one hesitates to use such a flippant word for fear it cannot match the depth and intensity these

writing relationships often reach.

In 1976 the US Supreme Court reinstated the use of capital punishment. At that time Rachel's husband, Bob, was working on criminal justice issues with the Church of the Brethren Washington Office. Knowing her compassion, Bob suggested to Rachel the possibility of a correspondence ministry. She readily accepted the challenge. The Washington Office was the first to support the project and in the fall of 1978, the DRSP started with about 20 correspondents.

"When I started in 1977 I thought, 'No problem, two years of this and the death penalty will be gone again

when people come back to their senses after they see how wrong it is.' But here we are, 20 years later. I thought it would be a short-term thing," recalls Gross with a mix of disappointment and amazement.

Obviously, it has been anything but "short-term." Twenty-one years and more than 600 executions later, the death penalty remains tightly woven into the American fiber. In fact, most polls show Americans strongly in favor of government-sponsored executions—upwards of 6,500 have been sentenced to death since 1977 (though 2,000 of those sentences have been commuted or reduced).

Even while public opinion continues to support capital punishment, and 38 of the 50 states proscribe death, the hope of abolition stays alive for many. In the meantime, DRSP plans to keep hard at work matching those imprisoned with those who are on the "outside."

Gross says it's hard to tell how many people are corresponding at the moment. But she does know that DRSP has referred more than 65 percent of the 3,625 on death row around the nation to correspondents.

DRSP continues the tradition set by other notable Brethren ministries by opening its doors to ecumenical and secular participation. This is due partly to an open attitude, but mostly out of necessity. The first push in 1978, including a MESSENGER advertisement, sought matches for the 400 people newly assigned to death row. A number of writers responded, but sadly short of 400. The need for more writers led to ads in *Sojourners* and other publications. Thankfully, a larger group responded to the plea.

Letter-writers have come from all walks of life, denominations, and parts of the world. Many write out of religious conviction, and some from deep wells of compassion. Many of the writers are Catholic sisters, American Baptists, and Seventh Day Adventists. Around 100 are Brethren. Since the US is the only Western country to use capital punishment, numerous writers hail from abroad, including many from Europe.



For nearly 20 years the Franklin family of Modesto, Calif., has corresponded with death row inmate Ronnie Bell through the Death Row Support Project. Bell, a prisoner at San Quentin penitentiary, is seated, flanked by Simeon Franklin, left, and Cyrus. Back row: Joshua, Pam, Phil and Melissa. The photo was taken several years ago.

Why would you want to write to a convicted murderer? Gross offers many reasons, but states that the most important for her is her belief that writing to a person on death row is a form of visiting, in line with Jesus' teaching (Matt. 25:31-46). She explains, "Jesus called us to be with those in prison; he didn't qualify it with why they were there."

One may suspect Jesus calls us to visit with those in prison for the very reason reflected in this article's opening quote—an utter feeling of abandonment and loneliness. Feeling forgotten may be one of the worst emotions one can experience. It is akin to worthlessness. Jesus saw the worth in all children of God he encountered; he was unconcerned with what they did for a living, where they hung their hats, or their past sins. He exemplified a way of living in which everyone deserved human contact and love, and an opportunity for forgiveness.

Regardless of guilt or innocence, DRSP believes that no person is beyond the love, compassion, and listening presence that only a fellow human being can provide.

This sentiment is felt by one man on Texas' death row who expresses his gratefulness for correspondence: "I have been corresponding . . . on a regular basis and have had few things in my life which have given me more pleasure. It is a helping hand to us who society has condemned, while

knowing we have violated those standards they hold sacred. To me that is truly love for your fellow man."

"This really changes people's lives," notes Gross, who launches into the story of one family's impact on their new friend's life. The family provided testimony in a re-sentencing hearing that was pivotal in reducing the convicted person's sentence.

Surprising to many, writing and visiting often becomes a family project. Younger children draw pictures, which are greatly appreciated by those who have little or no contact with children. In turn, children have the opportunity in a safe space to learn about the justice system and, more significantly, about the individuals who are in it.

A mother writes, "We have learned a lot about prison life—and its toll on a person. . . . We have a new awareness, as a family, of the inhumanity of the death penalty."

Correspondent relationships not only influence the prisoner's life, but they also change the other person psychologically and spiritually as well. Writing to a person on death row gives one the opportunity to see situations as they have never seen them before, from the childhood past of a confessed murderer, to the pleas of a person who may be an innocent victim caught in the wrong place at the wrong time (23 persons have been executed, only to be found innocent upon further review).

One man describes his discovery of compassion: "Besides learning about myself, I feel like I have learned to appreciate another unique individual. Until I am open to sharing and being sensitive to his concerns, struggles, joys, defeats, etc., I cannot be supportive or healing in any way."

In a land wracked by stereotypes and social stratification, DRSP opens the door to appreciate people for who they are and not who we as a society project them to be. One woman wrote, "I was able to see Richard as a person, and a neat person at that, instead of just a prisoner. The prejudices I had have disappeared. Actually I think I prob-

ably got more out of it than he did.”

DRSP correspondence also gives the imprisoned the opportunity to give gifts of the human spirit that might otherwise not find an outlet. Many in Brethren circles are familiar with the late Dale Aukerman, long-time peace activist, writer, and spiritual giant, who last year wrote for MESSENGER about his honest, yet graceful, battle with cancer. Aukerman had long been a correspondent through DRSP with men on death row around the nation and had supported men through the agony of death row all the way to the Alabama electric chair.

When Aukerman was diagnosed with lung cancer, his death sentence of sorts, a tremendous outpouring of love and support came from those he had long supported on death row. Those who knew what it was like to know their days were numbered felt an instant camaraderie. Ten men on death row wrote letters and notes of support to Dale and his family during this trying time, sharing with him their wisdom of what it means to lean on God while life hangs in the balance.

Wrote one imprisoned man, “Look upon the healing powers of Jesus, and also for the comfort of knowing friends and family are beside you. My prayers are joined.” In a turn-about of grace, the receiver became a reminder of God’s boundless love.

Gross maintains a database that tracks sentence changes, executions, names, department of corrections numbers, addresses, etc. Keeping this database up-to-date seems to be half the battle. Quarterly, DRSP receives listings from the NAACP Legal Defense Fund that shows many of the changes. However, this list does not tell it all. Gross must use other sources to maintain accuracy. In fact, DRSP has one of the most complete lists in the country of prisoners on death row.

Gross guards the list closely. “A few people have called thinking we were in support of the death penalty and wanted to know how they could help,” she laughs. Quickly growing



Pen pals: Beth Portela of Huntington, Ind., corresponds with Omar, a prisoner on death row in Florida.

earnest she retorts, “I’m very protective of the guys. I don’t want anyone getting hate mail. Unfortunately, it’s been known to happen.”

Since overhead is small, due to the fact that this ministry is run out of the Gross home, not many financial resources are needed for DRSP. However, DRSP has not been immune to recent General Board cutbacks—its budget was reduced by over 50 percent. Larger projects await completion, and staying abreast of issues by attending conferences and workshops around the country also requires funding. A unified budget structure does not allow for direct cash donations, but Gross happily notes that DRSP is always ready to accept stamps that can be sent to correspondents who may not be able to afford them. Postage also helps with day-to-day office operations and bulk mailings.

While money is tight, time seems to be the biggest shortage for Gross. She is not only the director of DRSP, but also a full-time mother and spouse, and practices what she names a personal “ministry of availability,” which calls her to many tasks in her home church and the larger community. She hopes soon to add a peace studies intern from nearby Manchester College to aid with database upkeep and administration. Another hope is to enlist coordinators who would monitor the status of death row—from new sentences to execution updates—in their respective states.

Whenever it’s suggested that DRSP go ecumenical to ease financial and time pressures, Gross balks. “It’s been a Brethren ministry from the start. Staying part of this community [Church of the Brethren] is important to me. I am Brethren and this program has always been Brethren.”

The Church of the Brethren stands firmly opposed to capital punishment and supports efforts to aid the accused, as well as the victims of crime. (See the 1987 Annual Conference statement.)

DRSP sees value in letter-writing not only for the relationship that is created, but also because it is one of the best transformative and inspirational tools for getting people involved in the abolition movement in more profound ways.

Pat Bane, a Catholic woman from Syracuse, N.Y., began corresponding with a man on death row in Arkansas. Written correspondence soon became personal visits and, when it came time for the man to be executed, Pat was able to serve as his spiritual advisor. It was a sad ending, but would have been sadder had he died alone. Pat Bane’s story does not end with the death of her friend, but the birth of a ministry.

Bane was not a typical DRSP correspondent—her uncle had been murdered years before. Through the relationship she built on death row, she was led to join Murder Victims’ Families for Reconciliation (MVFR), a national organization of family members of victims, of both homicides and state killings, who oppose the death penalty. In fact, Bane went on to serve the growing MVFR as its first paid staff person.

Bane no longer serves MVFR, but the organization continues to thrive as a support program that addresses the needs of victims of violence, enabling them to rebuild their lives. MVFR also advocates policies to reduce the rate of homicide, and promotes crime prevention and alternatives to violence.

“Pat is who I refer to as DRSP’s poster child,” states Gross. “Her story is exactly what we envisioned

when we started 21 years ago. Not just writing and becoming involved in someone's life in a very personal sense, but becoming part of the movement in new and exciting ways."

Working with victims' families also remains one of Gross's dreams. "Someday I would like to have a dual ministry—serving both victims' families and those on death row." She recognizes the healing and conciliation that can often blossom in the darkest of nights, when the opportunity is provided.

DRSP is not only transforming the lives of those who find themselves on death row and those who exchange letters with them, it is also leaving its mark on the movement to abolish the death penalty. Sometimes even worthy movements lose sight of why they are moving. However, in the movement to abolish the death penalty, DRSP has represented a Spirit-led voice of compassionate support and action. In response to this compassionate action, the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty recently presented DRSP with a "Special Recognition Award" for 20 years of dedicated service. This ministry is finding and gaining respect in the abolition movement.

DRSP has taken on the monumental task of assigning each person on death row a correspondent. To date two-thirds of them have been assigned a pen pal. "More can certainly be done," Gross says. More correspondents are needed to fill in for the third of death-row inmates who may have no constant support outside of prison.

Meanwhile, Rachel Gross waits patiently for more volunteers to correspond, as does someone who has been involved in the struggle for over 20 years.

A religious ethics writer once reflected on the nature of justice, punishment, and humanity: "Anger is righteousness without humility." In a nation gripped by anger, and the belief that an eye for an eye brings justice, DRSP offers a place of mercy

for those who find themselves amid the lonely solitude and terror of waiting—a place where they are not forgotten. 

Greg Laszakovits, currently living in Richmond, Ind., is a member of the Phoenix (Ariz.) First Church of the Brethren. He recently finished a one-year assignment with the Office of Brethren Witness focusing on anti-racism education and abolishing the death penalty.

How you can get involved

To obtain the name and address of a person on death row with whom you may correspond, write to Death Row Support Project, Department M, P.O. Box 600, Liberty Mills, IN 46946.

