

# Exonerated death row inmate speaks to abolish capital punishment in Kentucky

By Billy Mitchell, New Era staff writer | Posted: Monday, August 5, 2013 9:00 pm

Since the reinstatement of the death penalty in Kentucky in 1976, there have been 78 people initially sentenced to capital punishment.

And according to two-year study from the American Bar Association's Kentucky Assessment Team on the Death Penalty, 52 of those people's convictions were overturned on appeal. That's a 60 percent error rate, and what the ABA calls a waste of the commonwealth's resources.

On Monday night, an example of one of those 52 people – whose conviction was not only overturned, but also resulted in his exoneration, though in Illinois – spoke to an attentive crowd at Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Church in Hopkinsville, sponsored by the Kentucky Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty, to bear witness to his experience being a wrongfully accused on death row and why he has dedicated his life to abolishing the death penalty nationwide.

Randy Steidl, along with his then drinking buddy Herb Whitlock, was arrested and wrongly convicted for the 1986 murders of newlyweds Dyke and Karen Rhoads in Paris, Ill. Steidl was sent to death row, while Whitlock received life in state prison.

Telling his story from his first arrest and interrogation in 1986 to his release on May 28, 2004, Steidl pointed out how factors like the public's blind faith in law enforcement and the judicial system, corruption in politics and law enforcement, ineffective defense for the accused and too much reliance on eyewitnesses kept him locked up for a crime he had nothing to do with.

"In all 35 states that have the death penalty they still have the same flawed policy," he said Monday before the event. "And my job is to go state to state anytime there is an opportunity to put an abolition bill into place and attempt to change hearts and minds. Why, if we truly are a civilized country, do we still put people to death?"

Steidl is the president of the board of directors for Witness to Innocence, a national nonprofit organization based out of Philadelphia dedicated to empowering death row exonerees to speak out against the death penalty. There are 142 death row survivors alive in the United States today, many of whom work with Witness to Innocence.

Shekinah Lavalley, outreach director for the KCADP, noted that, while Steidl never served time in Kentucky, there are many similarities shared between his struggle to obtain innocence and the current state of the death penalty in Kentucky.

"There are some parallels with some things that happened in his case and some of the issues that the American Bar Association found with the death penalty in Kentucky," Lavalley said. "He's just echoing

some of the sentiments of some of the people who have examined the death penalty in Kentucky.

“It’s a really long list of things wrong with the death penalty,” she explained, before describing things like its economic stress on the state, the inability to fix mistakes in a case after someone has been executed and arbitrary factors such as race and other socioeconomic determinants that go into influencing the death penalty.

“If the race of this victim is white, it’s more likely that somebody is more likely to get the death penalty for murdering them,” Lavalley said.

While concluding his tragic tale, Steidl compared the cost to sentence somebody to a life sentence with parole versus holding someone on death row.

“You can give somebody life without parole, which is an average of 40 years, for a half-a-million dollars,” he said. “The state of Illinois spent \$3 million dollars trying to strap me to a gurney in 12 years.”

Additionally, Lavalley cited another study that found “a majority of Kentuckians supported alternative sentencing to the death penalty. So if there is an option like life without parole on the table, they would prefer the use of that. It’s pretty clear that a lot of people – even if they’re not coming at it from the humanitarian aspect – they see that there are problems with that system and not comfortable using it.”

Lavalley admitted that enforcing the death penalty, however, is a rarity in Kentucky, and that is a positive sign.

“We use it very infrequently,” she said. “And I think that the fact that we use it so sparingly shows that Kentuckians aren’t necessarily comfortable using it.”

Kate Miller, program director for the ACLU of Kentucky, said the hope is that the 35 states that still employ the death penalty will listen to Steidl’s story and others like it to join the progression toward a death-penalty-free nation.

“Kentucky is clearly on the pathway to abolition,” Miller said. “Six states in six years have abolished the death penalty, and here in Kentucky there’s a lot of momentum. A lot of people might think it’s hopeless, but the truth is, Kentucky is poised to be the first state in the South to abolish the death penalty, and we hope to do it within the next two to three years.”

Miller is traveling with Steidl asking citizens to sign a petition aiming to abolish capital punishment and trying to influence them to reach out to their state representatives and speak out against the death penalty.

Currently the Kentucky Department of Corrections has 33 death row inmates listed on its website. The most recent person to be convicted of the death penalty is Kevin Dunlap, an ex-Fort Campbell

soldier who was sentenced in March 2010 for the murder of three children and rape and attempted murder of their mother, before setting their Roaring Springs home on fire. Dunlap appealed his conviction to the Kentucky Supreme Court in June, but it was upheld.

What's become a slogan of sorts for Steidl perhaps best explains why organizations like Witness Innocence, the KCADP and the ACLU are fighting to abolish capital punishment.

"You can release a man from prison," he said, "but you can't release him from the grave."

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