

Forward to Hands Off Cain 2009 Report by Gail Chasey
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The Road to Abolition in New Mexico

How did we succeed?

The New Mexico Coalition to Repeal the Death Penalty deserves all the credit. It grew from a handful of organizers in 1997 to include thousands of people and 140 organizations of vastly diverse backgrounds, ideologies and perspectives. The faith communities – Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Quaker, Presbyterian, Jewish, Unitarian, and many others – made it an issue of conscience, invoking the power of redemption. Families devastated by the murder of their own loved ones described the cruel impact of the death penalty on them. Far from providing closure or comfort, death penalty trials and constitutionally guaranteed appeals re-open the wounds for many families. Their hearts simply break again and again when all attention focuses on the defendants and their fate, rather than on honoring the memory of those they lost. The Coalition worked at the grassroots level, obtaining funds to hire a director (3 superb women over a 12-year period), to bring in experts like Sr. Helen Prejean to inspire and teach, and to build its numbers. Members learned how to contact and speak with their elected representatives. The Coalition conducted public opinion polls, affirming that 64% of New Mexicans favored replacing the death penalty with a sentence of life without parole and redirecting money saved to help victims' families. Armed with these data, emboldened by their sheer numbers, and kept up-to-date by email and the website, members became increasingly skilled at making their voices heard in committee hearings and in the outcome of elections.

We introduced the bill in each of our biannual 60-day sessions beginning in 1999. In the first few years, it failed to clear all necessary committees for a vote by the full House of Representatives. Those losses were painful, but during that time, we gradually gained support of important House and Senate leaders so that the bill began to receive more favorable hearings. Coalition members also worked to gain support from both Democrats and Republicans. Though it was more difficult to get conservative support, some Republicans joined with progressive Democrats in this vote for moral reasons; others because they believe the system is flawed – that the danger of executing the innocent is too great. One explained that a friend from Russia cautioned her, "Never let your government kill someone in your name."

Governor Bill Richardson had been a supporter of capital punishment but never closed the door to a dialogue with us – one that began with his election in November 2002 and continued through the day he signed the bill. We came within reach of victory in 2005, and again in 2007, when the House of

Representatives passed the bill by comfortable margins with support from both Democrats and Republicans. Our numbers were much closer in the Senate, but we were denied a debate by that chamber in both 2005 and 2007 when the bill failed by a single vote in the Judiciary Committee - bitter disappointments, from which we simply had no choice but to recover.

What changed in 2009? The Presidential election was a factor. Barack Obama's strength at the top of the ballot helped progressive candidates in all races, increasing our support in the New Mexico Senate. The Governor signaled that he would consider signing the bill if it reached his desk. It appeared that our arguments had begun to resonate with him - particularly with regard to innocence and the potential for prosecutorial abuse. It became increasingly apparent that the world was watching - people from other parts of the country and throughout the world cared about what was happening in our state. Not only did the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty provide critical support, when the bill cleared its final hurdle in the Senate, the Governor was urged to sign the bill by people not only from our state but from all over the world.

And when he signed it on March 18, 2009, the whole world celebrated with us.

On April 15, the Comunità di Sant'Egidio lit the Colosseo in our honor. Members of Amnesty International from around the globe continue to send messages of thanks. Death Penalty Focus, dedicated to worldwide abolition of the death penalty, honored the Governor in May. At that event in Los Angeles, Bryan Stephenson, an attorney who represents poor people and death row prisoners in the Deep South, said: "The opposite of poverty is not wealth; it is justice."

We believe justice is more likely to prevail in New Mexico now that we have ended the "random brutality" of the death penalty. We are honored that Hands Off Cain acknowledges New Mexico's role in this world-wide movement to obtain justice without vengeance and we thank you for your work.

I am deeply grateful to share The Abolitionist of the Year Award for 2009 with Governor Richardson. I dedicate it to my fellow travelers - those on whose shoulders I have stood, who inspired and sustained me in this effort - the New Mexico Coalition to Repeal the Death Penalty, Murder Victims Families for Reconciliation, the exonerated, the New Mexico Criminal Defense Lawyers Association, my family and friends, an enlightened legislature and a courageous Governor.

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