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A path to healing, but not legislation

By Reviewed By Jamie Lucke

Ten years ago today, when Kentucky carried out its first execution in 35 years, I thought there was a reasonable doubt about the guilt of the condemned man.

No doubt that Harold McQueen, blotto on drugs and booze, had been part of the convenience store robbery in Richmond that left a wonderful young woman, Rebecca O'Hearn, dead.

But doubt about whether he or his half-brother was the shooter. The family hired a lawyer for the half-brother, who went to prison and was paroled after 11 years.

McQueen, a loser from the day he was born "prematurely to a teenager married to an alcoholic," got a court-appointed lawyer whose dim representation provides a textbook example of why the poor populate Death Row.

Carl Wedekind doesn't get into any of that in *Politics, Religion and Death: Memoir of a Lobbyist*, though the book opens with McQueen's case.

Instead, Wedekind gracefully weaves the true story of two broken souls: the convicted murderer McQueen, a diminutive man with an 82 IQ, handlebar mustache and amazing mane, and Paul Stevens, a devout Catholic whose daughter was brutally murdered.

After years of bitterness and anger, Stevens rediscovered his God and became a volunteer chaplain at the prison in Eddyville. McQueen and Stevens find forgiveness and peace through their unlikely father-son relationship.

And Wedekind, a retired corporate lawyer, finds himself part of the small movement to end capital punishment after volunteering on the legal team that failed to stop McQueen's execution.

This book, his second on the subject, was published by the Kentucky Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty. But it's not a polemic and is free of statistics, legalisms and morbid preaching. Considering the topic, it's quite a lively read, especially if you're into Kentucky history and politics.

Wedekind chronicles trying to build a movement and lobbying the 2000 General Assembly. Among the more memorable scenes: the day he and Catholic priest Pat Delahanty called on Rep. Stan Lee, R-Lexington, the current Republican nominee for attorney general. Arms raised, Lee told them not to worry, that with the arrival of Christ, the good and evil would be sorted with no appeal and 1,000 years of goodness would begin.

From this encounter Wedekind seamlessly segues into a short history of Protestantism in Kentucky and the Cane Run revival of 1801, when 25,000 pioneers, rapturously awaiting the Millennium, sang, prayed and spoke in tongues at the largest revival the West had ever seen.

Meeting Lee was "a direct greeting from the Second Awakening."

Such insights make this book very engaging.

Jamie Lucke is a member of the Herald-Leader editorial board.

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