

## Texas After Violence Project

### Interview with Kristin Houle

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KIMBERLY BACON: Okay, we're here with Kristin Houle on February 2, 2009. Myself, Kimberly Bacon, is conducting the interview and Sabina Hinz-Foley is doing the camera. And we're in Austin, Texas at the T.C.A.D.P. office. So Kristin if you want to begin by just talking about your background, where you grew up, your education, and kind of how you came to be where you are today.

KRISTIN HOULE: Okay, well I actually moved every three to five years when I was growing up so it's hard to say exactly where I'm from, but I claim Kentucky as my home state and that's really where my Southern roots took hold. Although the first time I really thought about the death penalty issue was when I was twelve years old. I was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade in Little Rock, Arkansas, and I was supposed to dance in the Christmas production of our school's performing arts magnet program and the woman, or the girl that was supposed to be lead dancer was murdered along with her sister and mother by their father who then committed suicide, so that was a fairly traumatic event and then a month later there was this horrible mass murderer in Arkansas by the name of Ronald Gene Simmons who killed fifteen members of his family and it took three to four days for them to realize what had happened and where the bodies were, and for some reason my parents let me read the newspaper and I was just riveted by this horrible story and I remember thinking very distinctly that this man did not deserve to be alive, that he actually should get the death penalty, which he did.

But my thinking on the issue obviously evolved and as a teenager I became really much more interested in civil rights and international human rights and started to educate myself through joining Amnesty International. Through Amnesty I started to receive all sorts of urgent actions on cases and inmates facing execution. I also read a cheesy John Grisham book, *The Chamber*, which really actually forced me to think about the issue from the perspective of the inmates and just that whole process that they go through leading up to their execution, which I realized was a form of torture. The whole idea of how disgusting it was to have to pick your last meal and say your goodbyes, or just the really programmed way in which they knew every detail about their death just really horrified me. So, it was really through Amnesty that I became interested in the death penalty issue, but still my main interest was the international part of international human rights and was working on human rights violations in China, and Nigeria, and Kenya, and places that had much worse records, I thought, than the United States.

But then in 1997 my then home state of Kentucky where I was attending college was planning for its first execution in more than thirty years and that's when it

really hit home to me that this was a human rights violation taking place in my name, in my back yard, and that I had an obligation to work against it. It was at that time, too, that I met family members of other people on Death Row so that really provided a personalization of the issue in a way that I hadn't been exposed to before. They knew Harold McQueen who was about to be executed, they knew his story, this woman's children spoke to him and were able to provide me with a more humane side of him. This was a man who was fully rehabilitated and was making films for youth that urged them not to follow the path that he did in life and I just realized it was such a travesty for the state of Kentucky to take his life. So I became really involved in the protests against that execution again in 1997 and in the summer went to vigils in the governor's mansion and met wonderful people who then became my mentors on this issue in Kentucky. So I graduated from University of Kentucky in 1998 and ended up staying in Lexington for about three years after that and continued to work on the death penalty and other human rights issues.

BACON: What initially drew you to human rights issues and Amnesty International, just that kind of area?

KRISTIN HOULE: My mother was always very good about exposing me to the world beyond our own, and so I remember watching films on South Africa and apartheid and being really interested in the Tiananmen Square massacre in China so I think I just from an early age I had this interest in global affairs and that translated into human rights. I also was really confronted with the legacy of the civil rights movement living in Little Rock, Arkansas and attending Little Rock Central High School where in 1957 there was a desegregation crisis when nine black students attempted to enter the building and were turned away by the Arkansas State Guard at the direction of the governor. So that issue was still so prevalent when I was in high school almost forty years later. I think always having a strong interest in the world beyond and also just a healthy sense of outrage that I think my mom also helped cultivate. She was an advocate for those with disabilities. She was a special education teacher so I think that also played a role on my general sense of community and activism but it was channeled in these other ways. I don't know, just being exposed to various global issues.

BACON: Would you mind talking a little more about what going to school in Little Rock was like?

KRISTIN HOULE: Sure, it was actually like going to school in a war zone, because the neighborhood in which the school was located in downtown Little Rock had completely "flipped" by that time. So it used to be an all white neighborhood and it was an all white school. By the time I went there from '90 to

'93 the neighborhood was predominantly African American and was also infested with gang activities. The Crips and Bloods gangs from Los Angeles had been transported to Little Rock and the street in front of the high school was considered the dividing line between the Crip and Blood gang territory. We had young, young kids in pimped out cars driving up and down on the street in front of the school building. The year before I got there the vice-principal had been stabbed in her office and there had been this huge racial brawl. That's set against the irony that this is hands-down the best high school in the state of Arkansas. Educationally we had the most phenomenal teachers and the most successful students. So while we were being confronted with issues that really were beyond our capacity to understand in terms of just the racial overtones in the history of that city and what it had been through, we were also trying to get a good education. The school was on lockdown a lot of the time. We got "wanded" with metal detectors, three or four times a week. We would be locked in our classrooms and we would have people petition to stand on the sidewalk in front of the school with signs that said "Return to segregation", or "Let's go back to '57." I felt like that incident was never far from our daily attendance in school there. Again, it was interesting because there were so many disruptions along those lines, but at the same time I received a phenomenal education and was challenged in ways that didn't even come close in college. High school was actually much more rigorous and challenging than anything I faced in college, so it was kind of a mixed bag. I think it also forced us to grow up and at least confront some social issues that most people don't have to at that age. Not necessarily effectively, I don't feel like we got a lot of assistance from our teachers. I think they just wanted to get through the days as much as possible, but that's something that obviously always stuck with me.

BACON: Can you talk a little bit on the effects on you in being in that kind of atmosphere? Like, how you felt about it?

KRISTIN HOULE: At the time I was certainly resentful of the fact that we would have so many disruptions to our day that were caused by, again, going into lockdown, having to stay in our classrooms, all the drug dogs search the halls. We also had an administration that really fostered conflict between the students on racial grounds. So at that time the school was about 60-65% African American, 35-40% white, and the white students were tracked so basically your white students were in the A.P. classes and the Black students were in the "regular" classes and there was gang activity within the school and there was a Black principal who again kind of fostered this sort of sense of competition and not healthy competition but would try to equalize things in a way that didn't seem to make sense or seem fair to us. He wanted to take all the A.P. teachers and switch them to regular classes and visa versa. The white students used to sit outside in

the front of the school for lunch and the Black students sat in the cafeteria. He just decided that nobody could sit in front of the building. So it seemed like there were a lot of arbitrary sort of ways that again furthered their racial division instead of really doing anything to address the issue. I just remember feeling really frustrated a lot of the time and not very capable of doing anything about it.

BACON: Ok, I was interested in kind of going back to, you said you were twelve when you read about the murders that took place in your community? I guess, if you can recall from that age the effect that that had on you?

KRISTIN HOULE: Well, like I said, it kind of unfolded over a number of days. The family members went missing and including young children, so it took several days for them to find their bodies so there was always this kind of sense of hope that maybe some of the children or grandchildren had gotten away, and then when they found them stuffed in the trunk of a car it was just really so grotesque and so incomprehensible how this man could have killed every last member of his family. Again I just remember thinking this whole emotion of this man does not deserve to be on this earth or that he's forfeited his right to life.

BACON: Could you talk a little bit about the shift between thinking he deserved to die and then going the other way and advocating for abolition and how you got there?

KRISTIN HOULE: Well I think there was a little more, there wasn't quite the same, there wasn't one moment where I was like, Oh I'm against the death penalty. Like I said, it was really looking at these cases individually and seeing the injustices that had been committed at all levels of the death penalty process, whether it be racial bias, inadequate representation in trial, or the fact that there were sixteen- and seventeen-year olds on Death Row, that really caused me to think about the death penalty from a different perspective. And I think also looking at human rights in an international context and seeing how the death penalty was used in other countries as a means of stifling political dissent. It all just lent itself to rethinking on my part and then just the exposure to the other resources, and not just looking at kind of a sensationalist crime, and then I think that all really culminated in the confrontation and being confronted with this issue as a resident of Kentucky and knowing that it was my state that was going to be engaging in this practice. That really changed it all for the...it all kind of culminated in that, and that's really when I would say the issue grabbed hold of me and hasn't really let go.

BACON: I think I read on your bio on the website that you were a member of the Kentucky and the Illinois, same organization. Could you talk a little bit about

that, and if there's a difference between your experience there and your experience in Texas?

KRISTIN HOULE: Yeah, sure. Well, so what I did in college was start an Amnesty International student chapter and then became really involved in regional activities by serving in several volunteer leadership roles in Kentucky. One was as a state student area coordinator so I was working with all the other high school and college university groups around the state, and then at that same time I became more involved with the Kentucky Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty which was an all-volunteer organization led by a Catholic priest named Father Pat Delahanty who also just became one of my mentors on that issue. I was involved on the board of the Kentucky coalition and then also very involved in local activities in Lexington.

After that 1997 execution there was one more execution in '99 but no more after that. So we weren't in the crisis mode as we are often in Texas, having executions weekly. We had to come up with other ways to keep the issue relevant and out front for the public to realize that it was, indeed, wrong even if we weren't actively killing people all the time. But we did a lot of really great work at the time in Kentucky. We did focus group research trying to really figure out what it was Kentuckians felt about the death penalty, what they were willing to let go of, or where we might have some opportunities to change their minds or to bring them along in the process of opposing it. We did a lot at the legislature as well; we were focusing on the juvenile death penalty and kind of trying to chip away at it.

And then I stayed in Lexington about three years after I graduated from college and then after a brief stint in the Peace Corps I moved to Chicago and while I was unemployed I became really involved with the Illinois Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty. That was totally different from Kentucky in many ways. It was a staffed organization. It had very close ties with the legal community and they were just in a totally different situation because the governor had by that time imposed a moratorium on the death penalty. It had all these issues of innocence and I felt like they were definitely more advanced than the situation in Kentucky.

When I moved to Texas two years ago I would say they were much more similar to Kentucky than Illinois just in terms of the structure of the organization. The Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty, how it was structured, and what it had been doing up to that point, there were few people doing a lot of work with limited resources but never a real strategic focus, and no sort of coordinated or very little coordinated effort and I think that's really evolved tremendously in

the last two years.

BACON: I want to ask a little bit about the focus groups you helped conduct. What did you find with those, if you can remember kind of general trends or research that you were able to find?

KRISTIN HOULE: Well we did them in I think four different parts of the state. We had separate groups for men and women because it's best to have people in the room be with people they perceive as most like them so they're not covering their opinions. We did them with what we tried to identify as moderate death penalty supporters. In the recruitment tool that we engaged a professional company to use to try to kind of bring people out that didn't have really strong opinions about the death penalty either way but identified themselves as supporters. And it was really interesting. Some of the men were just so hardcore and to the point where they would say that they thought that executing an innocent person was a reasonable price to pay for maintaining the death penalty. On the other hand we had people who seemed to change their opinions as the focus groups wore on.

I think the most interesting part of it was that we gave people cases, just short case descriptions, and asked them to write on a card what they thought the appropriate punishment should be in those cases and they were real death penalty cases. An overwhelming number chose a punishment other than the death penalty, and yet they still could not extrapolate the details of that individual case to their support for the system overall. I think it revealed to us that, again, people say they support the death penalty in the abstract but when you really present them with information about a case, and particularly compelling information about the status of the defendant in these cases, they are often --- like one was a juvenile offender, one had been represented by an attorney who slept through parts of his trial, here in Texas actually, and then I can't remember what the other one was -- but in those cases they could see how the system had failed those individuals. But they still felt that we needed the death penalty, it was fair punishment.

So I think it just showed that we really need to bridge that gap between what happens in an individual case and the system overall, and you can't really separate the two like most people seem to do.

BACON: What were some of the other things that you did to keep the issue relevant in those states where it wasn't really on everyone's mind?

KRISTIN HOULE: In Kentucky we had a monthly vigil for just everyone who

had been executed around the country in a certain time period and we would read off the names of the people who had been executed as well as the names of their victims because we felt it was really important to acknowledge that this person wasn't being executed for no reason. There was a crime that had a real impact on a family. We did a lot of public education events at the law school, and trying to reach out to faith communities and have information tables at July 4<sup>th</sup> festivals and those sorts of things.

Then in Illinois I think the issue was actually still pretty relevant even though they have the moratorium because at that time a "blue ribbon" commission had been appointed to look at possible areas of reform. They came up with eighty-five recommendations and at the end of that document they said even if all eighty-five recommendations were implemented we still aren't going to reduce the possible risk of error in the death penalty, and the only real way to ensure that there is no error is to get rid of it.

In that case, also, we did a lot of education events and forums, and brought in Sister Helen Prejean to speak, and then really were trying to strengthen the organization itself by recruiting new members and strengthening the activities of local groups.

BACON: Were there certain demographics that you aimed these programs at? Were there students, younger or older people, different ethnicities?

KRISTIN HOULE: Yeah I mean in Illinois I think a lot of attention was focused on students and I focused mostly in Chicago. I was only there for like eight months so it was a pretty short window in my overall work on the death penalty.

BACON: What was it that brought you to Texas, then?

KRISTIN HOULE: From Illinois I went to Washington, D.C. where I was the program associate for Amnesty International's Program to Abolish the Death Penalty. I was there for five years so in the course of that work I worked with every state in the country, but spent quite a bit of time on Texas for obvious reasons. Executions needed attention, and also just the prevalence of the issue here. So it was in the course of that position that I was able to come to Texas several times and get to know the activist community here and I just grew to develop a deep appreciation for all of them and the work they were doing and also to see the fact that they needed some help.

So I crafted a proposal for something called the Soros Justice Fellowship which is funded by the Open Society Institute and the George Soros Foundation, and the

focus of the proposal was the intersection of the death penalty and mental illness, which is an issue still everywhere, but even more so in Texas because of the sheer number of people with severe mental illness that they have executed, or we have executed. I received the fellowship and moved down here in March of 2007.

BACON: What kind of things for T.C.A.D.P., what are your general focuses and what are you doing right now to work on this issue? What are your current activities?

KRISTIN HOULE: Currently I am serving as the organization's first ever executive director and began in this position on December 1, 2008, and so a lot of my focus now is on formalizing the policies and procedures of the organization, putting some personnel policies and other sort of non-interesting things into play, just again so that we are everything is kind of on the up and up with our paperwork and everything is really clear, everyone has defined roles, those sorts of things just so just organizational development overall.

Then my focus, another issue focus, is to visit all of our local chapters around the state. We have about twelve different communities in which we have identified either a chapter leader or someone who serves as a representative for that community. I started visiting some of our members a couple of weeks ago. I went out to Beaumont and Houston, I have plans to go to San Antonio and El Paso and hopefully will hit all of them in the next six months. The goal there is really to strengthen our local chapter structure. Because of the geography of Texas we can't do everything from Austin, we really need to engage folks all over the state and we need to rely on having effective leaders in all different parts of the state who can carry forth the message and plan public education events or build coalitions that will then in turn help to mobilize the public to contact their legislators. So that's one thing we're doing; we're always doing membership recruitment.

We have an annual conference coming up in three weeks, February 21 in Austin, and then we're also working with a legislator on a bill that calls for the abolition of the death penalty, so that's been filed, and our goal is to secure a hearing on the bill in the House Criminal Jurisprudence Committee. What we need to do is, once the committee assignments have been made, we need to go back and look at our membership and see where we have members in those key districts.

BACON: Could you talk a little bit about the demographics of your membership, who your members are?

KRISTIN HOULE: Sure, well our members really reflect the cross-section of the

state of Texas. We have retired military families, we have families of those on Death Row, we have murder victims' family members, attorneys, college professors, religious leaders, people of faith, so we really run the gambit in terms of professions. We have a large concentration of members in the metropolitan parts of the state so: Houston, Austin, Dallas, San Antonio are definitely the centers of our membership, but I think we've done a really great job in the last year or two years of reaching out and identifying supporters in the "back roads" of Texas. We've done that through a couple of different ways. We had a year-long concert series where an Austin-based musician, Sara Hickman, visited a different city in Texas every month and performed at a benefit concert and that was a really great organizing opportunity. We have a lot of Catholics who are a part of our organization and reflect their church's teaching that values the sanctity of all human life. We also have a lot of Unitarian Universalists, and I think the most active members have generally been older or retirees, but I think we are starting to attract younger folks.

BACON: I guess my personal experience kind of researching the organization, that sort of thing, is that I do find that it, and please correct me if I'm wrong, that it's typically older people. Usually older, Caucasian, middle-upper class, is what I just noticed. Do you think there's a reason for that or why that?

KRISTIN HOULE: I think that's true of many, if not all, social justice or progressive organizations. That was definitely true with Amnesty International where it was mostly white, mostly middle-upper class, mostly over the age of forty. I think you find that kind of missing demographic from twenty-five to forty in most movements and most organizations and for a variety of reasons. I think it's because people in that age group are focusing on career and family and not as actively involved in their community, or involved on a more limited basis. And I think it's also about time and resources, quite frankly.

BACON: On that note, what drew you to this job because you seem to be younger than the typical age, so what drew you to this particular position?

KRISTIN HOULE: I really think it was a case of being in the right place at the right time. When I moved to Texas it was for this eighteen-month fellowship. I really didn't know what was going to happen after that. Certainly had some aspirations that I could stay on with T.C.A.D.P. if we could find a way to fund it, but for a while that didn't seem quite likely. Luckily right around the time that my fellowship ended we received a really generous grant from the Tides Advocacy Foundation, and because I knew this organization from the inside out, I knew all the board members, I knew our chapter leaders, I knew how the database worked, I was based in the office during my fellowship, and given my

background with the issue, I've been working on it for almost twelve years now, it did seem to be a good fit for them and for me as an opportunity to provide leadership both on the issue and for the organization.

BACON: Okay, I guess do you see your position as being just your professional life? Do you have another separate life, or do you identify yourself as an activist?

KRISTIN HOULE: I think I've actually changed a lot on the issue. I mean, I think probably through my mid-twenties I definitely identified myself as an activist, but, I just made a decision actually a while ago that you are more than your work, and so that was actually a big motivating factor for me to move to Austin where I think people do have really much healthier life and work balance than they do on the East Coast where everyone is very competitive about how many hours they work, and when you introduce yourself to somebody the first thing they say is "What do you do?"

So I very consciously cultivate a life for myself outside of work. I definitely do identify myself as an activist but that's not -- you know, that's a part of who I am -- that's not my entire being and I work very hard to leave my work at the door.

[withheld]

BACON: Okay, would you mind talking a little bit about the vigils, and what that's like?

KRISTIN HOULE: Sure. Before I moved to Texas I had participated in three execution vigils in ten years of working on the issue. It was quite a strange experience to then have a schedule of executions on a weekly basis. The vigils here in Austin take place now in front of the Capitol. They were on the side of the Governor's Mansion for a while, until the governor moved out of the mansion. It's a weird, any vigil, execution vigil is a weird experience. The first couple I participated in, the one in Kentucky was just the most surreal experience ever because that execution happened after midnight and we were just waiting, waiting, waiting to hear that it had happened. Another one I participated in was in North Carolina. It was the one-thousandth execution that happened in the United States since '77. That was right outside the prison, and that was at two o'clock in the morning. It was also just very surreal waiting to hear that somebody has died, and there was nothing we could do about it, even though we had tried.

Here, because we're so removed physically from the Walls Unit in Huntsville it has a really different flavor. We don't always know what's happening. Every so

often someone will receive this last minute stay and we don't know about it until we read about it in the paper later that night or the next day.

So I value the opportunity to be a witness and to at least make some people aware that this execution is happening. But I also have to say, after a while, it does kind of become like a burden of something to do and also just kind of a weird thing to go and stand outside of somewhere for an hour. It's kind of boring, to be really frank. We want to make it pass as quickly as possible so sometimes it becomes really chit-chatty and that doesn't seem appropriate either because somebody is dying at that moment so it's kind of a strange situation. Although I do think it's important to have, even just one or two people, to have that witness and to be publicly visible and saying that this happening in our names and we are not supportive of that. I think lately we've had a lot more support, too. We've had people who work at the Capitol who have come by when they're exiting the building and said supportive comments, and for the most part we get more honks than obscenities, so that's always good.

BACON: Do you see any shift that's occurring with more supporters?

KRISTIN HOULE: Yeah, I think so. We as an organization are growing and I think our movement is growing, to include a lot more key constituencies. Like not necessarily in Texas, yet, but even here to some extent. There are members of the law enforcement communities, former prosecutors, former corrections officials who are coming out against the death penalty and I think that's a really positive development in the abolition movement overall. And I think we are garnering a lot more support here in Texas. Even the things that we can't necessarily credit ourselves for, like the dramatic decline in new death sentences, I think is significant and demonstrative of the declining support overall for the death penalty.

BACON: Have you had any personal experience going to Huntsville, or I know several of your members will be pen-pals with inmates on Death Row, have you have any experience with that?

KRISTIN HOULE: I have not visited Death Row, and I don't have a correspondence per se with Death Row inmates but I have certainly received many letters from Death Row inmates over the years, and there are a few individuals that I'll write back every once in a while. On a professional basis I just don't think that, working professionally on this issue, it's a good idea to become personally involved in a case for various reasons. Although there are some cases that I will absolutely put my life on hold to make sure theirs does not end.

[withheld]

BACON: Where do you see future trends in capital punishment going? Do you think, especially in Texas, do you think we could feasibly abolish it, or where do you see that trend going?

KRISTIN HOULE: I think we're going to continue to see a decline in the new death sentences as people become more comfortable with the alternative sentence of life in prison without parole. I think that Texas will continue to lead the way in the number of executions carried out from year to year. I don't think that's going to change, but I think we're to see it as leveling off where Death Row is not being replenished every year with the number of people who are executed, if that makes sense. I think that will demonstrate to the public that it really is not served by locking up a really small number of people from year to year. I think that we will be impacted by progress in other states. So as more states work with their legislators to abolish the death penalty that will have some impact here, but realistically I feel like it's going to take a decision from the U.S. Supreme Court for Texas to actually abolish the death penalty. I mean, we'll do our best in the legislature, but that's kind of my prognosis.

BACON: What about Texas, why do you think we are the leader in executions? What about the state or our communities?

KRISTIN HOULE: I think it's less about the communities, and more about the legal process here. Texas is one of only two states that asks jurors to consider an inmate, or someone they've just convicted of capital murder, whether this person is going to present a future danger to society. I think that has just screwed us, basically. I think that one question, "does this person present a future danger?" is probably more to account for anything else and why so many people have been sentenced to death here in Texas.

You just take the jury who's just heard all the horrible facets of the crime, they've determined that this person is guilty, and then they're asked "are they dangerous?" Well, they are not thinking about this in the context of like is this person going to be dangerous if we lock them up for twenty-three hours a day in a tiny cell. They're thinking, "if I ran into this person on the street would they be dangerous?" So I think that's one huge reason why we have sentenced so many people to death. I think it's been used by prosecutors in a really indiscriminate way in the past where they sought the death penalty each and every opportunity they had.

The other piece of it is there is just no level at which someone is putting the brakes on the execution apparatus. In other states you might have a state supreme court or then the next the federal level, the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals might issue a stay or actually like look at a case, where as here in Texas the Court of Criminal Appeals is pretty much useless when it comes to looking at cases. The Fifth Circuit is not much better. So on the off-chance that a case gets to the U.S. Supreme Court you can, you might get some stays, but the Board of Pardons and Paroles is not effective, don't even meet, they don't hold hearings. They're not doing anything to stop it. The governor is certainly not doing anything to stop it. So I think all of this legal apparatus is working in tandem to accelerate the execution process. Whereas in other states, like in California, their Ninth Circuit Court really bottles up executions to a large degree. So I think that's it.

I certainly don't think that Texans are more bloodthirsty than any other Americans. I don't necessarily buy the theory of this "frontier justice," or "hang 'em high," or have you. I think there are certainly some people who kind of buy into the "tough on crime" rhetoric, like the political posturing that comes with that, kind of like to out-tough everyone else, or out-Texas everyone else, like this is something to be proud of, how bloodthirsty they can be in their online comments.

But I think for the most part the public's been deceived by prosecutors and by the judicial system. They really aren't clinging to the death penalty in the way that most outsiders would perceive. I think most Texans would want to be known more for the beauty of the hill country than for the number of executions carried out every year.

BACON: What kind of role do you think politics, if any, plays in terms of having appeals, and clemency, and that sort of thing? I guess if the people who are in power right now have, the kind of influence they have over that.

KRISTIN HOULE: Well, the Board of Pardons and Paroles is a politically appointed body. So, for the most part, they're not going to do anything that the governor doesn't want them to do. He can only issue clemency upon their recommendation, so they're kind of in collusion in that sense. There's only been one incident that I know of where they issued a recommendation that he rejected. So that definitely plays a role. The fact that our prosecutors and our judges are elected at every level also plays a role. I think up until the last couple of years most politicians felt like they had to spout this rhetoric of being "tough on crime" to get elected, to prove to their constituents that they weren't going to

stand for any horrible crimes in their community, as if the death penalty was really the solution to that. I think it taints every aspect of the system, for sure.

BACON: Also, I wanted to ask you if you face any opposition when you tell people what you do for a living, and kind of how you handle that.

KRISTIN HOULE: Yeah, it really depends on the setting. You know, in a social setting, sometimes I just say I work for a non-profit organization that works on criminal justice or I work on criminal justice reforms. Sometimes that works and sometimes it doesn't. And it's not because I'm nervous about what they're going to say, it's really more like not having to, there are just times when I just don't want to engage in discussion about the death penalty if I'm out at a party or have you. I don't want to get in a twenty-minute conversation about the death penalty, which happens all the time because most people have never met anyone who actually knows anything about the death penalty. So I appreciate that people have questions and every once in a while I do say that. But for the most part I've been really surprised in Texas. We have a dry cleaner just across the street and I take my stuff over there all the time, and one day she was like "What do you do anyway? You always walk over here," and I told her what I did and she was like, "Oh, I really support that, I've always been against the death penalty." So it was a good lesson to me that you can't pre-judge people and what their position is going to be on the death penalty, and it usually works out. I've met more supportive people here, and in all of Texas not just Austin, than I would have anticipated.

BACON: Those are kind of the questions that I had thought of, Sabina do you have anything you'd like to ask?

SABINA HINZ-FOLEY: I was a little bit curious, you talked briefly about your work with Amnesty International. You said you did that for five years? And so you just traveled around the country? More specifically, what were you doing there?

KRISTIN HOULE: Well, as the national program we mostly provided support services to our local and state-based activists. So it was our job to make sure that we were disseminating information that they would need to be effective local advocates. So I was mostly in touch with folks by email and phone, and providing resources. I coordinated a solidarity weekend called The National Weekend of Faith in Action on the Death Penalty. The aim of that was to engage local faith communities all over the country in devoting some time during their weekend worship services to the death penalty issue. So we provided them with resources, some films that they could use, what have you, so really it was more

like a membership-servicing role, and also coordinating with other departments within Amnesty International such as the media department, or the development department, or with our regional offices to make sure that we were all on the same message and communicating effectively about Amnesty's position on the issue.

HINZ-FOLEY: Cool, yeah I was involved with Amnesty International, kind of in a high school chapter at one point, and I think they're great. Also, you're not from Texas, but having worked with this coalition for a good amount of time already, have you traveled, have you been in contact -- I know you said you try to distance yourself from building personal relationships with people on Death Row -- but what other, do you work with a bunch of other activists? Or what has been your experience in general with the types of people you work with in Texas? We've worked with quite a few people and they all seem to have really compelling stories to tell, but did you have any experiences like that where you've met someone that reinforced or reaffirmed your idea or your belief against the death penalty?

KRISTIN HOULE: Yes. So, to answer the last question I think, earlier this month we were visited by a man named Curtis McCarty who spent almost twenty years on Death Row in Oklahoma for a crime he didn't commit, and he's been out of prison maybe two years, maybe a little bit less, but he was just the most articulate, and sweet and kind person, and just so, it was just such an injustice had been done to him and yet he was, for all outward appearances, processing it very well, and so willing to contribute everything he could to ending the death penalty throughout the United States. That really helped to reinforce to me why I continue to do this work. I really have been very moved by the stories of exonerated Death Row inmates. And then we also do work very closely with a number of murder victims' family members and we've done we do a lot of work with people of faith. So one of our main outreach activities is organizing among faith communities and providing them with resources and ideas for ways to engage their congregations in the death penalty issue. We also work a lot with student organizations. We're trying to branch out and engage more civic groups, like the NAACP, rotary clubs, or what have you.

So we're really working to build a coalition with a lot of other mainstream organizations around the state, and to do it in areas that are going to be influential with the legislature. We have a lot of contact with Sam Millsap, who is the former D.A. in Bexar county, we work with Reverend Carroll Picket, the former death house chaplain, and trying to really present people as the voices of experience with the death penalty issue, that this issue really, as you guys know, impacts so many people beyond the family of the person who has been

murdered or the person on Death Row. It impacts clergy, it impacts the corrections officials, it impacts attorneys on both sides of the issue, and we can never really lose sight of the fact that even though people may not share our position on the death penalty, per se, they are having to process their own experiences with violence, which I think is kind of the point of your project.

HINZ-FOLEY: Oh, definitely. We have one more question. You mentioned you worked with a lot of, or you were in contact with a lot of the victims' families. Do you also work, I'm just curious because this is all kind of new to me as well? From the offender's perspective, and the victim's families' perspectives, do you see a bunch of similarities, or do you see this conflict, or how do you see...from our work we try to find kind of the common ground between all of that, and I guess in abolishing the death penalty we work with kind of the same concept, but how do you go mediating between the two sides of, you know?

KRISTIN HOULE: Yeah, well I don't think that's our role really, to mediate between them or to treat them as if they're in opposing camps. I think that's really a disservice that prosecutors do by putting victims and families of the defendant on opposite sides, or even treating some people as "good victims" and other people as "bad victims" depending on what sort of position they hold on the death penalty. I think, what I've heard from family members who are on the other side of that, they actually both really feel neglected by the system and by society. We've heard from victims' families who talk about just the loneliness that comes several months down the road after the murder has taken place or the trial has taken place. People don't want to talk to them about their loved one that was taken from them. There's a discomfort there, and awkwardness where they don't even want to bring up the name of their daughter or son or brother who was murdered. I feel, and they feel like what they really need in the wake of this horrible tragedy and crime is support from their community. They need help paying for funeral expenses; they don't need the promise of the death penalty to feel better.

It's kind of the same vein I think that families of Death Row inmates or those facing capital murder charges carry with them a lot of shame and guilt and they don't want to tell people that they have a loved one who's on Death Row, and they don't know who to turn to for support in navigating the prison system. So I think that there's a lot of opportunity for them to share experiences, and there are a lot of . . . [?]

I think also maybe the role that we can play in the abolition movement is just continuing to facilitate contact not necessarily between these families, but within, I mean between victims' and offenders' families, but like connecting offenders'

families with each other so that they can share information or experiences, or tell them "here's how you set up an account," or any of those sorts of things.

And the same thing, I think, with victims' families, you know, what to do? What do you do in the wake of a murder? And how do you deal with and process that? We've tried to do some things like that. Last year at our conference we had a workshop that was just a private session for families and close friends of inmates on Death Row or those who had been executed just to come together and talk. Because we've heard some people say at various gatherings that this is the first time I've ever met anyone like me. I think at that gathering in San Antonio last fall of the families, and that was actually a good opportunity too, that was families of someone who had been executed despite their mental illness and then families of loved ones who had been killed by someone with a mental illness. So that, I thought, was actually a really effective model and was facilitated by Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights, so I think they can fill that role in sort of bringing people together and engaging in dialogue about their common experiences even though the system puts them on, or puts them against each other, or makes them part of this whole adversarial process. So I think yeah, that's a really good point.

HINZ-FOLEY: Yeah, maybe just raising awareness in general. I mean, Texas is a very complicated case, but what would you say is maybe, I think you mentioned earlier that...

BACON: Let's go ahead and change the tape.

HINZ-FOLEY: I was interested when you were talking about your experience had been in just talking to people once they'd been presented with the details of the trial, or once they saw the offenders as individuals, you know, they were presented with the details of their background, or the different circumstances of each case, you had an overwhelming, I don't know, difference in opinion with the death penalty. Suddenly they were like, "Oh, life in prison without parole sounds like more than enough, you know, justice is being served here."

What do you think, why is it that there is this huge push for the death penalty in lots of parts of Texas when in individual cases there's overwhelming evidence that no one would want something like that for people?

KRISTIN HOULE: Yeah, I think that prosecutors tend to offer the death penalty as the only way that a victim's family is going to achieve this idea of closure. They offer it as "this is the only way that your loved one's life is going to be valued is if they get the death penalty."

What I've heard from some people who have studied this a little bit more than I have is that, in reality like a victim's family doesn't necessarily, it's not that they want the death penalty, but they want the maximum punishment because that shows to them that whatever happened to their loved one, this person gets the worst punishment. So it's not that --- if the worst punishment available was twenty-five years in prison then that's what they would want. It's not so much that they want the death penalty per se.

I think it's just continuing education process. I think that people want what they want at base is that they want to know that this person is never, ever, ever, going to hurt someone again, and I think up until a few years ago even this idea that someone could possibly be paroled after forty years was still really scary to a jury. Again, they have just heard all these horrific details of a crime, even though we know better that Texas is not going to parole a violent offender, after 40 years they're not going to open the doors and let them walk away. I think that was still really a frightening concept to somebody sitting on a capital murder jury. So I think that at base they want to know that this person, that they want a punishment that's going to promote public safety and punish someone who is truly guilty of the crime.

So I think that all of these cases of innocence, whether they're death penalty cases or not, have planted seeds of doubt among the public about the reliability and accuracy of the criminal justice system. They know that once someone has been executed you can't take it back, and so I think that's starting to influence their decision in cases, and I think the quality of legal representation is also improving and so that the defense is putting on a lot more compelling evidence during the sentencing phase that provides this sort of mitigating evidence that we're talking about, that the jury is seeing this as a whole person. They're not just a culmination of the worst thing they've done in their lives, that there are actually some pretty obvious reasons why they ended up in this situation.

You look at the people on Death Row in this state and nationwide, and incidences of horrific child abuse they just blow your mind, really, what many of these young men for the most part have suffered through as children. They just never, never had a chance. But in many cases the jury has never heard that because the defense attorney didn't investigate it, they didn't have enough money, or they didn't have enough time or interest to really do a good job of investigating their client's background. So you have so many cases where the defendant really, there is no other side being presented to the jury.

So I think now that we have this sentence of life in prison without any possibility of parole it kind of meets the needs of the public, by guaranteeing that this person is going to be locked up for life, and that if by some chance they aren't the guilty party, then there is an opportunity for redress for them to be released, so that kind of sets their mind at ease. It's a harsh punishment and they think that people are starting to accept that. You'll hear people who also say that they actually think life without parole is a harsher punishment because there is no end or release, or whatever. Someone could conceivably be in prison for forty years. That's not why we advocate it, but there are people who say, if it's really about, making someone pay, then life without parole is a pretty hard way to go.

I think that's all the things we have to keep emphasizing to the public, to show that we don't need it. Their lives are not going to be affected in the least if we get rid of the death penalty. We know it's not a deterrent to crime; it's not going to improve public safety. We could probably abolish it under the table tomorrow and most people wouldn't even know because it does not impact their lives in the least. Which is a good thing, but it's certainly a challenge in terms of making the issue relevant.

HINZ-FOLEY: That's perhaps what I was getting to, I think its just too few people are touched by something this awful. A lot of my friends have been just oblivious or indifferent to what's going on.

KRISTIN HOULE: Yeah, I think the way to make it relevant is not so much on the criminal justice side of it, but by emphasizing what is lost by maintaining this expensive system. Maintaining the death penalty means we have fewer dollars for law enforcement, fewer dollars for mental health care, fewer dollars for anything that actually has a chance for preventing crime. So putting it in kind of those real dollars and cents figures to people has some resonance. It's not so much that we want them to be, like you said, we don't want more people to be impacted by violent crime, but to actually make that connection, that there is a cost/benefit to maintaining a system that sentences less than 2% of all eligible defendants to the death penalty. That we have other ways there are other ways to provide meaningful services to victims without resorting to this promise of the death penalty. We'll see. Hopefully in this economic crisis it'll have some positive outcome, people will be willing to give up some things.

HINZ-FOLEY: That would be nice.

KRISTIN HOULE: It would.

BACON: I guess, is there anything that you want to talk about that we haven't touched on? Open it to you?

KRISTIN HOULE: No, I think you all did a great job. I think we covered a pretty wide range of topics.

HINZ-FOLEY: Is there anything that you would just like people to know?

BACON: Kind of for the public record, if you want people when they see your interview, when they're doing different types of research on these issues, is there any "take home" message you want to leave them with?

KRISTIN HOULE: I guess I would say that I firmly believe that the death penalty will be abolished in my lifetime. I think that one of the things that actually drew me to the issue that I forgot to mention is that, unlike so many other human rights issues, there is a light at the end of the tunnel with the death penalty. We know how to get rid of it, and it's within our capability. I don't know how to eradicate torture and poverty and horrible education systems, but I know how we can get rid of the death penalty. So I think that was something else that really compelled me to work on this issue, because we don't need it, and we have a process in place that allows us to come to that realization and to make those changes in our laws. So I'm not some Pollyanna I'm not like looking at the death penalty through rose-colored glasses, but I firmly believe that even in Texas the death penalty will be abolished within the next few years.

So I think that, and I would also just want to add that I think that that mentality is shared by the rest of the, or the rest of the country is starting to share that mentality. Two years ago Texas was considered this hopeless place where nothing could happen so why should we even try and the national organizations would kind of throw up their hands at Texas like "why should we even bother?" I think that truly has changed to the point where foundations are investing in Texas. National abolition groups want to provide assistance to Texas because they see that there are phenomenal people working on the ground here and that we need their help, and that we in turn have a lot to contribute to the movement because any positive momentum or shift that happens in Texas has a ripple effect through the rest of the country, and it's important for people to understand that. You should go to even the darkest corners of the earth if you really want to make change.

BACON: That was beautiful.

KRISTIN HOULE: Ah, thank you!

BACON: Thank you very much!

KRISTIN HOULE: You're welcome.