



THE JOURNEY BANNER

newsletter of the Journey of Hope... From Violence to Healing

December 2009 Issue

The Journey Goes to “Big Sky Country”

by Marietta Jaeger

The most recent large-scale Journey of Hope was held in Montana, October 2nd through 11th, 2008. Encouraged by the growing numbers of Legislators willing to vote for abolition, the Montana Abolition Coalition (ABCO) contacted Bill Pelke and invited about 25 members (and spouses) of JOH to share their personal stories, songs and experiences of the death penalty.

JOH’s many speakers from various backgrounds, were able to present just about every possible perspective against capital punishment. Aided and abetted by the extraordinary organizing skills of Montana’s friendly ABCO staff, led by Jennifer Kirby, the JOH traveled over most of the western half of Montana, the

fourth largest state in the country, and a few towns on the eastern side of the state.

At educational institutions, churches and civic events, and not always just to the “choir”, speakers addressed all the facets of the ugly injustices inherent in execution policies, against the backdrop of the state’s marvelous and majestic mountainous scenery – to the senses, a theoretical oxymoron.

Besides the always-delightful remembering and camaraderie among the Journeymen themselves, 65 events were accomplished. Vast numbers of citizens’

minds were changed listening to experientially-informed, personalized presentations how the death penalty does not do what we think, want or hope it will do.


Four months later, when Montana’s Legislature addressed the abolition bill, it was passed by the Senate Judiciary Committee and then by the whole Senate. We were elated! Sadly, the next vote took place



Journey participants at the Montana Statehouse.

Photo by Jack Payden-Travers.

with the House of Representatives Judiciary Committee, which was split down the middle, politically, and thus did they vote – Republicans against and Democrats with us. With a tied vote, the bill was tabled.

So, now we Montanans are back at work, but October ‘08’s Journey of Hope made, and continues to make, a huge impact at the grass-roots level. We hope to see the real fruits from all that splendid work come January 2010, when our Legislature re-convenes. 

Marching Under the Journey Banner in Kentucky

by Bill Pelke

Marching under the Journey banner, three well-trained foot soldiers came to the aid of the Kentucky Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty.

Terri Steinburg, Shujaa Graham and I came to the Kentucky battleground with weapons of love, compassion and forgiveness. Seeking fertile soil to spread our seeds, we held meetings in seven of Kentucky’s prestigious colleges and universities. Thousands of people heard the trumpet of the abolition cry.

I spoke of forgiving the person who killed my grandmother. I spoke of the healing power of forgiveness and how the death penalty had nothing to do with the healing that murder victim family members need, and that it creates more murder victim family members.

Shujaa, a Journey of Hope board member, told of his time on death row for a crime he did not commit. He heroically challenged students to stand for justice and humanity.

I touched their hearts as I spoke, Shujaa opened their hearts and Terri walked right in. She shared her story of Justin Wolfe, her young son on Virginia’s death row and how the state wants to kill him. She told of the pain it is causing her and her family. We are all convinced that Justin is innocent and hopeful his innocence can be proven before the execution takes place.

All agreed that it is wrong to execute the innocent and many volunteered to personally help Terri.

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Journey of Hope on Tour in Germany

by Annabelle Thilo,
German Coalition to
Abolish the Death Penalty

What do the U.S. citizens Bill Pelke, Terri Steinberg and Ray Krone have in common? Each has a haunting story to tell: a story of love, death, hatred and forgiveness. And tell it they did - 32 times throughout Germany.

From April 28th to May 16th, 2009, they spoke in Hamburg, Frankfurt, Heidelberg and numerous other places. Some 5,000 people came to listen to their stories. And Ray Krone was interviewed by TV talk show host Kerner for an audience of approximately 1.9 million people.

Pelke, Steinberg and Krone deeply moved their audiences, telling them how they got involved with the issue of capital punishment. The anti-death penalty petitions traveling with them collected some 7,900 signatures. Bill Pelke gathered over 100 new friends via Facebook.

There is no doubt about it: The spring 2009 Journey of Hope tour in Germany, organized by the German Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty (GCADP), was a huge success.

The organizing GCADP deemed themselves lucky to win over three renowned speakers for the tour in Germany, co-organized by local groups of Amnesty International, European Law Students' Association ELSA and a number of schools and colleges. And GCADP's own Susanne Cardona, chair of the board, worked unremittingly towards the tour's success, accompanying the speakers to many of the scheduled events.

Ray Krone represented the section of exonerated members of the Journey of Hope - he became the 100th person to be released from death row in April 2002. He spent ten years in prison, two of which were on death row in Arizona, for the murder of a female bartender. DNA testing helped to exonerate him.

Terri Steinberg's son Justin Wolfe was sentenced to death in Virginia. Currently, available evidence suggests Justin's innocence. However, he will have to continue fighting for his life in court.

After he received the death penalty, Terri set out to fight against capital punishment.



Terri Steinberg speaks to a packed house in Weikersheim during the Journey of Hope in Germany. Photo by Susanne Cardona.

In May 1985, Bill Pelke's grandmother was murdered by four teenage girls. Their ringleader, Paula Cooper, was sentenced to death by electrocution. Initially, Bill supported this sentence but later changed and has since become an ardent opponent of capital punishment. In 1989 after an international campaign which was supported by Pope John Paul II, Bill's struggle succeeded in having Paula's judgment commuted to a prison sentence.

These three death penalty opponents traveled to many places in Germany, sharing their stories with many people. Starting out at Goettingen, their tour took them to Hamburg, Kirchheimbolanden, Neustadt/Weinstrasse, Wiesbaden, Heidelberg, Freiburg, Augsburg, Munich, Magdeburg, and it ended at Potsdam.

The response of their audiences - many of them pupils or students - was considerable. In addition, the events were often an opportunity for additional in-depth reflections on the issue. For example, at the school at Adelsheim, they organized a Projekt (Project) Week on capital punishment. At the commercial college at Bad Mergentheim, the vast numbers of people interested in the event literally filled up the school building. Over 400 students listened intently - while sitting or standing in the hallways for an hour and a half.

Two documentaries were done

on this journey, one of which is already being used for lessons at schools.


In the middle of the tour two pieces of news arrived: (1) the announcement of the 132nd exoneree; and (2) the information that Terri Steinberg's son Justin was going to be awarded a new hearing.

The tour not only was a great success, it also meant a tremendous effort on the part of the speakers. They sometimes had to tell their stories more than four times a day - not to mention press appointments and many other obligations. And the tour also meant traveling throughout Germany.

So, what are we left with after the end of that long journey? Well, hope will persist: the hope of sending a message of reason and forgiveness to peoples' hearts and minds as well as the hope of a growing international movement eventually putting an end to the madness called death penalty.

Finally, we understand the word gratitude in a deeper way.

We send our gratitude toward all the good folks who, like Terri, Bill and Ray, never tire of telling their stories, patiently, courageously and regardless of the horrors they have to retell, time and time again, 5,000 times, or whatever it may take.

We would like to express our gratitude - not only to the speakers again - but once more to all the many others who made this tour possible. 

INDIANA JOURNEY OF HOPE

From March 11th to 24th, 2009, a small group of Journey of Hope speakers canvassed Indiana, telling their stories to audiences at five college and university campuses, a Catholic high school, seven churches, a radio talk show, the Fort Wayne chapter of the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill and Legacy House, a program in Indianapolis to help victims of violence.

Four of the speakers' tragic stories began in Indiana many years ago. Bill Pelke grew up and worked as a steel worker in Gary, Indiana, where his grandmother, Ruth Pelke, was murdered in 1985. Bill originally supported the death penalty, but he became convinced that his grandmother would not have wanted fifteen-year-old Paula Cooper executed.

After many years, Bill finally saw Paula's death sentence overturned and the Supreme Court of Indiana raised the minimum age for the death penalty from age ten to eighteen years of age.

Ruth Andrews was sixteen, Bess Klassen-Landis was thirteen and Suzy Klassen was eleven on March 14, 1969, when their mother Helen Klassen was murdered in Elkhart, Indiana. The murder happened before DNA testing was a reality, and none of the seven suspects were convicted. Ruth took part in the first Journey of Hope and invited her sisters to join later journeys.

The last speaker, Darryll Burton, came from Missouri, where in August of 2008, he was exonerated from prison after serving 24 years for a murder he did not commit. Darryll has been speaking about wrongful imprisonment of innocent people and has been working to abolish the death penalty since his release.

Chris Hitz-Bradley, the director of Indiana Information Center on the Abolition of Capital Punishment, took on the daunting task of finding sponsors and ar-

ranging speaking events, hospitality, and funding for the two-week-long journey. Bess and Bill spoke throughout the whole tour, Suzy spoke in Goshen, Darryll spoke in Indianapolis and Ruth spoke in Goshen, Indianapolis, and Bloomington.

Two events that were highlights of the tour and may provide inspiration in designing future events occurred at College Mennonite Church in Goshen and at Breuf Catholic High School in Indianapolis.



From left to right: Bess Klassen-Landis, Ruth Andrews, Bill Pelke and Susie Klassen in Indiana. Photo by Emily Dougherty / Mennonite Weekly Review.

College Mennonite Church

Bess had been invited by the pastor of the College Mennonite Church (her father and step-mother's church) to speak to the congregation about forgiveness and her work through the Journey of Hope to abolish the death penalty. The date had been set seven months earlier for March 15th, the day after the 40th anniversary of her mother's death. Bess' father unexpectedly passed away prior to this date, and his memorial service was on March 14.

These two events happening at the church that weekend brought together approximately seven hundred people from the community who had silently suffered after the unsolved murder of Helen Klassen.

Suzy Klassen gave the sermon, telling how her mother's murder had robbed

her of the most important person in her life and destroyed her life as a child. Yet, she knew as a mother, that if it had been her child that had committed that atrocity, that she would still love him as much today as the day he was born.

Bess gave the sermon reflection through an original song of hope, and Ruth gave the children's story about victim-offender reconciliation through an original retelling of the story of the Gingerbread Man. During the Sunday school hour, Bill, Ruth, and Bess each told their own stories of trauma and forgiveness. The impact of

these powerful stories was cathartic for hundreds of members of the community that still felt the pain of a deep wound of violence.


Having murder victim family members speak up for forgiveness within the very community where the violence had a profound effect upon a group of people, even years after the murder, is not new for the Journey of Hope. It is a community intervention model that Journey of Hope hopes to continue in other communities and states.

Breuf High School

Another highlight of the trip was a speaking engagement at Breuf High School in Indianapolis. Bill, Darryll and Bess each told their stories before a school assembly of 250 students and staff.

Staff reported that students were talking about what they had heard to other students and in other classes for the rest of the day and for the next several weeks. Some of the same students came out later that evening and brought their friends to hear the speakers again at St. Thomas Aquinas Church.

School staff stated they were sorry the whole student body had not been able to hear the stories and messages of forgiveness and hoped that the speakers would be able to come back in the future to speak to the whole school.

Indiana Journey speakers were well received throughout Indiana. The Journey of Hope looks forward to future collaborations with the many organizations that are working to end the death penalty in Indiana. 

Upcoming Journey-Involved Events and Programs

Remembering Rachel ~ Supporting Survivors of Violence

Last summer we lost one of our greatest abolition activists, Rachel King, after a long and valiant struggle with cancer. Rachel was first a daughter, friend, wife and step-mother, but her personal and professional lives merged in her advocacy and efforts to make our world a better place. She did so in staff and volunteer capacities with various organizations, including Alaskans Against the Death Penalty, the ACLU Capital Punishment Project and the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty (NCADP). To celebrate Rachel's life and continue her legacy, NCADP has created Rachel's Fund to support the work of our state affiliates - both in the cause of abolition, and to support victims of violence. Rachel's Fund is a partnership supported by Rachel's family and a variety of organizations, including Journey of Hope and Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation. Give to Rachel's fund today at ncadp.org.


Death Penalty Conference in Louisville, KY ~ January 14-17, 2010

The National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty will hold its 2010 Conference and Dinner at the Seelbach Hilton Hotel from January 14 to January 17 in Louisville, Kentucky. The conference theme, Training for the Long Run -- Building Bridges to Wider Audiences, reflects efforts to broaden our base of support for ending capital punishment. The conference will explore this theme through speeches from internationally renowned figures in the areas of religion, civil rights and civil liberties. The conference places the death penalty within a larger criminal justice context by: educating attendees about best practices for organizing to repeal the death penalty so that society can better prevent and respond to violent crimes; offering training models Affiliates can replicate back home; and providing opportunities for networking among death penalty advocates, criminal justice leaders, murder victims' and death row prisoners' family members, religious leaders, lawyers and others. The training program provides substantive information, practical tools, and innovative ideas from research and personal experience. See www.ncadp.org for more information and to register. Earlybird discount available.

(Kentucky continued from page 1)

Our secondary mission was to inform people of the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty conference, "Training for the Long Run," which will take place in Louisville, January 14-17, 2010. There were many who signed pledges to participate in the annual conference.

We spoke at the University of Louisville, Eastern Kentucky University, Western Kentucky University, Georgetown College, Bellarmine College, Transylvania University and Kentucky State as well as speaking on State of Affairs radio program.

Thanks to Father Pat Delahanty, Kate Miller, Don Vish, Dean Ault and others for making this a highly successful mission. 

Fast and Vigil in Washington, DC ~ June 29-July 2, 2010

The annual "Starvin' for Justice" presence takes place in Washington, DC every June 29 through July 2, on the sidewalk in front of the U.S. Supreme Court. Dozens of anti-death penalty activists come regularly from across the country, Canada and Europe to join together for public education and outreach at the steps of the Court. With tens of thousands of tourists from all over the world passing by the vigil and our table, the opportunity for dialogue and discussion at a real grass-roots level is an invaluable contribution to the movement. In addition to the strong public witness, this is an excellent opportunity to meet other abolitionists and to "recharge your batteries" while engaging in public outreach and maintaining a physical presence at the Court. Fasting is always optional and all are welcome to participate for all four days, or just a few hours. See www.abolition.org for more information and to register.



Marietta Jaeger and Terri Steinberg at a memorial in Montana for Marietta's daughter, Susie. Photo by Jack Payden-Travers.



Speaking in Göppingen, Germany (left to right): Ray Krone, Terri Steinberg and Bill Pelke. Photo by Horst Rudel.