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Partly sunny: High 85, Low 66

Abolish the death penalty and support the survivors

By Ami Lyn White

Whether it's the latest mass shooting or a robbery gone awry, whenever I hear about a murder, my heart breaks again. I know what it's like to learn that the person you love and need the most is never coming home again. That pain and despair are real to me, because my pregnant mother was murdered when I was 5 years old.

I was raised by my grandmother, a smart woman who shared details with me as I got older. My mom was 26 when she was murdered in Alvin by two teens with car trouble whom she tried to help. Because the killers were juveniles, they were not eligible for the death penalty.

I've thought a lot about my mom and what our lives might have been like had she not been murdered. I've also thought a lot about the teenagers who killed her, and I have participated in a victim-offender reconciliation program that allowed me to meet with one of them in prison.

Looking one of my mom's killers in the eye helped me understand that they were people, too. They made a terrible mistake for which they have paid the price. One died in prison, and the man my grandma and I met with was paroled. I recently received a message from

his pastor, sharing that he is active in church and paying back to society. We're OK with that. There should be room for forgiveness and reconciliation.

I know some will disagree, and I don't speak for everyone who struggles with the aftermath of murder. I have no problem with a sentence of death by incarceration, which is what most killers get these days. We can be safe from dangerous offenders and hold them accountable without killing them.

I also recognize that those in prison or on death row and those who have been executed have families too. Those family members, especially those who were children when their loved one was arrested, experience pain and devastation similar to that which I felt. They, like me, didn't do anything wrong, but society need not make it worse by making them homicide survivors too. As much as I've missed my mom, I'm fortunate that my grandma provided

leadership for our family that steered us away from revenge. She understood that executing the killers wouldn't bring her daughter back. Given how long death cases take, I believe that not having to wait decades for executions allowed us

to move on with

our lives, and on some level, to heal. This is one reason I now advocate for ending the death penalty.

In our experience the death penalty system is not victim-friendly. It consumes huge sums of money which could be better used for direct victims' services,

such as counseling, funeral expenses and educational help for the children left behind. These and other things would have been useful to my family.

Additionally, executions focus attention on the offender rather than on the victims. The headlines are always about the killer. We all know the name of the shooter in Las Vegas. Can we name one of his victims?



Fotolia

Survivors need healing and support services over the course of their lives.

Worse, by holding up the death penalty as a commodity for victim's families, they are really saying that most homicide victims aren't valuable enough. The majority of murder cases are not death-eligible, and only a tiny percentage of those cases where death is possible actually end with an execution.

Anyone with a relative who has been murdered wants the right person to be held accountable. Beyond that, we need healing and support services over the course of our lifetimes. It's been decades since my mom was killed, but the trauma of losing her is triggered again almost daily.

The death penalty should be abolished and the funds currently used for killing should be redirected to better services for homicide survivors.

White lives in Cleveland. She is a featured speaker on the Texas Journey of Hope ... From Violence to Healing in the Houston area which ends today. Details at www.DeathPenaltyAction.org/JourneyofHope.