

Gary, a practicing Catholic, explains: “While he was being executed Jesus forgave the people who were killing him. I thought, if that’s the example Christ gave us while he was suffering on the cross, then I had to think very seriously about forgiveness in my own life.”

Kirk Bloodworth

Kirk Bloodworth, a retired Marine from Maryland, was wrongfully convicted of sexual assault, rape and first-degree murder, and was sentenced to death in 1985. The ruling was appealed a year later on the ground that evidence was withheld at trial, and Kirk received a new trial. He was found guilty again, however, and sentenced to two consecutive life terms.

In June 1993, Kirk’s case became the first capital conviction in the United States to be overturned as a result of DNA testing. By the time of his release, Kirk had served almost nine years in prison, including two on death row, for a crime he did not commit.

“In that time,” Kirk says, “my life had been taken from me and destroyed. The Catholic Church provided me with essential support in my time of need, and I converted to Catholicism in 1989, while I was serving time behind bars. I am a deeply spiritual person and continue to embrace the Church. Its values help to guide me as I travel across the country to tell my story.”

Although Kirk was a retired marine with no criminal record who was nowhere near the scene of the crime, he had nevertheless been convicted and sentenced to death for a crime he did not commit. If it could happen to someone like him, he reasoned, it could happen to others. And it does. Since 1973, more than 120 people have been exonerated from death row after being cleared of their charges.

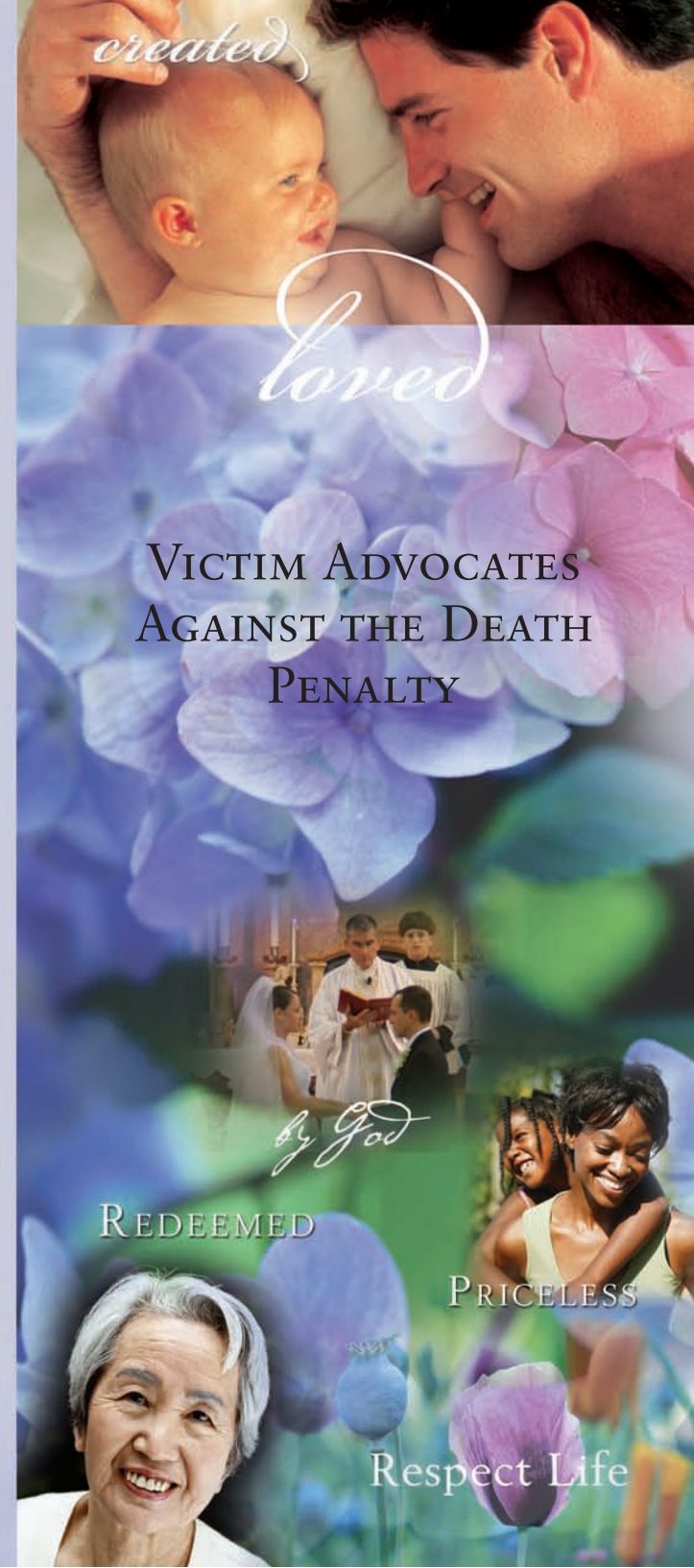
Today Kirk works for the Justice Project's Campaign for Criminal Justice Reform and the Criminal Justice Reform Education Fund.

What is striking about these stories is seeing how God embraces people as they face some of the most terrible and hopeless situations life can present. If these men and women can overcome human hatred and bring a gospel of mercy and love to the world, how can we claim a right to demand the death of a killer to “honor the victim” or to “win justice” for the victim’s family? We cannot. To do so dishonors the lives of all involved, making us complicit in perpetuating violence rather than ending it.

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Losing a close family member to murder is a tragedy of unimaginable proportions. The effects on the family, and on the wider community, extend well beyond the initial shock and trauma. The common assumption in this country is that families who have suffered this kind of loss will support the death penalty.

This assumption, of course, is wrong. Many family members of victims have argued forcefully against the death penalty for their loved one's killer.

We'll see how four people whose lives were touched by murder unexpectedly became public advocates against capital punishment.

Vicki Schieber

Vicki's daughter Shannon was 23 years old in 1998, when she was murdered by a serial rapist in Philadelphia. In 2002 Troy Graves pleaded guilty to assaulting, raping, and killing Shannon, and to thirteen other sexual assaults.

The Schiebers raised their children to oppose the killing of anyone, including murderers, if the killers could be imprisoned for life without parole and so no longer pose a danger to society.

No one should infer from her opposition to the death penalty that Vicki did not want Shannon's murderer caught, prose-

cutted, and put away for the rest of his life. "We believe he is where he belongs today, as he serves his prison sentence, and we rest assured that he will never again perpetrate this sort of crime on any other young women. But killing this man would not bring our daughter back. And it was very clear to us that killing him would have been partly dependent on our complicity in having it done."

Today Vicki serves on the board of directors of Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights (MVFHR), a national non-profit organization of people who have lost a family member to murder or to state execution.

David Kaczynski and Gary Wright

David Kaczynski is the brother of Ted Kaczynski, "the Unabomber," a mentally ill man whose anti-technology bombings over 17 years left three people dead and twenty-three injured. When newspapers printed the Unabomber's "manifesto," David and his wife, Linda, recognized similarities to Ted's ideas. David faced an almost unimaginable dilemma – he could turn in his brother knowing that he might be executed, or he could do nothing, knowing more innocent people could be harmed. David chose the path of life and took steps to stop the violence.

Despite Ted's history of mental illness, federal prosecutors sought the death penalty. It was only through the work of highly-skilled lawyers – an advantage often unavailable to those facing capital prosecutions – that Ted was allowed to plead guilty and is now serving a life sentence in a federal penitentiary in Colorado.

Gary Wright was one of the Unabomber's victims. Gary, the owner of a Salt Lake City computer store, happened to pick up a piece of wood behind his store in 1987. It turned out to be a bomb placed there by Ted Kaczynski. It was a miracle that Gary wasn't killed, but he had to endure three years in and out of surgery, and a slow, pain-filled process of rebuilding his body and contemplating what had happened to him.

Both David and Gary reflected on the death penalty in intensely personal ways, and both became convinced that our society can live without using the death penalty.

Five years later David became the executive director of New Yorkers Against the Death Penalty, a group headed by Albany Bishop Howard Hubbard. Gary has become an unlikely soldier in the same battle. He joined forces with David.