



1976-2006
National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty
A 30th Anniversary History

Eugene G. Wanger

NATIONAL COALITION TO

ABOLISH THE DEATH PENALTY

“Perhaps the bleakest fact of all is that the death penalty is imposed not only in a freakish and discriminatory manner, but also in some cases upon defendants who are actually innocent.”

Supreme Court Justice William J. Brennan Jr., 1994

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A 30th Anniversary History

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This history was written in response to the recent request of Diann Rust-Tierney, Executive Director of the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty, in celebration of the organization's 30th Anniversary. It is based on the author's files and recollections, with the invaluable assistance of the amazingly talented former director and longtime associate director of the Coalition, Robert Gross, and its highly skilled communications director and former reporter for the *Austin American-Statesman*, David Elliot.

Generous help was also given the author by Professor Hugo Adam Bedau of Tufts University, a member of the Coalition from its very beginning and America's leading death penalty scholar, along with Professor Herbert Haines of the State University of New York at Cortland, America's principal historian of the anti-death penalty movement in this country and Deborah Leavy, early director of the ACLU Death Penalty Project. Any errors this work may contain are the sole responsibility of the author.

Background

When the United States Supreme Court, in the famous case of *Furman v. Georgia*, decided in 1972 that the death penalty as then administered in America violated the United States Constitution, many death penalty abolitionists thought the long campaign to abolish the death penalty in America—begun by Dr. Benjamin Rush in 1787—was over.

It didn't work out that way. A storm of protest arose, centering in the 38 states where death penalties had been voided; a protest that reflected a considerable official attachment to the practice of judicial homicide, a great annoyance at what many described as the Supreme Court's "judicial activism," and the general public's growing fear and frustration over America's dramatically rising crime rate.

Some of this feeling spilled over into America's 12 abolitionist states as well, including Michigan, which in 1846 was the first government in the English-speaking world to abolish the death penalty for murder and lesser crimes and which had never revived it.

As a result 35 states passed new death penalty laws and on July 2, 1976, the United States Supreme Court, in the case of *Gregg v. Georgia*, held that those new laws that tried to impose guidelines for deciding which murderers should live and which should die were constitutional. Once again the fat was in the fire.

The American Civil Liberties Union, which had come out against the death penalty on constitutional grounds in 1965, established its "Death Penalty Project" in 1974. Sheila Levine, and on her departure, Deborah Leavy, headed that project. They had taken on the job of coordinating and encouraging the abolitionist activities of organizations in the country opposed to capital punishment.

In several respects they were inspired by the remarkable efforts of Douglas B. Lyons, founder and executive director of Citizens Against Legalized Murder, with the wonderful acronym CALM, who had done much valuable work in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The Beginnings

The adoption of the *Gregg* case made clear that a national organization devoted exclusively to the abolition of the death penalty was needed, a group that could act as a coordinating agent for like-minded organizations across the country.

Deborah Leavy, together with long-time civil rights activist Henry Schwarzschild, who had been on the ACLU staff since 1971 and who had just completed a major assignment, convened a meeting on July 8, 1976, one week after the *Gregg* decision. Many organizations opposed to capital punishment were invited to send representatives.

It was at this meeting, chaired by Henry, that the National Coalition Against the Death Penalty was founded. Its minutes show that the following people were present:

- Joseph Ingle, *Southern Coalition on Prisons and Jails*
- Morris Dees and Carl T. Herrman, *Southern Poverty Law Center*
- Frank Wilkinson and Esther Herst, *National Committee Against Repressive Legislation*
- Daniel Sheehan, *United States Jesuit Conference*
- Peggy Davis and David Kendall, *NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund*
- Anthony G. Amsterdam, *Stanford Law School*
- Joan Swan, *American Friends Service Committee*
- John L. Regier, *New York State Council of Churches*
- Hugo Bedau, *Tufts University in Massachusetts*
- Ronald Croen, *University of Pennsylvania Law School*
- Charney Bomberg, *National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council*
- Robert H. Davidson, *United Presbyterian Church*
- Leonard A. Tropin, *National Council on Crime and Delinquency*
- Marjorie Sutherland and Michael Myerson, *National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression*
- Irving Joyner, *United Church of Christ*
- Michael Meyers, *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People*
- Jack Himmelstein, *Columbia Law School in New York City*
- Lauren Anderson, *National Conference of Black Lawyers*
- Laurence S. Apsley, *Friends Committee on National Legislation*
- Aryeh Neier and Stephen Hatt, *American Civil Liberties Union*
- Neil Bradley, *American Civil Liberties Union—Southern Regional Office*
- Henry Schwarzschild, Deborah Leavy and Kay MacDermott, *American Civil Liberties Union—Capital Punishment Project*



After considerable discussion it was agreed that the following people (three of whom were absent) be appointed a working party to structure the Coalition: Irving Joyner, Morris Dees, Lauren Anderson, Henry Schwarzschild, Deborah Leavy, Anthony Amsterdam, Daniel Sheehan, Michael Meyers, Burt Joseph (Playboy Foundation), Jean Fairfax (Legal Defense Fund) and John Adams (United Methodist Church).

By September 13 the Coalition had a letterhead, which listed 26 affiliate organizations. It called itself the National Coalition Against the Death Penalty.

The Late Seventies

The organization, headquartered at the Capital Punishment Project office of the ACLU in New York City, got off to a slow but deliberate start.

By March 1977 Gary Gilmore had been executed in Utah by a volunteer firing squad—the first person to be executed in America in almost 10 years—and the NCADP had started issuing its publication “Death Watch” to keep its affiliates informed of the situation in death penalty states. This turned out to be a big job for there were 342 on death rows on March 17 and the list kept growing.

“What does the death penalty, after all, say to the American people and to our children? That killing is all right if the right people do it and think they have a good enough reason for doing it!”

Forty state affiliates had joined by August and in December the Coalition’s chairperson, John P. Adams, together with Henry, Deborah, Hugo and former United

States Attorney General Ramsey Clark traveled to Sweden to attend the Stockholm Conference on the Abolition of the Death Penalty, which had been called by Amnesty International, winner of the 1977 Nobel Peace Prize. They comprised the U. S. delegation among 250 delegates from 55 countries that attended. The conference adopted the Stockholm Declaration, which called upon all nations to abolish the death penalty and asked the United Nations to declare it contrary to international law.

Early in May 1978, Henry Schwarzschild, as director of both the Coalition and the ACLU Capital Punishment Project, testified before the Judiciary Committee of the U.S. Senate, saying in part:

“What does the death penalty, after all, say to the American people and to our children? That killing is all right if the right people do it and think they have a good enough reason for doing it! That is the rationale of every pathological murderer walking the street...”

Hugo Bedau testified with him and written statements against the death penalty were filed with the committee by the Michigan, Illinois, Hawaii, South Carolina, Tennessee, Utah and Virginia coalitions.

On May 18, 1978, the first annual meeting of the Coalition was held in the Church Center for the United Nations in New York City. Among the 18 in attendance were:

- John P. Adams, *Coalition Chairman, United Methodist Church*
- Tony Henry, *National Friends Service Committee in Philadelphia*
- Steve Insley, *New Jersey ACLU*
- Marge Golden, *National Council of Churches*
- Howard Maxwell, *United Presbyterian Church*
- Mary Powers, *Catholic Committee on Urban Ministry, Winnetka, Illinois*
- Barbara Parker, *NCADP*
- Mike Jendrejczyk, *Fellowship of Reconciliation*
- Carol Palmer, *NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund*
- Rick Ream, *Texas Coalition*
- Deborah Leavy, *NCADP*
- Henry Schwarzschild, *NCADP*
- Eugene G. Wanger, *Michigan Committee Against Capital Punishment*

An executive committee was appointed and the Coalition’s cash on hand amounted to \$431.88.

Deborah left the organization to attend Yale Law School and by November there were 464 inmates on death rows in 24 states, of whom more than 80 percent were in Southern states and almost half (47.6 percent) were non-white.

At the close of 1978 Henry was the director of the NCADP, and the ACLU in its annual report was predicting, “The struggle to abolish capital punishment will be protracted.”



Off to the Races

The year 1979 saw the execution of John Spenklink by the state of Florida, the second person to be executed in America in more than 10 years. The inevitable publicity surrounding it, like the publicity given Gilmore, caused many to reflect that with the death penalty the names of these murderers would be remembered long after the names of their tragic victims were forgotten.

At mid-year Henry reported that the Coalition was coordinating some 50 or more national and regional organizations, primarily from the religious community, the minority communities, the public-interest law world, and state and local anti-death penalty groups.

The Coalition is the only single-issue institution devoted to the issue, Henry noted, and is, in effect, the successor to the American League to Abolish Capital Punishment that lasted from the Sacco-Vanzetti case in the 1920s until the 1960s.

The NCADP, he continued, whose secretariat is the ACLU Capital Punishment Project, serves as a national resource to the media, other organizations and the public, stimulates and supports local, state and regional anti-death penalty coalitions, and is the aegis of the Governors' Council Against Executions, comprising some 40 former and incumbent governors who agreed to intercede with their sitting colleagues in favor of executive clemency.

As 1980 dawned, John Buckley, Sheriff of Middlesex County, Massachusetts, formed Law Enforcement Against Death (LEAD) to bring together members of the police community opposed to capital punishment and became an active Coalition member.

Getting Organized

In September of that year a full membership meeting of the Coalition was held in New York City at which Kathy Young of the United Presbyterian Church was chosen chairperson, succeeding John P. Adams, who had been promoted by his church to a new and more time-consuming assignment. Twenty-seven people attended, including representatives of ten state coalitions. The first executive committee was appointed, committee assignments were established and Henry was listed as the Coalition's executive director.

The 16 members of the Coalition's first executive committee were Henry Schwarzschild, Kathy Young, John Adams, Louis Brin, Sylvia Brown, John Buckley, Joe Chuman, John Churchville, Larry Cox, Sarah Dike, Joe Ingle, Mike Jendrezczyk, Michael Meyers, Judith Murciano, Carol Palmer and Mary Powers.

May 1981 saw the Coalition's office moved from the ACLU's site on 43rd Street to the Presbyterian Church's office on Riverside Drive. At the end of September the NCADP's first national conference was held in Washington, attended by 186 abolitionists.

The Coalition is the only single-issue institution devoted to [Capital Punishment].

With its distinguished workshop leaders and speakers including such notables as Coretta Scott King, widow of the slain Rev. Martin Luther King, former U. S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark and U. S. Senator Carl Levin of Michigan, the meeting provided a great energy boost to the Coalition. Mrs. King said to those attending:

"Forgiving violence does not mean condoning violence. There are only two alternatives to forgiving violence: revenge or adopting an attitude of never-ending bitterness and anger. For too long we have treated violence with violence and that's why it never seems to end."

As Hugo Bedau told the conference, it was the first such gathering held in the 20th century.

The executive committee decided to search for staff and an office, despite having only about \$5,000 in the treasury. At the fall 1982 annual meeting in Atlanta,

Suzanne Badoux of the Pennsylvania ACLU was elected the new chairperson and Bob Gross, volunteer coordinator



of the Church of the Brethren criminal justice project, was interviewed for the new position of director.

Office space was donated by the American Friends Service Committee in its Philadelphia headquarters. In May 1983 Bob and Rachel Gross moved from Indiana, having made a commitment to stay for one to two years to help the Coalition get off the ground. With two small daughters at home, they shared the position, with Rachel in the office one or two days each week.

Early November saw the Coalition's treasury drop to \$1,804.32. More than 50 abolitionists from 18 states registered for the Coalition's December annual meeting in Chicago. University of Chicago Professor Hans Zeisel was among the distinguished panelists and the keynote speech was delivered by abolitionist David Clarke, president of the Washington, D.C. City Council. He explained:

"Retribution per se is not what concerns the average politician the most. That is a theory of death penalty apologists. What concerns politicians more is the maintenance of the public order and the perception of the public's order. To the extent that retribution is seen as the restoration of public order, it is pursued."

Spreading the Word

As the 1980s continued the NCADP became a corporation. State groups were formally accepted as members and were represented at ever-larger annual conferences. Providing resources for state-level work became a priority and the Coalition started issuing its *Execution Alerts* to warn of impending executions. It also published the *Abolitionist Directory*, listing contact information for all the abolitionist groups; the *Death Penalty Exchange*, an idea-sharing newsletter for activists and *Organizing Against the Death Penalty*, a resource book with articles on everything from fund raising to demonstration planning to coalition building.

A major development was the Coalition's production of *Lifelines*, which quickly became the newspaper of the death penalty abolition movement.

Beginning in 1985, two or three regional conferences were held each year. Strategy and planning sessions, often centered around the visionary energy of NCADP board member Jonathan Gradess of New York, produced not only ambitious plans but also new confidence to carry

them out. The National Clearinghouse on Death Penalty Legislation, the "STOP IT!" campaign and "Not in Our Names" were a few of the initiatives during this period.

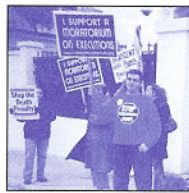
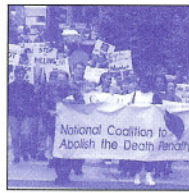
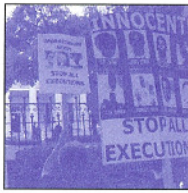
Early in 1985, when Bob and Rachel Gross moved back to Indiana, Timothy Cain of New Jersey became director of the Coalition and Bob continued as associate director on a part-time basis, establishing a field office for the NCADP in the Midwest. Howard Zehr of the Mennonite Church, who had succeeded Suzanne Badoux as NCADP chairperson, was photographed conferring with Pope John Paul II on the death penalty late in the year.

"[Capital Punishment] is a human rights violation, not just a matter of criminal justice."

Anna Hauptmann, widow of Richard Hauptmann, who was executed in 1936 for the kidnapping and murder of the son of America's great hero, Charles Lindbergh, attended the 1985 annual meeting in Philadelphia to plead her husband's innocence. She was accompanied by her attorney, Robert Bryan of San Francisco. In 1986 Jack Healey, executive director of Amnesty International, in an impassioned keynote speech told the annual meeting in New Orleans that capital punishment "is a human rights violation, not just a matter of criminal justice."

When ill health forced Tim Cain to resign in 1986, the Coalition phased out its office in Philadelphia and rented space in Washington, D.C. Leigh Dingerson came from the South Carolina coalition to become director. In 1987 the executive committee voted to change the Coalition's name to the "National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty," New Mexico Governor Toney Anaya keynoted the NCADP's 6th annual meeting in Washington, Bob Gross presented his ever-popular "Answering the Difficult Questions" workshop, Henry Schwarzschild was given the Abolitionist of the Year Award and Attorney Robert Bryan of San Francisco was elected chairperson to succeed Howard Zehr.

At the close of 1987 Leigh Dingerson announced that the 1987 Fastathon, organized by Chuck Culhane, a former death row inmate serving a life sentence in Sing Sing, and longtime abolitionist Doug Magee, had, with more than 100 fasters, raised over \$6,000. But executions in America were continuing and a headline in the May/June *Lifelines* read, "100 EXECUTIONS: DO YOU FEEL SAFE YET?"



Volunteers Make It Work

Much of the Coalition's work has been done by volunteers. Several full-time volunteers came through the Church of the Brethren Volunteer Service to work for a year or more and two of them, Pamela Rutter and Michelle Smith, were hired as permanent staff at the end of their volunteer terms. Pam served the Coalition with dedication, skill and imagination as program coordinator for several years. Highly important was the continuing work of Bob and Rachel Gross.

Gerri Traina joined the staff as development coordinator in 1991 and Ricardo Villolobos came on board later as organizing coordinator. Other staff, including key volunteer staff, from 1985 through 1994 included Lois Williamson, Jon Kreig, Susan Stephan, Keith Rutter, Maurice Morales, Pam Ayo Yetunde, Ellen Woods, Kurt Rosenberg, Joan and Kathy Ansheles, Jenna Hensley and of course, Henry Schwarzschild.

Many excellent volunteer board members have served the NCADP over the years, coming from national organizations, the religious community, state coalitions and student groups. While all deserve mention, there is room in this short history only to name the board chairpersons, most of who served for two to four years.

A New Idea Catches On

"Lighting the Torch of Conscience" was a joint project of the NCADP, Amnesty International and many religious groups, vigorously headed by Sister Helen Prejean, soon to become famous as the author of *Dead Man Walking*. Projecting a new model of education/action campaigns, its purpose was to activate the religious community against judicial killing. It began with a summit meeting at Atlanta in April 1989 at which Kerry Kennedy, daughter of U. S. Senator Robert Kennedy, who was eight years old when her father was murdered during his campaign for the presidency, addressed the gathering:

"I remember wondering what would happen to the guy who killed him," she said. "I didn't want him to die just because my father died. I didn't want any other family to have to go through what our family was going through. I didn't want to be part of that myself, and I don't want my government to be part of it either."

The campaign ended 12 months later with a "Pilgrimage for Life" march from Florida's death row in Starke to Georgia's death row and then finally to the Martin Luther King Center in Atlanta. Along the way there were opportunities for public speaking and organizing meetings in the communities through which the Pilgrimage passed.

This event sparked the imagination of abolitionists, and in 1991 Texans Against State Killing (TASK) held a similar march from Huntsville, site of Texas' death chamber, to the state capitol in Austin. Bill Pelke, a steel worker and member of Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation (MVFR), was a participant in the march and was inspired by its possibilities.

Bill spoke to Bob Gross, who had been part of the leadership in both the Pilgrimage for Life and the

"I didn't want any other family to have to go through what our family was going through."

TASK marches, and asked if Bob and the NCADP could help MVFR organize a similar event. The answer was "Yes" and in 1993, with the assistance of NCADP, MVFR led the first "Journey of Hope," which included 175 speaking events in 18 cities in Indiana and surrounding states. MVFR members have been key elements in the abolition movement, and the NCADP has helped their voices be heard.



Ways and Means

From 1983 to 1994, the growth of the Coalition could be measured in many ways. Some of the development in staff and program activity has been described above. Annual budgets grew from \$27,000 in 1984 to \$300,000 in 1994. Office space expanded from a donated room about the size of a prison cell to a couple of rooms in a church basement, then to a suite in the lower level of a bank building (banks don't have "basements") and finally to a set of offices in a prime D.C. location—above ground at last.

Through the middle years of the Coalition's existence, the person whose vision and skill moved the NCADP forward most was Leigh Dingerson, who served as director from 1987 until 1995. One veteran Southern abolitionist, when asked to comment on the young woman from South Carolina who had applied for the position, said of Leigh, "She's the best weapon we have against the death penalty." It proved to be true. The vision, wisdom, leadership, humor and hands-on organizing skill that Leigh brought to the Coalition were key to its rapid growth and success.

Some Outstanding Events

The year 1988 saw the successful continuation of the Coalition's Abolition Day project, picking March 1, the anniversary of Michigan's abolition of capital punishment for murder and lesser crimes in 1846, as the date for abolitionist events across the country. It was timed to coincide with the end of the 1988 Fastathon, which now included supporters from abroad.

The NCADP entered the electronic age by linking up to Peacenet for faster communication and sharing of information. Affiliates were urged to join.

At the 7th national conference in Dallas, special recognition was given Anna Hauptman for her 50-year

"It is fair to say, I think, that without significant resources of its own, the NCADP has contrived to become one of the Big Four in this field..."

struggle against the death penalty. Anna, who had just turned 90, told the gathering that her husband, Richard, did not kidnap and kill Charles Lindbergh's infant son in 1932 and should not have been sent to the electric chair by the State of New Jersey in 1936, the most famous execution in American history:

"I know he didn't do it," the frail woman said in a thick German accent. "He was with me all that evening. We didn't even know there was a kidnapping until the next day. When I go to bed at night, I say goodnight to my Richard. And I say 'God, I know you will be with me tomorrow and help me.'"

It is not too much to say that her nobility touched the hearts of everyone who heard her.

As the ninth decade of the century began, Leigh Dingerson recommended that information for the news media should concentrate on two themes: that the actual time served for murder and violent crime is much longer than the public thinks; and that the death penalty is being used as a political, not a criminal justice, tool in America.

At mid-year Henry Schwarzschild, on announcing his retirement from the ACLU staff after 26 years and from professional death-penalty abolitionism, told the Coalition:

"It is fair to say, I think, that without significant resources of its own, the NCADP has contrived to become one of the Big Four in this field (with the LDF, Amnesty, and the ACLU—no offense intended to other vitally important organizations)."

He added as a personal note:

"I first became actively involved in the anti-death penalty movement in the mid-50s, on the executive committee of the New York State Committee Against Capital Punishment (when Tony Amsterdam was still in law school...). I shan't disappear, perhaps not even from the NCADP. Don't forget that I am the chair of the nominating committee this year!"

At the November national conference in Washington, Hugo Bedau was elected chairperson to succeed Robert Bryan. By year-end 143 people had been executed in America since 1976.

A touch of gallows humor was added to the campaign in 1992 when the NCADP published an engagement calendar featuring political cartoons against the death penalty.



The following year's national conference in Pittsburgh featured Pulitzer Prize-winning author William Styron. Sister Helen Prejean was elected chairperson.

At the 1994 national conference in Little Rock, a special posthumous award was given Arkansas Governor Winthrop Rockefeller for his opposition to the death penalty, and the Coalition's third annual celebrity auction, again conducted by the dynamic Jonathan Graddess of New York, raised \$5,000 for the cause.

Toward the end of the year, Leigh Dingerson, who had married a short while before, announced that she would soon be resigning as director. Bob Gross, who, with his wife Rachel, had been the Coalition's first staffer, said he would be leaving the Coalition at the end of 1994.

"Stop Killing Kids!"

Leigh was succeeded in June 1995 by Steven W. Hawkins, a veteran attorney who had performed death penalty appellate work for the Legal Defense Fund. He was given the job title of "executive director."

At the August annual meeting in New Orleans, Marshall Dayan was elected Coalition chairperson. The NCADP faced the continuing challenges of raising the funds necessary to run the organization and finding opportunities to make progress when public support for the death penalty was approaching an all-time high.

The Coalition is the only single-issue institution devoted to [Capital Punishment].

The year 1996 marked the 20th anniversary of the Coalition's founding and the 150th anniversary of Michigan's abolition of the death penalty. Henry Schwarzschild, in his last message to his abolitionist friends before his death, wrote: "Congratulations Michigan! Keep up the good fight! Sooner or later the other states will join you."

The Coalition's annual meeting was once again held in Washington. The keynote speaker was Rubin "Hurricane" Carter, the former contender for the middleweight boxing championship, whose career had been cut short when he was falsely convicted of murder.

Finally, after almost 20 years in prison, he was exonerated and freed.

Having worked to save two juvenile murder defendants from the death penalty, the Coalition launched its "Stop Killing Kids!" campaign in 1997 at its annual conference in Houston. The campaign attracted considerable funding, broadened the Coalition's public appeal and helped bring young people into the NCADP family. (After several legislative successes, the juvenile death penalty in America was finally ruled unconstitutional by the United States Supreme Court in 2005.)

By year's end the Coalition had moved to new and better quarters and inaugurated its first web site, www.ncadp.org. Hilary Shelton was elected chairperson and it was reported that at least 31 of the 400 executions that had been carried out in America since 1976 had been bungled.

New Staff Members

Rachel King was chosen chairperson of the Coalition at its 1998 annual meeting in St. Louis. Among those who joined the staff were office manager Leona Martin, development coordinators Brian Henninger (now a board member), Monique Meadows and Jason Zanon; and grassroots organizers Jotaka Eaddy, Ben Jealous, Tonya McClary and Terrance Pitts. Eaddy, a youth activist and former NCADP board member, would leave a long-lasting influence on the Coalition through her commitment to organizing young people and communities of color.

In 1999 Rachel King announced that the Coalition had received two large foundation grants. It could now boast of having 121 affiliate organizations, of which 42 were national, 54 were state, 21 were religious and 4 were student groups.

The turn of the century saw things looking up at the NCADP and throughout the abolition movement. 2001 marked the first time in modern history that bills to abolish or reform the death penalty outnumbered bills to reinstate or expand it in state legislatures. The number of executions began to decline, public support for the death penalty began to dwindle and, perhaps most important, the number of death sentences dropped from a high of 300 a year in the late 1990s to just under 100 in 2005. This was in part



due to the commutation in Illinois of all death row inmates' death sentences based on the governor's deep concern about the fairness of the convictions.

The Coalition added a communications department for the first time in 2001, directed by a veteran newspaper reporter, David Elliot, who earlier in his career had exposed the flaws in the Texas death penalty system. That year the first Jesuit Corp volunteer joined the staff, and there has been one on the staff almost every year since. More than 400 abolitionists attended the annual meeting in Raleigh, North Carolina, despite travel problems created by the terrorist attack of September 11, and Brenda Lewis was elected chairperson.

The annual report for 2001 reported that 99 people had been released from death row on grounds of innocence since 1976. Early the following year Steve Hawkins reported that "Public support for the death penalty is at a record low, down nearly 20 percent from where it was in the mid-80s."

In March 2003 the Coalition published *Human Rights, Human Wrongs, Sentencing Children to Death*, a comprehensive and eloquent study of the subject written by staffer Sapna Mirchandani. She was a Soros Justice Postgraduate Fellow and attorney who was asked to lead the NCADP's campaign to end juvenile executions. It focused on helping educate the general public about the juvenile death penalty at the local and state level.

On August 11, 2003, Steve Hawkins announced that he was leaving the staff to take a new job. He reported that 111 people had been released from death row due to actual innocence and observed that today,

"The death penalty is under collateral attack from every direction. Federal judges are lambasting it, juries are refusing to assess it, state legislators are debating it, and a flurry of city councils and other elected bodies are passing resolutions against it."

After Hawkins left, the NCADP was capably led by two interim directors: Brian Roberts, who had started in 2002 as the Coalition's state legislative director and Jason Zanon, who continued on as development director.

A New Era Dawns

In September 2004 Diann Rust-Tierney, former head of the ACLU Capital Punishment Project and recipient of the NCADP's Abolitionist of the Year Award in 1995, became the Coalition's new executive director. She immediately engaged in a strategic planning process that has led the Coalition to where it is today.

During the year NCADP's Jotaka Eaddy flew to Geneva, Switzerland to lobby the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. Eaddy's work was an

"The death penalty is not a fringe issue. Countries around the world are concerned about the death penalty in the United States..."

extension of Hawkins' commitment to emphasizing the death penalty as an international human rights abuse, not just a domestic civil rights issue.

The commission is comprised of 53 member states that serve three-year terms. It meets for six weeks each year to debate resolutions aimed at reining in human rights violations. It voted 43-1 to defeat an effort to delete language criticizing the juvenile death penalty from a resolution dealing with juvenile justice. Eaddy reported that "The Vatican's permanent ambassador to the U.N. came up to me and said, 'you have stirred the pot—countries are now talking about the juvenile death penalty.'" She added:

"The death penalty is not a fringe issue. Countries around the world are concerned about the death penalty in the United States and are prepared to help us build the bridge in the United States toward abolition."

Bill Pelke was elected Coalition chairperson at the NCADP's 2004 annual meeting in Washington.

The heart of NCADP's work, now and in the future, is at the state level. The Coalition is working to strengthen its affiliate base through a series of skills-building programs. Some of these take place at the annual conferences. Others take place during a series of monthly NCADP-affiliate conference calls organized by the Coalition's staff.



Already under Rust-Tierney's short tenure, NCADP has been part of two major victories. In 2005 the Coalition helped New Yorkers Against the Death Penalty successfully organize and prevent the reinstatement of that penalty in their state. And in 2006 the NCADP helped New Jerseyans for Alternatives to the Death Penalty pass capital punishment moratorium legislation—a step toward hopefully abolishing the death penalty there in the next two years. "The lessons of New Jersey and New York are that consistent public education and organizing can overcome the old 'politics as usual' on the death penalty," Rust-Tierney stated. She concluded:

"Momentum is on our side. The question of capital punishment as an instrument of public policy is under scrutiny as never before. Death sentences have declined sharply. The number of wrongfully convicted individuals released from death row continues to increase. We are honored to have one exoneree on the NCADP board, Juan Melendez, free after spending 17 years on death row for a crime that he did not commit."

"We will be seeking common ground with law enforcement, victims' family members, religious progressives and conservatives who are committed to fairness, to carefully build the base of understanding that the death penalty is not working and is not worth the trouble...we must raise the tent high enough and wide enough to include every single person who wants to see the end of this system of capital punishment."

This history of the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty can report only some of the highlights of the past 30 years, and mentions only a few of the many death penalty abolitionists who are worthy of applause.

The Coalition remains as it began: the only fully staffed national organization devoted exclusively to eliminating the death penalty in America. Its outreach to its affiliates, and its faith in the abolitionist community, was expressed a century ago by an American presidential candidate who said, "The humblest citizen in all the land, when clad in the armour of a righteous cause, is stronger than all the hosts of error." All they have to do is get organized.

"The humblest citizen in all the land, when clad in the armour of a righteous cause, is stronger than all the hosts of error."

"Momentum is on our side. The question of capital punishment as an instrument of public policy is under scrutiny as never before. Death sentences have declined sharply. The number of wrongfully convicted individuals released from death row continues to increase."



Copyright 2006 by Eugene G. Wanger, co-chair of the Michigan Committee Against Capital Punishment since 1972 and past member of the NCADP's executive committee. He has attended all of the annual meetings of the Coalition, is the author of Michigan's constitutional prohibition of the death penalty and in 2005 was given the Champion of Justice Award by the State Bar of Michigan, primarily for his work against the death penalty.