

# REPORT FROM DEATH ROW: an Exclusive Interview with Jesse Morrison, anti-death penalty activist and death row prisoner

Jesse Morrison is the co-founder of Project Hope to Abolish the Death Penalty, an organization made up, and run by, death row prisoners and supporters around the country. Project Hope aims to educate people about the death penalty, and its literature addresses the fact that the death penalty discriminates against the poor and minorities and kills innocent people.

Although many people think death row prisoners may be the first to be against the death penalty, convincing a prisoner to stand up and oppose the death penalty is not easy. Project Hope works from the inside, and Jesse is unflinching in explaining the importance of helping prisoners organize independently of the prison administration to develop a direction in their lives.

He spoke to us from the William Donaldson Correctional Center in Bessemer, Alabama. We conducted the interview by phone, from the home of a mutual friend. Death row prisoners, at least at this prison, can receive no calls but may make 15 minute calls to a handful of people from a list of relatives and close friends.

It was the first time I have talked to a person in prison; the only difference from a regular collect call was that every few minutes, a recorded voice reminded you that you were speaking to a prisoner. Our conversation ran over an hour, and I can only imagine how annoying that recorded voice becomes, for someone in prison as long as many of the prisoners have been.

Jesse himself will have been on death row for 18 years this September. At the William Donaldson prison there is no library, and Jesse spends 23 hours of the day in his cell. When you talk with Jesse, you can tell he is self-educated man who is completely devoted to the struggle for social justice, a struggle which will continue long past the end of the death penalty.

—Heather Erb •

by Raphael Kamber & Heather Erb

What has been your experience on death row?

It's kind of difficult to describe my experience here. A lot of people would think it's a bad experience but with me I think it's a good experience, in the sense that it increased my awareness of the social problems of society today. I have often said to people that if I could get parole tomorrow, I'd rather have come to death row than not have come.

I think how Project Hope started was with the experience I had with another inmate here. We had a situation where his claim was he was mentally ill, which I think he was. The officers and state employees wanted to write a legal affidavit to say the inmate was not mentally ill. I took offense because to claim in court he was mentally ill, you need a competent psychiatrist, and they had unqualified people in court.

Right around the time of execution for the guy [Michael Linsey 1989] we got together and wrote petitions to the Alabama courts. He was executed a few days later. Out of that I felt it was time to get involved. That really frightened a lot of inmates.

We [death row prisoners] depend too much on the establishment to argue our point. We had to establish things for ourselves and become our own media source. We had outside contacts, and tried to distribute information among our friends. That was the original initiative.

We started in June, 1989 with Wallace Thomas, Johnny Harris and myself as a committee with the intent of getting other people involved.

If I was to argue with someone who was for the death penalty, do you have any advice on how to sway them?

I don't have a general way of dealing with people. I think a lot of times we talk about the issues surrounding the death penalty, like racism. Today a lot of people have feelings about the death penalty that makes it difficult to change their position.

What is the organization of prisoners like that are involved in

Project Hope?

You have quite a few guys involved in Alabama, I'm working on that here. We tried to get death rows across the country involved. The feedback was negative but it's because of the structure of death row. We were lucky that we had officers and prison administration that were willing to allow us to start the program. Here wardens get to know the families of death row prisoners and unspoken relationships develop. At other prisons it's much more difficult.

I had a vision of what to do and where to go but I think most inmates are in a state of denial about where they are. They don't think they can do anything to help themselves, and I think that's been one of the extraordinary things about getting Project Hope started from an inmate's point of view.

I feel very strongly about standing up and opposing the death penalty and I feel inmates have a responsibility to themselves to go up against the anger and mean-spiritedness of people out there. That's one good thing I got to a lot of inmates that helped Project Hope do so good. When you come to prison, it's like

your voice is taken from you, and choices are made for you. Most prisoners accept that. I want them to make an attempt to get control in their lives and make decisions for themselves. I appreciate that the administration allows us to have this program but I make it clear that they have no say whatsoever in the decision making process of the organization. At other prisons you can't do that.

What will it take to get rid of the death penalty today?

To say that one single thing or effort would be difficult. I do feel we have to come to understand the existence of the death penalty, the penal system, and the court system itself. Why do these things exist? Just to be opposed to these things gets us nowhere. You have to understand the economic system today and how that fits into it.

How important do you think the economic system is?

law enforcement related. As we began to lose industry, we made up some of the loss at the same time. The prison population increased and a lot of jobs were replaced with state correction jobs. The economic system ties into how we began to use prison correction jobs to replace some jobs and we need to really look and try to understand that.

A lot of people I corresponded with over the years have told me that various mayors/city councilors have discussed trying to get more construction of county/state prisons to revitalize the community as more jobs are lost. From the 1980's, I see the prison population increasing.

We have to tie the death penalty into all the country's social problems. Without understanding the issues we are lost in trying to address the problem.

What do you think the roots of crime are?

You have to look at a number of things. For one, I think as we moved away from the industrial age into a technological age, we did so without a real sense of direction, a sense of a true understanding of the elapse between one entity to another. I think in moving, a lot of people got left behind education-wise, and in terms of job training. A lot of minorities got left out, now the problem is how to address that.

Do you think that economic class has anything to do with it?

Of course, I'm not sure that it's an evil plan drawn out, but that is the result. It happens. That's what prisons and death rows are made up of.

Have you encountered any racism on death row?

Not outwardly, but you have to understand in today's world, we are confronted with a lot of institutionalized racism. People don't even realize it. I'm trying to raise myself above sexism. We discuss it with each other, and I have to catch myself. I never thought of it in that way. White guys don't even realize it.

Why do you think so many poli-

ticians support the death penalty?

I think it's been an attitude, a mindset created that creates an easy ticket. All you have to do is say you're tough on crime and people listen. We created an atmosphere that politicians play into. Many people might not even believe in the death penalty but see where it can get them.

We have to understand what is going on out there. We unintentionally don't have a real sense of what to do with crime. It's easy to see the harsh view of it. Citizens should be concerned and afraid. A lot of crime goes on out there, but without a real sense of what to do with the problem, the idea grew. Even now, I watch TV and I see clearly how it would be easy to perpetrate fear. I even have to think, do I really want to go back out there.

A lot of shows on TV are really violent. Do you think that TV perpetuates fear and violence?

Yes, I think it does. We get a lot of ideas from what we see. With myself, I have a rather strict mother who fought very hard for her kids to grow up and do well; however, all the trappings in the city did a better job. In the Wisconsin school system, the school system is looking at teaching non-violence in schools, and that's one of the best plans I have heard in a long time. I don't think we teach

non-violence; it should be a part of the curriculum. We also should look at the violent nature of a lot of our heroes.

Do you get your ideas in your cell?

For me, Project Hope and prison issues in general take up 90% of my waking hours. This is not just an inmates complaint from me, this is

what I want to devote to my life. I think about this constantly. I understand the need to be involved, it's what I enjoy doing. 23 hours to be in my cell gives me a lot of solitude to think more about the issues. It was always a part of me growing up to be politically aware, but not involved.

I've been kept abreast of the activities of your group [Campaign to End the Death Penalty] and am totally impressed with the student enthusiasm. A lot of people talk about the issues, but it's about organizing, developing a direction and a goal. What needs to be done is to get people more involved in this abolition movement. For 15 years, I have sat and watched, and I feel that the key people who should be involved are not involved. I really want to see more visible functioning involvement. Just to sit on a panel on TV won't give us reform. We need to focus on a true grass roots movement. That has been the intent of Project Hope. I can truly say that yours is the one group that I was impressed with that shared the same views. I deal with a lot of people with political views, but there is no commitment to struggle.

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