

March 26, 2015

Dear Members of the Pennsylvania House Judiciary Committee,

We were told that we would not be allowed to give testimony at the public hearing scheduled for [today](#), Thursday, March 26, 2015 because our daughter's murderer is not on death row, even though she was killed in Philadelphia.

We respectfully submit the following piece that was written for the [Philadelphia Daily News](#) on March 9, 2015 in place of giving testimony.

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We know the pain of losing a child to a brutal and senseless murder. In 1998, our amazing 23-year-old daughter, Shannon, was raped and murdered in Philadelphia. Shannon was a student at the Wharton School and she had her whole future ahead of her. Now, we can only imagine what kind of woman she might have become.

After our daughter's death, my husband and I experienced grief, depression, anger and confusion. We didn't know how we'd ever recover from our loss. We knew that the idea of "closure" was a myth, because you never "get over" the death of your child.

As we struggled to make sense of a seemingly senseless tragedy, our Catholic faith did eventually help us find healing and acceptance. It also informed our belief that while we desperately wanted Shannon's killer to be held accountable for his crimes, we did not want the man who murdered our daughter to be put to death.

Shannon's murderer, Troy Graves, was known as the "Center City Rapist." Graves was ultimately charged with 12 sexual assaults in Pennsylvania and Colorado, in addition to the murder of our daughter.

When we told the district attorney that we did not want to see our daughter's killer executed and instead preferred a sentence of life in prison without the possibility of parole, our position was publicly questioned. The comments were unnecessarily stinging and hurtful as we grieved for our daughter.

Our family's preference for a sentence of life in prison without parole over the death penalty is rooted firmly in our religious beliefs, but those beliefs are strengthened by the knowledge that the death penalty is a charade and a hollow promise to victims.

More than 300 people have been sentenced to death in Pennsylvania since 1974, but only three have been executed, and those three individuals voluntarily gave up their appeals. The reality is that the vast majority of the men and women who are currently on death row in this state will never be executed. They will die in prison of old age, sickness or suicide.

The death penalty traps victims' families in a decades-long cycle of uncertainty, legal hearings and waiting. In contrast, a sentence of life without parole is a swift and certain punishment that begins immediately and avoids the delays and media circus that come with a death sentence.

A life-without-parole sentence also allows the victims' families to move on and begin the healing process, secure in the knowledge that the offender will die in prison, rather than forcing them to endure years of waiting for an execution that will probably never come.

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endure years of waiting for an execution that will probably never come.

The death penalty is not needed for justice, nor is it needed to keep the public safe when we have the option of permanent imprisonment. It's also appallingly expensive. Many people don't realize that because of the constitutionally mandated appeals and required safeguards, the death penalty ends up being far more expensive than life imprisonment. By replacing the death penalty with life without parole, we could free up millions of dollars that could be redirected to programs that could actually improve public safety, such as the testing of backlogged rape kits, improvements to crime labs and more funding for cold-case investigation units.

Shannon's killer attacked four women in the year before he killed her. If the evidence from those crimes had been processed faster, and those crimes had been solved sooner, our daughter might still be here today. Over the last few years, the unsolved homicide rate in Philadelphia has fluctuated between 20 and 40 percent.

Funds saved by getting rid of the death penalty also could be used to compensate victims' families for lost income, provide grief counseling and offer other much-needed services - all of which will help victims' families far more than the promise of an execution one day.

We are grateful that Gov. Wolf had the wherewithal and common sense to halt executions in Pennsylvania until concerns about its fairness and accuracy are addressed. Vicki is part of the bipartisan study commission that is taking a closer look at the death penalty and will be providing recommendations to the legislature and the governor. We are both hopeful that these recommendations will ultimately stimulate an important public debate about the value of the death penalty, and are confident that as the the public learns more about this issue it will realize that the death penalty doesn't serve victims and it isn't needed for justice.

Thank you for considering our perspective on capital punishment.

Sincerely,  
Vicki & Syl Schieber