

Don't Kill My Killer

By George M. Anderson

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'I couldn't find anyone else to go—it was too close to Christmas.' But the matter was urgent: a death row prisoner was to be executed in two weeks, and he was asking for spiritual guidance. So Camille D'Arienzo, a Sister of Mercy from Brooklyn, made the journey with a priest friend to a federal prison in Pennsylvania to speak with a man facing imminent death by lethal injection.

That trip in 1998 stemmed from the "Declaration of Life" that serves as the guiding principle of the Cherish Life Circle that Sister D'Arienzo founded. The declaration reads: "I hereby declare that should I die as a result of violent crime, I request that the person or persons found guilty for my killing not be subject to...the death penalty under any circumstances, no matter how heinous their crime or how much I have suffered." The condemned man whom she visited—David Paul Hammer—is still alive, saved initially by an appeals process that Sister D'Arienzo had hoped might eventually lead to the commutation of his sentence to life without parole. As of press time, however, he had dropped his appeal.

In a conversation at America House, Sister D'Arienzo explained how the Cherish Life Circle, dedicated to the abolition of capital punishment, first began. Now in its tenth year, it originated in a group of religious and lay people who had been meeting periodically to consider some of the pressing concerns of the 1980's and 90's. They had studied the U.S. bishops' pastoral letter on peace and discussed other issues, such as the wars in El Salvador and the Persian Gulf. But the event that really galvanized them was the pledge made by the Republican George Pataki in 1994, that if elected governor of New York, he would restore the death penalty. "We asked ourselves," says Sister D'Arienzo, "Can we remain silent in the face of widespread public support for capital punishment?" The answer was clear. In an effort to capture the public's attention, the Cherish Life Circle then

adopted the "Declaration of Life," originally composed by a former Maryknoll priest. Printed on wallet-sized cards and signed by the bearer, it is carried by Sister D'Arienzo and now by many others.

Please be advised that I have signed the **DECLARATION OF LIFE**.

Therefore, I hereby declare that should I die as a result of a violent crime, I request that the person or persons found guilty for my killing not be subject to or put in jeopardy of the death penalty under any circumstances, no matter how heinous their crime or how much I have suffered.



Signature: _____ Date: _____

After Governor Pataki defeated New York's former governor, Mario Cuomo—a strong opponent of capital punishment—Sister D'Arienzo asked Mr. Cuomo to sign the "Declaration of Life," and he did. When the death penalty came up while he was being interviewed by a reporter from *The Boston Globe*, recalls Sister D'Arienzo, "he urged the reporter to 'go see this nun in Brooklyn.'" The result was a front-page story on the Cherish Life Circle in *The Globe* and a further flurry of national media coverage. An Oklahoma relative of Mr. Hammer sent him a clipping about the Cherish Life Circle and the "Declaration of Life." That in turn led Mr. Hammer to contact her, in a letter that began simply, "Dear Cherish Life Circle."

Today, with Attorney General John Ashcroft pressuring federal prosecutors to seek the death penalty in more and more cases—even when the prosecutors themselves are reluctant to do so—the task of the Cherish Life Circle and other groups opposed to capital punishment has become more urgent than ever. The dozen members of the circle express their anti-death penalty views in various ways, such as accepting invitations to speak at public forums and arranging for such gatherings. Several years ago, for example, they brought together 500 students from four local high schools for an address by Helen Prejean, C.S.J., author of *Dead Man Walking*. The group's position is also mirrored in a series of one-minute reflections on the death penalty that Sister D'Arienzo presented on a local New York City radio station. These have now been collected in CD format as an audiobook, *New York Minutes*:

Commentaries on Life and Faith, released in 2003 (available through Sister D'Arienzo, camilledrsm@aol.com).

She continues to make quarterly visits to Mr. Hammer, who until recently was at a federal prison in Terre Haute, Ind. The visits there have been supplemented by visits from another sister from a nearby community of the Sisters of Providence. Visits are never easy. "It's an ugly place," says Sister D'Arienzo, "sprawling and treeless, with high barbed wire all around it." The separation of the condemned prisoners is rigidly maintained: "Even when they go to Mass, they are held in separate cages, not in the same physical space."

It was while he was on on death row in Terre Haute in the fall of 2000, that David Hammer was received into the Catholic Church by Archbishop Daniel Buechlein, O.S.B., of Indianapolis, who administered Communion and confirmation to him and to another death row prisoner. At no time were those present allowed to be together as a group, and the archbishop had to anoint the prisoners through the food slots in the cell doors. But the happiness of the group could not be dampened. "Seeing the incredible joy in the eyes of David is something I'll never forget," says Sister D'Arienzo.

Sister D'Arienzo has encouraged Mr. Hammer to use his considerable gifts as an artist to create a set of greeting cards. The proceeds from their sale help fund several programs that serve at-risk youth, including a residential school and social service program in Kingston, Jamaica, run by the Sisters of Mercy. David Hammer knows from his own experience, she says, about the problematic future such youngsters can face without help: first incarcerated at 19, he has spent more than half of his 45 years of life behind bars. And yet it is there that he has continued to develop his gifts. He has written two books, one of them about Timothy McVeigh, who occupied the next cell at Terre Haute. The most recent change in his situation was his move to the federal prison in Lewisburg, Pa., for a hearing in early 2004. "Although David had prepared his appeal for life without parole," she says, "he asked for an execution date. We who counsel him," she adds, "are heartbroken—although

a desire for freedom from endless incarceration and all its attendant indignities is understandable."

While extending its hand to death row inmates and advocating against capital punishment, the circle has not neglected to provide support for the families and friends of murder victims. This support includes a yearly interfaith service for them. At the most recent one, at the Convent of Mercy in Brooklyn, more than 100 adults and children whose loved ones had been murdered gathered to share their thoughts and to pray together. Several spoke spontaneously of their struggle to come to terms with their losses—of husband, child, nephew or boyfriend. The congregation sang hymns, listened to a Scripture reading (about the raising of Lazarus) and heard a homily given by the Haitian pastor of a local Brooklyn church. From their places in the convent chapel's sanctuary, each who had suffered a loss read the name of the loved one and lighted a candle, which was then used to light the candles of others in the chapel.

In that late afternoon setting, as darkness fell outside, the flickering candles created an ambiance of soothing light. They reflected the hope of healing for which all in the chapel longed—and the possibility of forgiveness for those who had caused their anguish. Then the people in the pews raised their free hands in blessing toward those in the sanctuary, as if to proclaim by this gesture: "We are with you!"

George M. Anderson, S.J., is an associate editor of *America*.

The Cherish Life Circle of Friends offers a wallet card attesting to the conviction recorded in the document in exchange for the signer's Name, Address, and a self-addressed, stamped envelope. A dollar is also requested to cover costs for each recipient. To receive this card or to learn more about the Cherish Life Circle please write to:

Cherish Life Circle
Sisters of Mercy
72-25 68th Street,
Glendale, NY 11385-7216

See also: www.signers.org/ to Sign the Declaration of Life