

Exonerated Death Row Inmate Speaks

Written by Westside ID370

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Shujaa Graham, an exonerated death row inmate, called the death penalty discriminatory against America's minorities and poor when he spoke to a group of students in ICC Tuesday night.

In an effort to raise awareness and gain support for the abolition of the death penalty during Death Penalty Awareness Week, Graham was joined by Mike Stark, regional director of the Campaign to End the Death Penalty, and Gwendolyn Bates, the sister of a current death row inmate in Maryland.

"I stand here wounded by the blows of the death penalty of racism, trying to end this awful reality," Graham said.

After being imprisoned for a robbery charge in 1969 when he was 19 years old, Graham became involved in the Black Panther Party. He said that because of his political activism, the justice system "tried to assassinate our voices."

"What I stood for and what I fought for, I would die a million times for," Graham said.

After a conflict broke out between inmates and prison guards at the Soledad Prison in the early 1970s, many outspoken prisoners, including Graham, were implicated in a series of legal cases.

In a racially-charged trial in 1973, Graham was convicted of killing a prison guard and sentenced to death.

Graham spent four years on death row but was later exonerated because it was discovered that African Americans had been systematically removed from his jury.

Bates echoed Graham's sentiments of inequality in the justice system.

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“Poor people don’t have money, so they get inexperienced public defenders,” Bates said. Such was the case with her brother, Vernon Evans, she claimed.

“I need for you to understand that my brother is innocent of shooting two people,” Bates said. “How do I know that? Because of the evidence.”

Evans was convicted of killing two people at the request of Anthony Grandison, who allegedly hired Evans to kill two federal witnesses scheduled to testify against Grandison in a drug trial in 1984.

Bates said that Evans was convicted based on circumstantial evidence given by his girlfriend.

In a request to save her brother’s life, Bates asked students to write letters to congressmen and the White House. After 20 years on death row, Evans faces execution this year because he has exhausted all his appeals.

“They have killed innocent people and it must stop,” Bates said. “It could be your brother, your dad. We need help. We need voices to say ‘this is wrong.’ To kill people is wrong.”

Stark called the death penalty “one of the crucial social issues of today,” and said he was concerned that the issue has been dropped from public debate.

“This gives the appearance that there is no problem,” Stark said. “For every eight executions, one person is exonerated from death row.”

Stark also criticized President Bush’s handling of the death penalty when he was governor of Texas.

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“One hundred fifty-two people were killed under George Bush, and these people are far from the Ted Bundys of the world,” Stark said. He claimed that Bush would systematically sign off on executions based on a summary given to him from the prosecution.

Stark added that compared to the costs of prison, execution is more expensive due to all of the appeals that suspect will file in order to avoid execution.

This event was sponsored by The Campaign to End the Death Penalty. ([Source](#))