

Murder of Stanley Tookie Williams Anti-Death Penalty

Written by CC Campbell-Rock ID2326
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Far from the shores of the U.S. and a little more than a month after his execution at the hands of the state of California, the life and contributions of Stanley Tookie Williams fueled a discussion about the death penalty at a workshop held as part of the World Social Forum in Caracas, Venezuela.

The panel of experts, Barbara Becnel, the executive director of Neighborhood House in Richmond, California, a close friend of Williams and consultant on the film about his life, "Redemption," Alice Kim, national coordinator of the Campaign to End the Death Penalty, Loretta Capeheart, Ph.D., assistant professor of criminal justice at Northeastern Illinois University, and Héctor Reyes, co-editor of *Obrero Socialista*, shocked participants with statistics that caused many to wonder what is wrong with those in charge of the penal system in America.

Kim told the group assembled in a small classroom at the Universidad Central de Venezuela that in 2006, 30 years after the reinstatement of the death penalty in the United States: "The Campaign to End the Death Penalty is launching a new campaign called '30 Years is Enough.' Since the death penalty has been reinstated, 1,000 men and women have been executed, but only 126 people have been freed (from death rows) across America. It is an indictment of our criminal justice system that innocent people have probably been executed."

In 1996, the Supreme Court found proof that a death row inmate named Herrera was innocent, but he was executed anyway, Kim explained, because his lawyer missed a filing deadline. Kim took umbrage at U.S. Supreme Court Justice John Roberts's response to a reporter's question, "Do you allow the execution of an innocent person if there is a question about his or her guilt?" Roberts said the question is: "Will you allow someone to challenge a sentence six or seven times?"

When asked if the death penalty could lead to the execution of an innocent person, Kim quoted Justice Antonin Scalia as saying, "Of course it will. That's the risk inherent in having the death penalty."

"If the innocent don't matter, who does?" Kim asked.

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Today, more than half of the people in America's prisons on death row are either Black or Latino, and 2 million are in prison.

Kim told the audience: "In 1980, there was an explicit agenda by politicians to house African Americans and Latinos in prison. They created the 'three strikes you're out' rule, where you can go to prison for stealing a slice of pizza."

The coordinator said Chicago prosecutors in the 1980s were so racist that they played a game called, "Nigger by the Pound." They would weigh each person they got a conviction on, and the prosecutor who scored a total of 4,000 pounds first won the game.

"When pressed about the game, a Cook County judge admitted the title of the game was offensive but the game was just 'gallows humor,'" Kim explained, adding that at the same time, white police officers were torturing African-American men. One officer named John Birch, a Vietnam veteran, used a makeshift black box to electrocute African American men.

"He would attach electrodes to their ears, testicles and elbows. He suffocated them, held one to a radiator, beat them, played Russian Roulette with them. It wasn't until the community organized that John Birch got fired. But he was involved in 12 cases of men who landed on death row," she continued.

Former President Clinton left the campaign trail to preside over the execution of Ricky Ray Radnor, Kim added.

However, not all Americans support this type of injustice, Kim affirmed, adding, "Beginning in 2000, Gov. Ryan enacted the first moratorium on the death penalty in Chicago. He commuted the sentences of 167 death row inmates and pardoned four others. In Illinois, we learned an important lesson. If we organize, we can defeat the death penalty."

"In December, we lost a fighter from death row – Stan Tookie Williams. Stan's legacy is that he rejuvenated the campaign to end the death penalty like we haven't seen in a decade."

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“On Dec. 13, 2005, the state of California killed and murdered Stanley Tookie Williams. A politician asked me not to use those words, but I will always call it what it was – murder,” said Barbara Becnel.

“Before they killed him, they enacted one last act of cruel and unusual punishment. They pretended they couldn’t find the vein and caused him to writhe in pain. This went on for 25 minutes,” said Becnel, who witnessed Williams’ execution along with four others. “And it took 10 minutes to kill him. A reporter called me the next day and said she had never seen such a barbaric scene.”

Becnel said that she and the other witnesses were told that they would be kicked out if they spoke out or sobbed too loudly. “Once he was dead and we were waiting to leave, I whispered to another friend, ‘Let’s say the State of California just killed an innocent man.’ When we got to the last step, we shouted it out.”

Williams’ friend of 13 years said the warden used “racist and brutal” tactics to kill Tookie Williams. “They moved him to a part of town where only 1 percent of the population was African-American. There were three Black jurors selected, but they kicked all three off,” she continued.

Becnel said the prosecutor used racist language to describe Stanley Tookie Williams. “He told jurors that they should consider themselves visiting the San Francisco Zoo when they visited Stanley Tookie Williams. He called him an animal. He went on to say that South Central L.A. is comparable to the natural habitat of wild animals in the jungle.”

She said that Stanley Tookie Williams was framed by witnesses who said Williams volunteered a confession to them. “All charges were dropped against them,” Becnel added.

Prior to Williams’ execution, Becnel paid a private investigator to gather evidence in support of his innocence. “People in jail have come forward and started giving affidavits. Arnold Schwarzenegger didn’t care that we had started the process of getting evidence. He killed him anyway.”

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Becnel said the investigator's report will prove Williams' innocence. And she is determined that his death not be in vain.

"We will make a proposal to the World Social Forum for support in declaring Dec. 13, 2006, the first International Conference Against the Death Penalty."

Before playing a taped message from Williams, Becnel confirmed that in the last few hours he rejected everything from the state. "They wanted to give him a fine meal, a pill to calm his nerves and they wanted him to write his last words so that people who hated him could read it in the death penalty chamber."

Williams confirmed Becnel's testimony of his last hours, in a letter he gave her. He wrote that if he was indeed executed he wanted no last meal, no special religious person, no pills to calm his nerves and no warden to read his last words.

In the letter, Williams also forgave those who sent him to his death.

"Still my redemption allows me to understand those who want to end my life. Many of them are ignorant, and so I forgive them, for they know not what they do. I spent the last 13 years working to help youth, and that has brought me peace and happiness. My redemption and faith in God sustains me and continues to sustain me. My nine children's books, my memoir, 'Blue Rage, Black Redemption,' sustain me. I am no longer a man of war. I die a man of peace."

Then Williams' calm, clear voice came through the audio recording.

"I have been on San Quentin's death row for 24 years. On Easter Sunday 2004, a two-hour movie aired about my life, "Redemption." I helped created the first youth gang in L.A. 34 years ago. My detractors argued that I did not apologize. I will never apologize for capital crimes I did not commit, not even to save my life. And I did not commit the crimes for which I was convicted and remain on death row.

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“In 1988, redemption was an alien concept to me, but I embarked on an additional path toward redemption.”

Becnel said Williams’ own attorneys tried to get him to confess to the crimes. “Then they tried to get me to convince him to do it. I wouldn’t and he wouldn’t – and he’s dead. And Arnold Schwarzenegger used that against him to justify his execution. But Stan proved that the most wretched of our society can be redeemed.”

Not even a month had passed by after Stanley Tookie Williams’ execution that a blind, crippled, Native American was killed. “There are two sides in America regarding the death penalty: the pro-death racists and supporters of the campaign to end the death penalty,” Kim concluded.

When the floor was opened for questions, a young social worker, Charlene Smythe from Bayview Hunters Point, said: “Black and brown men from my neighborhood, who are often unemployed, are stopped, beaten, picked up and brought to the police station. Here in Venezuela you’re proud of your national color – red. But in my neighborhood, young men can be picked up for wearing the wrong color. Red, blue and black are gang-related colors.

“America is the biggest violator of human rights in the world. The police in our country think they have a right to beat and torture without question. They can make up crimes and charge you with them, whether you did it or not. When you go to the police to file a complaint, you never hear back from them. This is the same police department that got caught making a video with insulting comments about Blacks, gays, Latinos and others,” she said.

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