

North Carolina needs to rethink the death penalty

STEPHEN DEAR & DIANN RUST-TIERNEY

Recently, law enforcement officers, prosecutors, crime victims' advocates and both Republican and Democratic state legislators in New Jersey worked together to pass legislation to repeal that state's death penalty. Gov. Jon Corzine signed the bill into law last month, making New Jersey the first state to legislatively repeal the death penalty since Iowa and West Virginia did so back in 1965. Despite some significant reforms, death penalty systems in other states, such as North Carolina, remain awash in blunders, racial and class bias and runaway expenses, and are long overdue for systematic reviews by their legislatures. In New Jersey, a blue ribbon commission was appointed to thoroughly study the pros and cons of the state's death penalty and to recommend what measures could be taken to fix it. The commission was made up of victims' rights advocates, prosecutors and other law enforcement representatives, a retired state Supreme Court justice and many others. The study found the death penalty to be a deeply flawed public policy and, in the words of one state senator who in 1982 voted for reinstating the death penalty, it is a "false and ineffective choice for taxpayers

and residents who have lost loved ones. It has for too long been sustained by mythology and fiction, propped up by outdated rhetoric when courage and common sense would have served us better." The commission further found that the death penalty squanders millions in tax dollars, does not serve a legitimate purpose such as crime deterrence, delays healing for murder victims' loved ones and carries no guarantee against the execution of innocent people. Other states have begun to rethink our nation's four-century experiment with capital punishment. The record of North Carolina's death penalty is far worse than New Jersey's ever was. North Carolina, however, has never had a comprehensive evaluation of its death penalty system commissioned by the Legislature. How bad do things have to get before our leaders deal with them? Just this month, North Carolina declined to retry Jonathan Hoffman, a convicted murderer who had been granted a new trial. He was the state's sixth death row inmate to be exonerated. Hoffman, an African-American, was condemned to die by an all-white jury in Union County for killing a white jewelry store owner, Danny Cook. No physical evidence linked Hoffman to the crime. Hoffman's prosecutors, Ken Honeycutt and Scott Brewer, withheld in-

formation about deals they made with prosecution witnesses, what the N.C. State Bar has called egregious misconduct. Honeycutt is known for having awarded his staff lapel pins in the shape of a noose when he won death penalty cases. Last month, a judge ordered a new trial for another death row prisoner, Glen Chapman, saying in this Catawba County case that police withheld evidence and lost or destroyed documents, that Chapman received ineffective assistance of counsel and that one of the women Chapman is accused of killing was likely not murdered at all. Executions are on hold in North Carolina while courts decide whether the N.C. Medical Board can ban doctors from participating in executions and whether the Council of State improperly approved the state's lethal injection protocol. Much more needs to be considered. Since North Carolina reinstated the death penalty in 1977, more than 15,000 people have been murdered here. Based on past studies, taxpayers appear to have spent on the death penalty tens of millions more than they would have on life imprisonment without parole. For that, 388 people have been sentenced to death here; 180 of them were later removed from death row and 43 people have been executed.

The General Assembly should suspend executions until it can resolve myriad questions. To begin with: How were six innocent people, who collectively spent more than three decades on death row, sentenced to death in the first place? Are there any more innocents condemned to die and, if so, why? Why are the worst of the worst almost never found on death row? Is justice served by sentencing the severely mentally ill to die? How does our system allow people to be sentenced to death because of their race or the victims' race? Why does our system repeatedly allow prosecutors to win death cases by breaking laws and acting unethically? How many more millions of dollars are North Carolina taxpayers going to be asked to spend on Old South justice while these problems go unsolved? In New Jersey, regardless of initial views on capital punishment, a panel of experts and a bipartisan group of lawmakers faced up to these types of questions. The onus is on those who support North Carolina's death penalty to confront these questions with the same honesty, openness and courage.

Stephen Dear is executive director of People of Faith Against the Death Penalty. Diann Rust-Tierney is the executive director of the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty.

OBITUARIES

Tracy Teague Hackney

Tracy Teague Hackney, 71, of Carrboro died Tuesday, February 5th, 2008 at his home. Surviving are is wife Alice Lockamy Hackney, three children — Jessica Hackney Williams and husband Ricky, Camilla Hackney, Tracy T. Hackney, Jr. and wife Julie, grandchildren Bailey Hackney and Jacob Williams, and a sister Tril-lis Hackney Sparrow and husband Lindy. Friends and family are invited to celebrate Tracy's life at the Carrboro United Methodist Church Fellowship Hall on Saturday, February 9th at twelve noon. In lieu of flowers, donations to the Prayer Garden of Carrboro United Methodist Church are requested. Arrangements made by the Cremation Society of the Carolinas. Online condolences can be made at www.cremnc.com.

Martha Kathryn Smith

Martha Kathryn Smith, 90 died on Wednesday, January 30, 2008 at UNC Hospital, Chapel Hill. Mrs. Smith was a longtime resident of Carolina Meadows in Chapel Hill, NC. Kay was born March 24, 1917 in Hamilton, Ohio to Ida James and James Millspaugh. She was the loving and caring wife of Edwin James Smith, who preceded her in death, December, 2005. She was a member of Christ United Methodist Church in Chapel Hill and was an active community volunteer at Carolina Meadows up until her health began failing. She will be remembered as a friendly caring friend and mother. Surviving are son James Lawrence Smith and wife Nancy Crewdson Smith of Durham and grandchildren Betsy and Gregory Smith. Friends may visit the family at a memorial service on Saturday, February 9 at 11:00am at the Carolina Meadows auditorium. In lieu of flowers contributions may be directed to Christ United Methodist Church, Chapel Hill, NC or the Carolina Meadows Residents Fund. Arrangements are made by the Cremation Society of the Carolinas.

LETTERS

What's the fuss?

I'm a little surprised by the dust-up that has occurred because of Carrboro's taco wagons. They haven't come from out of nowhere. These sorts of food stands have been around forever. I don't know the specifics of Carrboro's licensing laws, but I feel certain that these people are paying payroll and sales taxes and that they have had to buy some sorts of business permits. As a chef in Orange County (I'm just across your eastern border), I have every confidence that our health department is as strict on them as they are on everyone else. True, they don't have hood fans and bathrooms, but they don't need them. They are take-out places, with tiny cooking appliances. The wagons themselves are clearly not as expensive as a building; but just as clearly, they are not cheap.

When you go to a taco wagon, you probably had no intention of going to a sit-down restaurant to begin with. You are in a hurry, you have a careful of children, you just realized that you'd better eat something quick after a night on the town. Ditto, if you are trying to economize, you don't go where you'll have to tip twenty percent and pay for a markup on drinks. You stop at the taco wagon and pick up a six pack on the way home. If people occasionally decide to patronize one of these wagons because of their novelty, fine. This area, in the last ten or so years, has become known as a serious food destination. We're always in some food or travel magazine. It seems to me that another interesting dining choice can only enhance this reputation to the advantage of us all.

—Bill Smith, Chapel Hill

HFCS: A ban worth getting excited over

REBEKAH L. COWELL

I was thrilled to read Weaver Street took a stance against high-fructose corn syrup! This January — new year, new resolutions, yadda, yadda — Weaver Street issued a newsletter stating that they would no longer carry any products that had HFCS in them — hip-hip-hooray for Weaver Street, right? Well, I certainly thought so. I mean, now instead of having to read labels and carefully comb the aisles, I can be assured everything I drop into my cart is HFCS FREE — meaning it takes some of the work out of my grocery shopping, which is a wonderful thing when I'm toting along a very busy toddler who does not appreciate my efforts on her behalf — nor all that label reading! I've been polling friends and neighbors and getting feedback from them on the radical new developments over at the Weave. Seems some folks don't appreciate the loss of Orangina

— in fact, one friend eschewed Weaver Street's ban as something akin to free speech, and book burnings, and, oh god, we don't need to go there! Most everyone didn't mind the removal of beets from the salad bar. I have a faint suspicion beets are not a make-it or break-it type of food.... I could be wrong.... So for everyone who wants to know why? Weaver Street has taken a stance against HFCS because they are committed to our community. You see, unlike white sugar, HFCS is digested differently when we consume it. High-fructose corn syrup is an additive that was put into use in the 1970s. It has now been discovered to go straight to your liver where it releases (get this!) an enzyme that instructs your body to store fat! The authorities on this research are now claiming it has aided the rise in obesity and type 2 diabetes. Bottom line, HFCS is an artificial additive that our bodies cannot properly break down and digest. Furthermore, HFCS is in more products than not. I challenge

you to go to Harris Teeter and randomly pick up groceries and read the labels — ketchup, pickles, crackers, cereals and so on. What Weaver Street has done for me and you as informed consumers is take the guesswork out of purchasing HCFS-free foods. Back in the 1980s, my mother herself was on an organic kick and would only use honey to sweeten our foods. I'm not proposing such extreme measures, and I certainly like to use my sugar for baking and (ahem) coffee. But I think this type of consciousness about the foods/ sugars we ingest is going to be vital for making our children's futures' healthy. Good for Weaver Street and, hey guys, you can get your Orangina over at Whole Foods!

Rebekah Cowell is a mother, writer and graduate of UNC who resides in North Chatham.

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