No need to kill:

Reflections of murder victims' family members.
The Kentucky Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty thanks the family members who have shared their stories in this publication. The Coalition asks readers to remember them and all those who have lost loved ones to murder.
People tend to think that the family members of a murder victim want revenge. The following stories tell us otherwise.
“If there is a creed we hang our hats on, it’s that God is in everyone. If you really do have that viewpoint, how can you kill somebody?”

– Ben Griffith

Ben Griffith, who lives in Frankfort, Ky., believes the death penalty violates his Christian faith and that it does nothing for the family members of murder victims.

He speaks from experience. The man convicted of killing his eldest brother was executed in 1997.

His brother, Chris, was killed by a gunman on Sept. 9, 1986. Chris Griffith, who was 38, worked as a physical therapist for the state of Missouri. He spent the morning of Sept. 9 doing his job, training state workers to safely lift and carry heavy objects. On the way home, he and a co-worker, who was a state inspector, made an unplanned stop at a shooting range that needed to be inspected.

“‘As they were getting out of the car, Chris’ co-worker was hit!’ and killed by a gunshot, said Ben, describing the scene. ‘And Chris started running. Chris was shot in the back about 20 yards away.’ His brother was shot twice more — once in the back and finally in the head. Two other shooting victims were found dead in another car.

“About a week later, they arrested a man named Donald Reese” who worked at a quarry nearby and knew none of the victims, Ben said. Chris’ parents, who raised their family as Quakers, were opposed to the death penalty from the beginning and told the judge they didn’t want Reese sentenced to death.

He was sentenced to life in prison without parole for Chris’ murder, but received a death sentence for the murder of Chris’ co-worker. Donald Reese was executed in August of 1997 — one month after Kentucky resumed executions, Ben noted. After the execution, Ben said, he felt empty.

“‘The way I tried to fill it up was to fight against the death penalty,’” he said. For Ben, the experience prompted a crisis of faith. “‘The murder really did make me examine my own pacifism’” as a Quaker, he said, noting that he felt a “‘murderous rage’ toward Reese. “‘Up to that point, I had in my head felt like a pacifist. But my heart wasn’t there.’”

It took about three years, he said, but ultimately he worked through his anger and let his faith guide him. “‘If there is a creed we hang our hats on, it’s that God is in everyone,’” he said. “‘If you follow that to its logical conclusion, you become a pacifist — the inward Christ. If you really do have that viewpoint, how can you kill somebody?’”

Ben said he never forgave Reese in person, “‘but I have forgiven him.’”
“The system really uses murder victims family members more than it serves them.”

– Ben Griffith

After 38-year-old Chris Griffith was murdered in 1986, his family became victims of a second assault — one that came from the justice system. His youngest brother, Ben Griffith, believes the system uses the families of murder victims.

Ben Griffith explained that his parents were opposed to a death sentence for the killer, Donald Reese. Reese was a stranger who murdered Chris and Chris’ co-worker in a random attack.

During the trial, “the prosecution team was their best friend,” said Ben. But during the sentencing phase, his parents asked the judge not to seek death. The next day, the prosecution team treated his parents “as their worst enemy,” he said.

“Prosecutors know the murder victims family members are some of their best ammunition. If they have victims, they are more likely to get the death penalty,” Ben said.

Reese was sentenced to life in prison without parole for Chris’ murder. But he received a death sentence in the murder of Chris’ co-worker. Reese was executed in 1997.

In the years leading up to the execution, Chris’ parents were forced to become involved over and over again in the appeals process.

“During the last years of Donald’s life, there were several attempts to have my mom and dad persuaded that Donald Reese’s son committed the murders,” Griffith said. “That made them upset. That was not their cause.” Ben believes the system used his parents — and uses the families of other murder victims — more than they serve them.

“If they were really trying to serve them, they’d be setting up restitution and mental health opportunities,” he said. “They’d be doing much more than trying to kill this person. I’m advocating taking the murder victim family members out of the argument for the death penalty.

“There are thousands of us morally and philosophically opposed to the death penalty. We recognize that there are many, maybe, that want the death penalty. But in the end, that justice is hollow.”

Ben said he sees secondary victims every time a new murder victim’s family appears on the news.

“I see lots of opportunities for us to help them,” he added. “I think there’s a way to serve families quicker if you have life without parole.”
“We must not let emotion cloud the truth.”

– Eugene Thompson

Watch Eugene discuss the death penalty on YouTube: http://bit.ly/15y2ipk

Charles Fitzgerald Thompson was killed in 1987 by repeated blunt force trauma. His death was relatively quick, but it would take 17 years for his family and friends to see any justice. That’s how long the capital case lingered in court.

“He was murdered by a serial killer here in Louisville,” said his son Eugene Thomas. “This person murdered four people and once he was captured … this (legal battle) went on for 17 years, back and forth to court. During that time I was very upset, to the point I could not sleep.”

Immediately after the murder, Thomas said, he wanted retribution. “I was bitter, angry to the point I was sick. This went on for about a year. I wanted to do something to the murderer.”

Those feelings came to an abrupt end when Thomas felt “evil surge through me” and “I said, This is not right, it’s not me. That’s not the type of person I am,” he explained.

Thomas was opposed to the death penalty, even “before it came knocking at my door,” he said. He saw the system as flawed — that it had the capacity for human error and could lead to the death of an innocent person. He also thought it ironic that the government would commit murder to punish a murderer.

His father’s murder didn’t change his views. Rather, the protracted battle in court affirmed his beliefs. He was especially affected by what the process did to the mother of the accused.

“I saw over those 17 years what it did to his family, particularly his mother,” Thomas said. “His father died during all the court stuff. His mother was emaciated, grappling with what had come of her son.”

Thomas believes that emotion holds too much sway when it comes to sentencing people convicted of murder. And he knows from experience that emotions can overwhelm the better judgment of victims’ families.

“I could have taken the wrong road,” he added. “We must not let emotion cloud the truth.”

Thomas said he made it clear to the Jefferson County Attorney’s Office, he didn’t want to seek the death penalty. Despite Thomas’ objections, his father’s murderer was sentenced to death. He died in prison before the execution.
“You cannot bring life back by taking away another life. It hurts a whole family”

– Kathryn Gaines

Watch Kathryn discuss the death penalty on YouTube: http://bit.ly/14kUuIl
Kathryn Gaines believes every life has value. She believes that killings of all kinds can be curbed if people — and the state of Kentucky — adopt that attitude, too.

Her eldest grandchild, 32-year-old Antoine Ellis, died of multiple gunshot wounds in the 200 block of North 39th Street in Louisville on Jan. 29, 2010. “He was no angel,” she said of Antoine. “But he didn’t bother anybody. He was a quiet loner.”

His killer, she said, hasn’t been caught. If authorities eventually identify and convict the murderer, Gaines said, she wouldn’t want an execution.

“You cannot bring a life back by taking away another life,” she said. “It hurts a whole family.”

She believes she knows who killed her grandson, she said, noting, “I don’t hate him; I hate what he did.”

“I think he needs to live with what he’s done,” she said. “I think he needs to live in a cell with pictures of people he’s killed and the Good Book.”

Gaines believes street violence — that seems to permeate some neighborhoods in Louisville — can only be stopped when society begins to value all life.

“Parents and grandparents must tell their children that their lives have value. They must teach them about God,” she said. “These kids aren’t afraid of dying. They don’t know anything about God.”

That’s why the threat of capital punishment is “not scaring them,” she added.
“Civilized people do not willfully put other people to sleep. It’s barbaric and we have to join the civilized world on this issue.”

“If I’m suffering, if I’m in pain, I feel that pain. But I’m not going to be consoled if someone else feels the same pain. Why should other people be punished because I have lost my cherished brother?”

– Nancy Rowles, sister
Nancy Rowles sees the death penalty as willful violence committed by a supposedly civilized group of people. And, she believes it creates an additional set of innocent victims — the family of the inmate.

Her brother, Alfred DiSalvo, was shot and killed in 1973 when he was just 43 years old. He was taken, in one violent act, from his five young daughters and his wife. He was also taken from his loving parents and his little sister Nancy.

“My heart was broken,” said Rowles. “He was my older brother. We had the same friends and he was protective. We had children at about the same time and an extremely close family.”

For that reason, Rowles said, she and her family had no time to grieve. They had work to do.

“He left a widow and five young children. I was rearing my own four at the time. We had to jump in and help,” Rowles said.

As a result, she noted, “I never had the luxury” to grieve or think much about the killer.

“I have to say that my grief was a wound too tender to touch for decades,” she said. “I have lost many people since then, including my husband. Nothing resonates like murder.”

“There was a great concentration on what we could do,” she said. “Even as our hearts were broken. There was a lot less concentration on the shooter and a lot more on the survivors.”

Rowles said that she has always found capital punishment abhorrent. And her brother’s death didn’t change her mind.

“Civilized people do not willfully put other people to sleep,” she said. “It’s barbaric and we have to join the civilized world on this issue.”

Her brother’s shooter was found to be mentally ill and was not sentenced to death. If he had been, he would have left behind a former wife, children and a girlfriend who was pregnant at the time, Rowles said.

“If he had been put to death you would have other people who have lost someone, too, essentially to murder,” she said. “There are a lot of innocent people. His former wife is innocent, his children are innocent, his girlfriend and baby were innocent.

“If I’m suffering, if I’m in pain, I feel that pain. But I’m not going to be consoled if someone else feels the same pain. Why should other people be punished because I have lost my cherished brother?”
“I know that God can change people because God has changed me.”

– Ruth Lowe

Ruth Lowe wrestled with anger and hatred after her brother was killed 35 years ago. In fact, initially, she wanted the killer to die.

Now, with the passage of time, “I’m learning to forgive. And even if I had the chance I wouldn’t want him executed,” she said. “It would do nothing for me; it would do nothing for the rest of my family. To take his life would make no sense.”

Ruth’s brother, Charles Clarence Brooks, died more than three decades ago at the hands of his own nephew and the nephew’s friend. The boys were in their early 20s at the time and her brother was 40.

Her nephew set it up as a robbery, Ruth said, describing the crime. The nephew’s friend beat her brother and ultimately caused him to suffocate on his own dentures.

Afterward, “I was so angry,” particularly with her nephew, she said. “I wanted him to die because I thought that was the ultimate betrayal. I was so, so angry that it colored my whole life.”

The killer was sentenced to 40 years in prison and is set to be released in 2016. Her nephew, who admitted to arranging the attack, walked away without being incarcerated.

While the murder tore a rift in her family, Ruth says she focuses on letting go of the pain.

“The hate is gone. I had to let it go,” she said. “I do pray. I go to daily Mass when I can and receive Communion because I want to let go of this.”

She also attended a parole hearing for the killer; where she told the board, “If someone can tell me he is a better person, that he admits what he has done was wrong, I wouldn’t object to parole.”

The killer wasn’t remorseful, but Lowe said she still believes he has the capacity to change.

“I know that God can change people because God has changed me,” she said. “I know that love is the answer. I know that God is love.”

Ruth says she has come to believe that “human beings without love are capable of anything.”
“When we have forgiven, we truly have no need to kill.”

– Maria Hines

Maria Hines, whose brother was murdered in 1989, opposes the death penalty because, as a follower of Christ, her faith compels her to forgive. But also, she met her brother’s killer and she believes he changed.

Her brother was Jerry Hines, a Virginia State Trooper shot and killed during a traffic stop.

“He was my baby brother and only sibling, born when I was eight, and I was devastated by his loss,” said Maria Hines, who lives in Louisville. (She told this story in an article several years ago and her story is adapted here.)

Dennis Eaton was charged with Jerry Hines’ murder, as well as the murders of three other people. He was sentenced to death for killing Jerry Hines.

But Maria Hines said she struggled with this sentence. She didn’t want another family to suffer the way hers had. At first, she did nothing, though.

“I agonized for two years about this decision to go public. My reluctance was based on the fact that other family members didn’t hold the same
beliefs,” she said. “Then in the summer of 1996, my husband and I went to see the movie ‘Dead Man Walking.' During the execution scene I began to cry, then started sobbing.”

She joined the Kentucky Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty and began to share her experience.

“In November 1997, while attending a death penalty conference, I realized that, although I had forgiven Dennis Eaton in my heart, forgiveness is not in the abstract but rather, whenever possible, face to face,” she said.

She wrote a letter to him, which said, in part:

“It is also difficult to forgive one who has hurt you so deeply but I believe that, for me, forgiveness is the only way. I grew up as a Catholic and, from my earliest years, learned the teachings of Jesus — the main one being that our lives must be governed by love and forgiveness. Hell has been defined as the absence of love and, likewise, with hatred instead of love in my heart, my life would be a living hell. So forgiving you is not only for you, but also for me and what it would do to my own soul if I refused to forgive.”

Eaton answered her letter and the two began a correspondence. Within a few months, a date was set for his execution. Maria promised to visit him beforehand.

The person she encountered on death row, she said, was not the same person who murdered her brother:

“Over the two-day period, Dennis and I talked for 10 hours and what I came to realize was that he was no longer the same person who had killed Jerry and three others,” she said. “He had experienced a religious conversion after going to prison and I saw that Dennis was a living example of what Christians refer to as redemption.”

Maria said that during this ordeal, she also petitioned the governor of Virginia for clemency.

“The day before the execution, I again visited Dennis — this time for the last time. The following day, he called me at the motel where I was staying and, during the brief conversation, once again apologized for what he had done. He also said, ‘This started in tragedy and is ending in tragedy, but I’m glad I got to know you.’”

Several hours later, the governor denied clemency.

“I took part in a prayer vigil held in a field outside the prison,” she said. “We later learned that Dennis had died at 9:09 p.m.”
Victoria Cox’s brother Michael Cox — the youngest of her 10 siblings — was murdered in 1985. He was just 24-years-old.

The night he died, Vickie was volunteering at her church. She and her pastor saw on the news that someone had been killed, but didn’t give it much thought.

Cox said she left about 30 minutes later and discovered when she arrived home that her youngest brother had been shot.

“You never forget that time,” she said.

Her brother had come home from a day of work when he was apparently taken from his home without a shirt or shoes. He was found dead in another house with a gunshot wound to the head.

Despite her grief, Cox said, she didn’t want the killer to die. Such a wish is contrary to everything she believes.

“It’s not in me to want someone dead. Bitterness can eat you up. You have to find peace with it, or it can overwhelm you.”

Watch Victoria discuss the death penalty on YouTube: http://bit.ly/17uMHf8
Rita Shoulders has experienced more tragedy than most. She lost her 30-year-old son, who had heart troubles, during a heart transplant. She was widowed by her first husband. Then, her fiance, who would have been her second husband, died, too. But before those tragedies — those that came with the natural course of life — she lost a sister, Mildred Caldwell, who was gunned down in front of her own children.

Despite this extraordinary loss and inevitable pain, she believes — as her parents taught her — that each person, including her sister’s killer, is her brother or sister in Christ. And only God, she said, can choose when to end a life.

Mildred Caldwell was killed 41 years ago. She was 46 at the time and served as a nurse at Our Lady of Peace Hospital. One night, a patient at the hospital went to her home where he shot and killed Caldwell in front of her children.

When the legal process was set to begin, Rita’s father was adamant that the death penalty not be considered.

“My dear father said, ‘Taking his life is not going to bring my daughter back,’” she recalls. “‘The Lord brought us here, and he’s supposed to be the one who takes you back.’”

She, too, believes capital punishment “is brutal and cruel.”

“We are brothers and sisters in Christ. If we are indeed brothers and sisters, that makes us responsible to one another. Taking a life doesn’t make you even. It sets you apart from God,” she said.

The patient — who also was accused of killing two others the same night — died the day before his murder trial was set to begin.

“We are brothers and sisters in Christ. If we are indeed brothers and sisters, that makes us responsible to one another. Taking a life doesn’t make you even. It sets you apart from God.”

– Rita Shoulders

Watch Rita discuss the death penalty on YouTube: http://bit.ly/1a1WOM
“We want an end to the violence, not participation in it.”

–Jane Chiles

Watch Jane discuss the death penalty on YouTube: http://bit.ly/1fu06Yu
Jane Chiles, who lives in Lexington, believes the notion that a murder victim’s family can find “closure” is a myth.

Her nephew, Scott Johnson, died in the South Tower of the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001. He was 26-years-old, had a large loving extended family and was known for his good looks and ready smile.

When he went to work at the World Trade Center on the morning of the infamous terror attacks, Scott had just changed jobs.

“He was very interested in international relations — particularly in financial relationships,” said Chiles as she recounted her nephew’s life and death. “Scott did what good employees do — he showed up on time. He was in the second tower hit. It hit within a floor or two of where Scott was. We would like to think death was very quick.”

His family suffered his loss intensely.

“There were never any physical remains, which has been a huge challenge,” she said.

“I think that you often hear about closure. Closure is a myth,” she said. “I don’t think that ever happens. There are no remains. And there is still so much talk every day of the week about 9/11, two wars, heightened hatred of the Muslim world.”

“All of that caused my brother and his wife not to move on,” she noted. “You learn to live with it. Scott had lots of aunts and uncles and lots of cousins. The loss is deep and intense.”

More than 10 years after the terror attacks that shattered thousands of lives, the man responsible for Scott’s death, Osama Bin Laden, was tracked down and executed.

“Did his execution bring closure to my family?” Chiles asked rhetorically. “Not at all. There is no change.”

“People were satisfied to know this man was no longer able to perpetrate this kind of crime,” she added. “But did he have to die for that to stop? No.”

Chiles said she believes the death penalty is “one more form of killing, one more form of violence.”

“When the state kills in our name that’s not what we are asking for,” she said. “We want an end to the violence, not participation in it.”
For more information about the use of the death penalty in Kentucky or to share your own story, contact us.

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