

Davis supporters to keep up fight

BY TODD LUCK
THE CHRONICLE

News last week of Troy Davis' execution was received with sorrow and determination by local activists who had championed Davis' cause.

Davis' death by lethal injection on Wednesday, Sept. 21 in Georgia hit Darryl Hunt especially hard. Hunt was close to receiving the death penalty himself in the 1980s, after a jury convicted him of a murder he did not commit. Hunt spent nearly 20 years in prison before DNA testing set the stage for his release in 2003.

Hunt now leads the Darryl Hunt Project for Freedom and Justice, which advocates on behalf of those who have been wrongfully convicted and helps recently-released former inmates. For years, he had been an advocate for Davis, who was convicted of murdering a police officer based mainly on of eye witness testimony; there was no physical evidence connecting Davis to the crime. Great doubt was cast on Davis' conviction when the majority of the witnesses who testified against him recanted their statements, with many of them stating that they were coerced by the police to implicate Davis.

The Davis case – like Hunt's more than two decades earlier – had racial overtones. In both cases, the victims were white and the men convicted of the crimes were black.

Hunt joined other locals for a march in Atlanta on Friday, Sept. 16. It was a last-ditch effort to save Davis' life.

"With so many people praying, and there was so much doubt ... we were looking that they would at least spare his life," said Hunt.

But early last week, the Georgia Board of Pardons and Paroles denied Davis clemency. A short time later, the U.S. Supreme Court refused to take up the issue – essentially giving the State of Georgia the go-ahead to proceed with the Davis execution.

Hunt was among those who stood vigil outside the prison in Jackson, Ga. where Davis was executed. He was pronounced dead at 11:08 p.m.

"Like everyone, we were just at a loss for words," said Hunt, recalling when the news was announced to the crowd outside the prison. "It was like our own life had been taken."

Hunt said a t-shirt he saw a child wearing earlier in the day summed up what many are now feeling. On the front of the shirt was a picture of Davis and on the back – the words, "Am I next?"



Troy Davis poses with his mother in this 2002 snapshot taken in a Georgia prison.

Those words are particularly poignant to Hunt. He says he would have been executed like Davis had one juror voted the other way.

"I thought about that ... in Jackson, Georgia; that could've been me," said Hunt.

Hunt had fought for Davis since 2006, when he met Davis' sister, Martina Correia, at a Georgia screening of the HBO documentary "The Trials of Darryl Hunt." He researched the case and found there were many similarities between his own wrongful conviction and the Davis case.

"It's unbelievable when you think about all the innocence cases, if you read them, they all read just about the same, with the eye witness misidentifications and police intimidation and coerced statements and how courts have this straight out tunnel vision when it comes to getting a conviction," said Hunt.

He continues to keep in contact with the Davis family, whom he described as a "very strong and committed, loving family." Hunt said he plans to continue to work with the family on the cause. Davis' last words included a charge to his supporters to continue to fight against injustice.

"They're sad as can be expected, but they're determined to continue to fight for justice for Troy to bring about justice in our justice system," said Hunt, who also plans to attend Davis' funeral this weekend.

Mark Rabil, Hunt's former trial lawyer and co-director of the Innocence

and Justice Clinic at Wake Forest University, paused a class he was teaching last Wednesday for five minutes of meditation at 7 p.m. – the time Davis was originally slated to die.

Rabil used the Davis case to teach law students affiliated with the Clinic, which focuses primarily on local cases where questions regarding an inmate's innocence are overwhelming.

Rabil said the Davis case was typical of a death penalty case, which he said is usually driven by emotion and tends to have more mistakes than other cases. He said he hopes this case can be used to teach people about the flaws of the system.

"We try to take Troy Davis' situation and continue to talk about the death penalty so he didn't die in vain," said Rabil.

Stephen Dear, executive director of Carboro-based People of Faith Against the Death Penalty, was in jail in Georgia at the time of Davis' execution and didn't find out about Davis' death until he was released the next morning.

He spent a night in jail after walking up to a police officer at the vigil and telling him he was there to stop Davis' execution. He was one of several activists arrested for civil disobedience. Dear believes Georgia killed an innocent man.

"It's a new low that the State of Georgia has sunk to," said Dear. "They have ignored the ... legal standard of reasonable doubt and there's nothing but reasonable doubt in this case."

People of Faith Against the Death Penalty had worked hard on the Davis case. The organization collected the signatures of 3,500 faith leaders on a petition calling for clemency for Davis. Dear hand-delivered the petition to the Georgia Board of Pardons and Parole two weeks ago. Dear said there were boxes of petitions presented to the Board from groups like Amnesty International and the NAACP.

Dear hopes that the millions saddened and angered by Davis' execution will channel that energy to create change.

"We want to do our best to help people learn more about the death penalty and understand there were many Troy Davises on death row," said Dear.



Hunt

Suspensions

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As scrutiny of suspension rates has grown, many schools have lowered their rates, but often only in "superficial ways," Langberg said.

He told the audience that there are better, more productive ways to approach discipline issues, such as peer mediation. In instances where students are suspended or expelled, under state law, they have a right to continue receiving "a sound, basic education" under the state constitution, Langberg told the group.

Public schools, which Langberg says are "designed to serve capitalism and white supremacy," are deliberately targeting minority and economically disadvantaged students through biased practices and policies that are created and implemented to their detriment, according to his presentation. Langberg says these practices are longstanding, but have been exacerbated by the No Child Left Behind Act, which brought a sharper focus on test scores as it awarded funding to schools based on those scores.

"The easiest way to raise test scores is to get rid of low performing students, and under No Child Left Behind, there's no consequences for using that as a method of raising test scores," he told the audience. The tests themselves, which Langberg refers to as "drill and kill" high stakes testing, are designed to discourage students from thinking for themselves, mak-

ing those oppressed groups easier to control, he said.

Despite the dismal nature of the facts, Langberg said change can come to North Carolina public schools, but it will require those who care about the outcomes for African Americans and other underrepresented groups to stand together.

"Unless we build a movement of people to transform the entire system, we'll never get there," Langberg told the audience. "We have no choice but to fight for our kids."

Real Men Teach Coordinator Holly Pitts said last week's presentation was intended not only to educate future educators but also the larger commu-



Simon

nity. Real Men Teach was established in 2007 as a means of encouraging minority males to consider careers in education. The program supports male education majors during their college careers and beyond through mentoring initiatives and other opportunities designed to increase their success and retention in the classroom. The program currently has 24 student participants, or "protégés."

Real Men Teach Protégé Tremon Simon, a junior special education major from South Carolina, introduced the presenters.

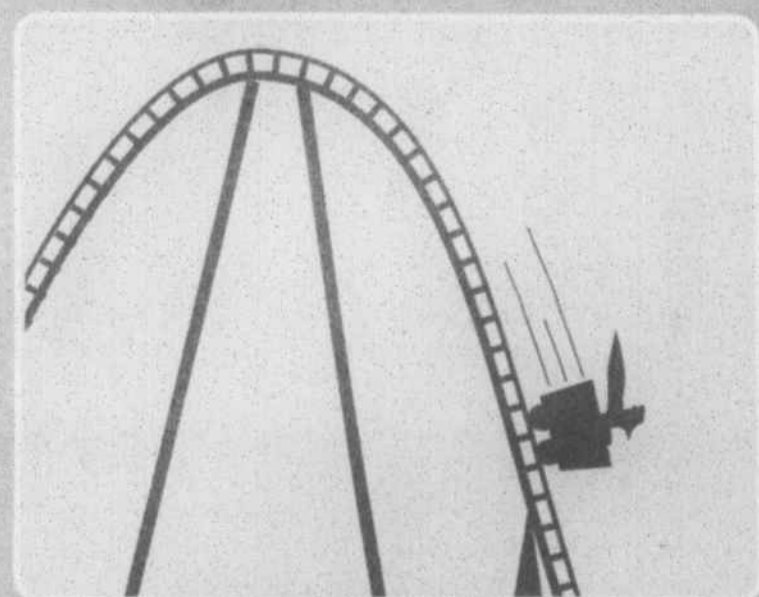
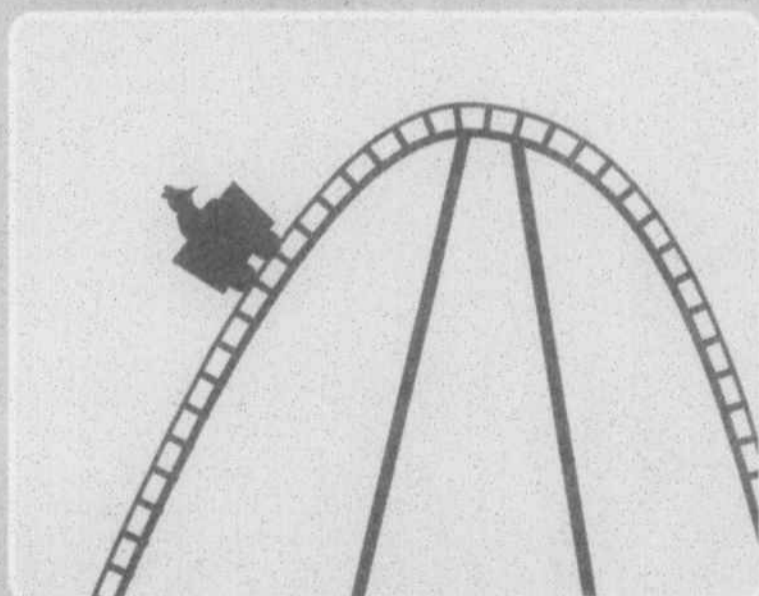
"...We believe it is our responsibility to at least bring awareness to this issue," he said.

For more information about Advocates for Children's Services, visit www.legalaidnc.org/acs.

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