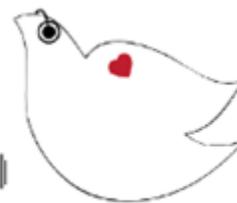


Dunker Punks Podcast



Transcription details:

Episode Number: 78

Episode Name: Death Row Support Project

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Episode Description: In this new episode, learn about a much-needed project that Dunker Punks are taking on to support the outcast and forgotten of our society. Emmett Witkovsky-Eldred interviews Rachel Gross on what she and others like her are doing through small acts of kindness, sincerity, and love with the Death Row Support Project.

Speakers in audio file:

S1: Jacob Crouse

S2: Emmett Witkovsky-Eldred

S3: Rachel Gross

Transcription:

Jacob: Hey Dunker Punks, have you ever thought about being pen pals with someone you've never met, and might never see face-to-face? Stay tuned to hear how doing just that could change your life, and theirs.

[Intro music]

Jacob: What's up, Dunker Punks? I'm today's host, Jacob Crouse. Let's get into it. I love reading and listening to Jesus' teachings, and especially their cultural context. He advocated for society's outcasts, and the lowly and down and out, when no one else would. His teachings have encouraged and inspired generations of Christians to do the same. In today's episode, our friendly neighborhood co-host Emmett, is going to interview Rachel Gross about a ministry she's involved in, reaching out to society's outcasts.

[music]

Emmett: Rachel Gross, welcome to the Dunker Punks podcast.

Rachel: Thank you. I'm glad to be here.

E: We're glad to have you. Um, so Rachel, you work for the Death Row Support project, or volunteer with them. Could you tell me a little bit more about what the project does?

R: Yes. We, um, set up correspondence for people who are on death row all across the United States. We receive requests from people who are interested in doing that, and then, um, it's not like a, a computer match-up exactly, but we take the information that we have and try to set up, um, a relationship that we think will be successful.

E: Um, I'm interested in, uh, the point about, um setting up a relationship. Do you look into people's interests, and who you think might be a good match, or is it more just finding a person and matching them with whoever's available?

R: In the last few years, we um, have an online sign-up form that we use, and we don't ask very many questions. If the age, uh, religious affiliation, if any, and then obviously we have the person's location. So that's the information that we have about people on the outside. We get letters from prisoners that sometimes are just one line "I'd like to have a pen pal". Sometimes they say a lot more about themselves, and so then we try to do our best in terms in matching age and religious affiliation, if any, and, and then location. Some prisoners want to write to somebody in the United States. Some prefer to write to somebody overseas. And so we take, it's not a lot of information to work with, but we do the best we can with that.

E: Mmhm. And, do you have more, um, people on death row who are looking for pen pals, or do you have more people writing in and saying they would like to write to someone on death row?

R: Right now it's pretty evenly balanced. Over the years, (cough) it's fluctuated back and forth, um, and in the last two or three years, we've had more people on the outside wanting to write than we had requests from prisoners. And so, um, to help with that, just this past fall, we invited people to send Christmas cards to people on death row, and along with that, to send an invitation. I try to pick people from our database, prisoners who didn't have pen pals with us, and then the people who sent Christmas cards sent an invitation for them to write, and so over the holidays, we've received a lot more requests from prisoners than we had for a long time. And so, right now it's a pretty even balance.

E: Ok. How many Christmas cards did you send?

R: We...I gave out names of over 560 people. And of those, we've probably heard from about 50 prisoners asking for pen pals. The requests are still coming in, um, so I expect that we'll continue to get more, so.

E: Uh, Rachel, could you tell me a little bit more about what you specifically do, um, with the Death Row Support project, and how you got involved in the first place?

R: Well, how I got involved in the first place, was that my husband Bob had the idea to start it, and um, he knew that I liked to write letters, and um, he was involved in, this was back in the 1970s, and he was involved in criminal justice activities as a result of a paper that was passed

by the Church of the Brethren in 1974, uh raising a lot of concerns about criminal justice issues at that time, in the country. And, so because of his involvement, he was attending meetings related to prison concerns and, and it was right at the time that the death penalty started being used again in the United States, after there had been a four-year break from it. And, so, kind circumstances just all came together, and we got the support of the Church of the Brethren through its Washington Office, to start the project, and that was 41 years ago. And here we are, still, so, um. So I've been the main coordinator of it, with, uh, lots of help along the way from various family members and friends. Um, and then, lots and lots of people who have become involved. When we started it, I thought that it would just be a couple years and then the Supreme Court would rule the death penalty unconstitutional, but that hasn't happened yet, so we're still here.

E: So you've been involved since the very beginning of the project. Um, have you seen either the project itself change or people's perceptions of the death penalty and uh, people on death row change in that time?

R: That's a good question. Um, I would say that it's been through, um, probably several different changes over time. I... Part of the, I mean one of the main motivations for starting it was to provide a way for people on the outside to have a more inside look at who ends up on death row and why they end up there. And I think for a lot of individuals, it definitely has had that impact. Um, um, then, at the same time, we've seen the, as the death penalty became more and more used in the 80's, it was more in the public eye. And more attention. But now, it feels like that kind of faded again, because it, in a way became more commonplace, and so people aren't, it's, it's not in the news as much. Um, what, one thing that doesn't really relate to our project at all, but certainly a change in the climate, is that in the last, just in the last few years there's starting to be more involvement from conservatives in wanting to work against the use of the death penalty. Whereas in the past it probably was seen as something that was more, liberal issue.

Um, the other, another thing that changed, I think is just the awareness of it, especially in the United Kingdom. And, in the last few years we've had more people wanting to write to somebody on death row from the United Kingdom, than we have from within the United States here. And I think it's a combination of, they don't have the death penalty there, and, but there's a lot, there is a lot of awareness there. Um, there've been lots of documentaries done by BBC and others in the UK that have just brought more awareness to it. That doesn't necessarily, um, impact what happens with the issue here in the U.S., but it's just something that's been a change that I've seen over the years.

E: Mmm. Uh, that uh, influx of interest from the United Kingdom is really interesting to me, and I kind of get the sense that part of it might be because the death penalty is pretty unique to the United States. There aren't a lot of countries that still, um, have a death penalty, isn't that correct?

R: That's right, that's exactly right. And I think they can't, I think they can't quite, they just don't understand it.

E: Mmhmm.

R: Um, and I think because of the relationship between the U.K. and the U., the U.S., uh, and just in terms of our history, that it is, it's like, it's a per, it's perplexing. Maybe kind of like watching your teenage child's behavior and not quite understanding it.

E: (Chuckle) Why do you think that the death penalty has persisted in the United States, even as it's been abolished pretty much everywhere else in the world?

R: Well, that is a complicated question. Um, I've been reading a book that was written, I'm not going to be able to give you the name of it, but it's written by two lawyers about the Supreme Court, and its relationship with the death penalty. And it has, it, the book is really, is helpful to me in understanding it more. I think it, it goes back, I mean it involves our, our history of racism and lynching, and it continues to be more prevalently used in the south than it is in the north. Um, and, and then, I mean I don't under, I mean it's tied in with our views on guns and all that, I think. Uh, and it really does boil down to retribution, at this point. Um, all the studies that have been done, capital punishment is not a deterrent of crime. Uh, murder rates are higher in states with the death penalty than in states without the death penalty. Um, it is, to me, from my point of view, there's very much an irrationality about it.

E: Um, you talked about the racial dimension that's at play, um,

R: Mmmhmm.

E: Could you... unpack that a little bit more? What is the link between the death penalty and systemic racism?

R: Well, what's, what statistics have shown over the last 40 years, is that, the way that race most impacts use of the death penalty is that, if um, if the victim is white, the perpetrator is more likely to be given the death penalty. And so, proportionately, uh, it may be true that, even though murders are fairly evenly committed across the race spectrum, um, if, the, the if the, just the race of the victim is what plays into it the most on who's going to get the death penalty.

E: So, um, of the current population on death row, do you have a sense of what proportion of them are people of color?

R: Yes. It's um, it's pretty close to half and half. Uh, um, half people of color and, I think it's 45 percent African American, and I think it's about 45 percent White. And then, there's Asians and, um, and Hispanics that make up the other ten percent.

E: How many people are on death row?

R: Right now it's about 2700.

E: And, what does life look like for someone who's on death row? What are the conditions like, and what might their day to day experience be?

R: Most um, people on death row are basically in solitary confinement, although it's probably, it's not as uh, stark as maximum security, uh places that, that you might, um, hear about. But most are in their cells 23 hours per day. Um, the, it varies from state to state on how much contact their allowed with other prisoners. Um, most are not allowed to have any kind of jobs within the prison. Um, some may be allowed to, like spend a little time in a law library. Um, some prisons provide, uh like televisions but others don't. Um, so it's a, it's a, on the other hand, so it, it's obviously not a pleasant existence. An interesting thing to me, though, is, um, in Florida I've heard from some prisoners who have been taken off death row and put in general population, and it is, that's a really difficult adjustment for them, because then they are thrown into a situation where there, there's a lot more interaction with other prisoners. And after many years of leading a more solitary existence, that's a difficult, um, change to make.

The, um, food situation is not good in most places. Um, and there just, ya, there are a lot of limitations, obviously, put on, put on daily, on daily life.

E: And, I, I know that, a typical person who is on death row, tends to be there for a long time. Could you tell me, how long, is, does a typical person spend on death row?

R: The last time I saw the statistics on that, the average stay was 14 years, but again it varies a lot from state to state, and there, people in Florida who have been on death row for over 30 years, and I would say California is approaching that also. Um, Texas and Virginia, uh it's much shorter (E: cough) because they just move through their appeals processes a lot faster, and move towards execution more quickly. Something that might surprise people, it's been really surprising to me, I told you that there are about 2700 people on death row. Almost 800 of those people are in California (E: Mmmhmm) on death row. And, and there, and, it would feels like an anomaly, and the books that I've been reading, one of the ways that, one of the things that's been helpful to me in understanding that, is that California has a more mixed-feeling about the death penalty, whereas, for example, in Texas pretty much everybody's in favor of it, and so there's not much pushback against moving through the appeals process quickly, moving towards executions. Not a problem.

In California, because there is, um, there's more feeling against the death penalty there, they're much more particular about going through the appeals process. There's a lot more funding for lawyers, to make sure that people have had a fair trial. There's more resistance to executions, so they've had very few executions in the last 40 years, whereas Texas has had more executions than, um, than there are people on death row there right now. I think that would be accurate to say. Um, ya.

E: Is it...

R: So...

E: Is it still the case (R: Go ahead) in a state like, uh, California where there are so few execu, executions, are people still sentenced to death and placed on death row though?

R: Yes. And that's, I mean, and so then that's part of the uh, like the mixed feeling about it. There is enough support for it that people continue, to be sentenced to death. On a regular basis. But then just not executed.

E: Um, I come from Pennsylvania which is another state that has the death penalty, although the, Governor Wolf has placed a moratorium on executions, and I believe it's, it's been even much longer before him that there has been an execution in Pennsylvania. So then, it's striking to me that all these people are being placed on death row, where they're languishing, in solitary confinement for 23 hours a day. With this, specter of, um, the possibility of their execution hanging over them, and they're, they're just stuck in that limbo. Um.

R: Yep.

E: I, I think you talked a little bit about how the conditions on death row can create um, a real sense of isolation. Um, I'm wondering, do a lot of people who are on death row have much contact with friends, or family members?

R: Well, again there's a lot of variation in that. I think some, it just, so much depends on the circumstances of each individual. Not surprisingly, a lot of people who end up on death row are people who have had very troubled childhoods, and so it's not at all unusual for them to not have a good family system in place. When they end up on death row, sometimes they're there because they murdered a member of their family, and so in those situations they're not very likely to have much family support. Um, but then there, there're others who for one reason or another do have a lot of support. So, occasionally we do hear from prisoners, we may reach out to somebody with a potential pen pal and we hear back that they have plenty of support already. Um, but it's more usual that there's not much support there. Which is, again one of the main reasons that, that we started the project was, um to provide that for people.

E: MmmHmm. So, um, I imagine, that's actually where I kind of wanted to go next. Um, part of my interest in thinking about, uh, the death penalty and populations on death row, really came out of reading the work of Bryan Stevenson, who has a prolific legal defense practice for people on death row. Um, and previously on the podcast I've, um, talked with a representative from the Catholic Mobilizing Network, whose mission is to abolish, um the death penalty. So those are two different examples of ways that organizations are working on the death penalty. You have, on the one side the legal defense program and representation of people, trying to get their convictions overturned. At the same time, we also have organizations working on the abolition of the death penalty. Um, but it seems like the main focus of the Death Row Support Project is, on emotional support and building relationships with people who are on death row. Why was that the approach that this organization decided to take?

R: Well, I think it was to see, it was a, because, in a, in a church context, it was a way that we can follow Jesus' command to visit those in prison. And so it was a way to follow that call, then it was a way to contradict what people see in the media about people who have committed murders. Um, then it was also just a small fact from, my husband's Bob's experience of having been in prison, he was aware that people who get more mail, are treated better by prison staff. So there were just those different little aspects of it that I think underline all that. For sure, for us it

was in a context of wanting to see the death penalty abolished, and feeling that this was a way for people to first-hand know the situation more, and that might move them toward more activism. And that has happened, not as much as we would like to see it happen, but it has happened that some people have really become activists in the abolition movement, because of writing to somebody.

Then also, we've had, uh, I'm aware of at least two specific cases where the pen pal, the Death Row Support Project pen pal was able to testify at a re-sentencing of the person they were writing. And to testify that they felt that this person had changed, and, and, and both of those cases, um, the persons received life sentences then, rather than death sentences. Um, and so, that, so ya, all those things kind of mixed together. But I think, um, at the same time that we started the project, or soon after that, Bob ended up, um becoming the director of the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty. Um, and so he was working at it from that angle, also. And one of the interesting things about the abolition movement over these 40 years, is just seeing the different approaches to it, and, uh and watching people initially, I think 40 years ago, there, there was sometimes conflict between those different groups about who had the best strategy and what was the best strategy. But over time, people have come to see, more and more, that all those pieces are important, and everybody needs to do their part, and just find what their, what their calling is and what they can do well, and work at it from that aspect.

E: Right. And I also appreciate how, you said earlier in the conversation, when you started out in 19, in the 1970s, you thought it would be 4 or 5 years until the death penalty was abolished, and obviously that hasn't happened. And so, if organizations had only focused on abolition, then there would be four decades worth of people languishing on death row who wouldn't have had that opportunity to build a relationship. And we can't (R: Yes) forget about those people while we're pursuing the (R: Yes), the systemic change as well. (R: Yes) With that in mind, I'm curious since you've been at this for forty years, if you have one story that you often like to share about a really successful or impactful relationship that has formed because of this work. Either, between you and someone, or between one of your letter writers and a, person on death row.

R: Well, one of the most significant ones, there are a lot, there are several, but one of the most significant ones that, that I would choose to mention here, that people listening to the podcast may already be aware of, but I'll go ahead and tell it anyway, is that: Uh, in North Manchester, where I live, uh Timbercrest Retirement Community, has uh, an organization called Seniors for Peace. And they've invited me to come two or three times to talk about the Death Row Support Project. And several years ago, then, they had an extra meeting for people who definitely wanted to write to somebody. And I passed around a pile of letters, at that time I had quite a few letters from prisoners waiting for pen pals. And out of that pile, uh, David Waas, a member of our church, the Manchester Church of the Brethren, he picked the letter from Raymond Johnson, who is on death row in Oklahoma.

Raymond is a very prolific writer, and David was having a hard time keeping up with, um, writing back. So, as a way to, to help himself out he started sending Raymond copies of our pastor's sermon every week. And Raymond was just very taken by what he read in the sermons, and by what David was writing to him, and that eventually led to Raymond asking if he could become a member of our congregation. So for over a year, our pastor, Kurt Borgmann, exchanged letters, monthly letters with Raymond to work on that process, and brought it before

our church board; which is, that's normal for anybody seeking membership with our congregation, it comes before the board, and we approved Raymond to become, um, I should say Raymond was approved to become a member of our congregation. And um, Kurt was able to do vows with him over the phone, and then that was played for us on a Sunday morning. So that has been very, very power... powerful for our congregation. Several people in our congregation now write to Raymond, and there's a woman in our congregation who has visited him several times in Oklahoma, and has become involved with his family.

And so, ya. So that's definitely, very much of a highlight, I think it's been, it was challenging it, for a lot of people in our church. It was not an easy thing to think about, that we were welcoming somebody who had committed a murder. Raymond very much acknowledges his guilt, he's not down, and so that's, that's very clear. To welcome him into our congregation, but, but it feels like it's been very positive all the way around.

E: Mmhmm. One of the things that I find is so... commonplace with building relationships is that you... you get to know someone beyond your surface-level impression of them, and I think a lot of people probably are... hearing this conversation or have heard of the work of the Death Row Support Project and felt a little bit of... that apprehension about building a relationship with someone who is on death row. Because, uh, many of them have been placed there because of, uh, horrific crimes that they've committed. Um, what do you find are the, um, the stereotypes that dissolve away when, once those relationships start to form?

R: I think, that, well, somebody just wrote to me the other day. That writing to somebody has helped her to see this, her pen pal as, as a person. Otherwise, you just tend to think they're monsters. And I think that sums it up pretty well. That, that we, that there is that stereotype of whatever a monster means, that it is... that an evil, like there's an evilness there. Rather than understanding the complexity of what, of the circumstances that led somebody to commit a murder in the first place. So I think that would just be the general overall thing. That we, it's just too easy, to... to make a, uh, just a general summary of, of what a person is like, or just an assumption without, ya. Seeing everything that led the person to that point.

E: Mmhmm. One of the things that I've found really powerful in Bryan Stevenson's writing, is he often will ask people who, have that initial reaction, negative reaction to his work on the death penalty is, he'll ask them if they would want to be defined as a person by the worst mistake that they've made in their life (R: Uh huh). And I think that's so powerful. And I think that also connects so potently to a lot of these examples that you've brought up of how there's more to someone's conviction, um, to the death, of the death penalty than just the act that they've committed. Um, their, their race has a factor, as well as the race of their victim. Um, I was reading, or listening to an interview with, um Robert Sapolsky who is a neuroscientist, um, who talked about how most people on death row, or a higher proportion of people on death row than in the average population had a childhood trauma to the part of their brain that mediates their ability to control impulses. And so there's so much that is, at, at play beyond just one person did something wrong, and they, and they deserve... punishment for it. Uh

R: Absolutely.

E: So, can we talk a little bit about, um, the scriptural basis for opposing the death penalty? I'm curious about that 1974, Annual Conference paper, and what that found, and what reasons that gave for...supporting criminal justice reform, and how that finding has evolved into your... formed your spiritual understanding of why we should oppose the death penalty.

R: I (laughter) uh, I, I should have done more homework on (mutual laughter) that... The answer to that question. I think that, uh, um, let's see, so the, the 74 paper dealt with criminal justice just in a general way... and then there also have been specific papers that just addressed the death penalty, but I think the bottom line for all of it is, is just um, God's vision, God's desire to...to um, for wholeness with all of creation and, and the power of redemption. Um, and uh, and second chances and, if you look at the biblical examples of what happens, like with Cain, the very first one. The very first murder that was committed. God did not strike Cain dead. Um, he put a mark on Cain to protect Cain. Um, and I just, I think that, I mean so often we hear quoted 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth' as a justification for the death penalty, whereas Jesus said 'but, I say to you...' Um, and so, I think that, um, so I'm going to speak more for myself than from what, where the paper, what the paper actually says. But I just think as, we look at the... at God's message overall and the Bible, it's one of reconciliation and, um, bringing us all back, bringing us back to God. And, into, in right relationship with each other. And.

E: Sure.

R: And that punishment and killing don't have any part in that. I mean, I would include punishment as well as killing with that.

E: Mmhmm. And yet, um, a lot of surveys have found that Christians, and especially Evangelical Christians, support the death penalty more than any other group of people in the United States. Why do you think that is, and how do we go about changing their minds?

R: Ya, well, civil religion is, that is just a, and that's how I would categorize that, that um, there's just become a lot of confusion in this country, um, equating patriotism with religion, and, um, and just issues of White supremacy, um, all those things get involved with why that is. That, um, prosperity gospel. I mean there's just, it feels like there's so many ways that Christianity in the U.S. has gone astray from, from what Jesus had in mind. Um, and I would just say that that's one more of them. There is a group called Evangelicals Against the Death Penalty, so there are some within that body who, who um, I would say have seen the light about it. But, you're right, I mean there is that general support for it, and I think it's because people don't read their Bibles (mutual chuckle) carefully enough. But, that probably sounds prejudicial (background chuckle) on my part. I mean I really think that's what it comes down to, if we look at, if we really read the Bible carefully it just, it seems very clear to me. So.

E: Sure. And um, I've been very inspired by the work and the writing of, of Shane Claiborne, who is an Evangelical Christian (R: Yes) who is so outspoken on this issue (R: Yes). Um, all right Rachel, thank you so much, could I just ask for those listening, how can they become involved in the Death Row Support Project?

R: The simplest way is to go to brethren.org/drsp for Death Row Support project, or if you go to the main page of brethren.org, on the left-hand side is the Service tab, and, if you go down that, Death Row Support Project is listed under that. There's all kinds of information there, including links to the statements that the Church of the Brethren has made against the death penalty. And, um, we make it a little bit, you have to go through several clicks to get to the sign up form, and that's intentional cause we want people to be really serious about writing before they sign up. Um, but there is a sign, an online sign-up form there.

E: And...

R: People can also contact me directly by emailing drsp@brethren.org. Um.

E: And are there other ways, in addition to writing letters, that people can support the project?

R: Well, one of the ways is by something like the Christmas Card mailing that we did, um, it's...just this past year. That, people, um, who sent Christmas Cards aren't necessarily people who want to get involved in writing and so we suggested that they send Christmas Cards with our, with the DRSP address as the return address. Um, people can also, um send birthday cards. We have the dates of birth of most people on death row, and that's a project actually that Manchester University students have been doing, is sending, every month I give them a list of people whose birthdays are that month and they send birthday cards with notes. Um, again either with our return address or with the campus address. So, it's not making a commitment to write, but it is a way, I think it's a way for people to be thoughtful about it, and thinking about it, just reaching out beyond themselves. So that's been really helpful. We're always glad when, uh, people send stamps to help us with our work. And, I don't know if you've seen the project that Claire Flowers recently has done, or is right in the middle of doing? She's a Church of the Brethren member, um, and her son made this delightful, colorful thing that says 'Everybody deserves to be loved' and Claire, with the help of her church, and some other people, is in the process of sending that as a postcard message to every single person on death row in the U.S.

Um, and so there's just, there are ways like that, that um, people can creatively, uh, reach out to people on death row, or, um, or like a Sunday School class can decide to adopt a person and then write to them. There's a, church in um, the Fraternity Church of the Brethren in Winston Salem, North Carolina. One of their members... two of their members are writing to people on death row, and then there are other people who are just sending food packages. Um, to, that they, to people that they get connected with through the pen pals. So, those are a few ideas.

E: Well Rachel, um, when I was reading Just Mercy, um the passage that, by, this is the book by Bry... Bryan Stevenson, Just Mercy, about his, work with um, the death penalty and working to abolish it. Um, when I was reading that book, the passage that stood out to me the most, was this chapter, um, entitled 'Stone Catchers', um, which was a reference to the story in the Gospel where Jesus intervenes, uh, in the execution by stoning, of a woman, stands in the way and says 'you without fault, can cast the first stone'. And, I think Stevenson really issues a call for us to be stone catchers, people who will also stand in the way of that type of retribution. Um, and I really think that you all at the Death Row Support Project are, are stone catchers, so I

thank you for the work you are doing, um, and thank you so much for taking the time to tell us about it on the podcast.

[background music]

R: Yes, well thank you very much. I really, really appreciate the opportunity to share, and I also appreciate that, that uh, that image of being a stone catcher. I really like that. Thank you for that.

E: You're welcome. Thank you. Have a nice day.

R: Thank you. Same to you, Emmett.

[music]

J: Thank you so much, Rachel, and all the people involved in the Death Row Support Project, for your ministry, you're work, and for sharing with us today.

I'd like to invite Emmett to come back and explain to us, about some political happenings that are relevant to today's subject, and to help kind of wrap up how we can be supportive of projects like this one.

[background music ends as Emmett begins speaking]

E: Hi, this is Emmett again. In the week since Rachel and I have spoken there was a prominent Supreme Court decision that brought the topic of the death penalty back into the news. I wanted to take just a moment to reflect on this story, because I think that it underscores exactly why the work of the Death Row Support Project is so important.

On February 7th, 2019, the state of Alabama executed a man by the name of Domineque Ray. Mr. Ray was a practicing Muslim, and he learned just weeks earlier that he would not be permitted to have his Imam present at the execution. In the final moments, a lot of people on death row understandably want to have their faith advisor there. So that that faith advisor can provide a measure of comfort and reassurance as these people confront the imminence and finality of their own death. Mr. Ray was told by the state that he could have a Christian chaplain present during his execution, but he was not permitted to bring his Imam. Obviously this is a violation of Mr. Ray's rights to religious freedom, and is a clear violation of the establishment clause of the constitution, which prohibits any governing entity from favoring one religion over another.

Mr. Ray's lawyer requested a stay of execution so Alabama's religious discrimination in this case could be reversed. And the lower courts actually agreed to stay the execution, but on February 7th, the Supreme Court reversed the stay, and they allowed the execution to move forward as scheduled. Domineque Ray died later that same day.

The Supreme Court didn't even comment on religious discrimination or establishment. Instead they simply argued that Mr. Ray had waited too long to bring this case. This, despite the fact that the state of Alabama concealed their policy from him until just weeks before he was set to die. And his lawyers filed for a stay virtually as soon as they were made aware of the situation. Now, a lot has been made of this Supreme Court decision in the following days. And all of that criticism is 100 percent correct. This was a horrific and shameful decision. It was a decision in which the court decided the timeliness of an execution mattered more than the rights and the dignity of Domineque Ray.

[pause]

But as we criticize the Supreme Court, we also shouldn't ignore the actions of the state of Alabama. It would have cost Alabama nothing to grant Mr. Ray this request. Simply put, the state did what they did out of pure hatred. They did what they did, for no reason, but to be cruel. They did what they did, just because they could. They denied a dying man the comfort and dignity of his faith. This, in a country in which the free exercise of religion is purported to be our most fundamental and sacred right. But because he was a man condemned to die, because he was a man without power, or hope, or value. Because he was a Muslim, Domineque Ray became a man without rights.

There is no doubt that Alabama did what they did, because Mr. Ray was a Muslim. They hated him. And they feared him, for that simple fact alone. But we can also not lose sight of the fact, that they treated him as they did, because he was a person on death row. In fact, in the fallout of this execution, Alabama did change their policy. Now they refuse to allow any chaplain to be present at any execution, at all. In the eyes of Alabama, and let's be honest, in the eyes of so many others, people on death row are not people. They have no right to comfort, to dignity, or to hope. Let alone to religious freedom. Because these are rights that are only reserved for the living. I have absolute faith that the death penalty is going to be struck down in the courts one day, or it will be abolished by law. But our attitude towards people who have committed serious crimes is something that can never be reformed through legislation. That is something we can only accomplish through a revolution of love, and a resistance to the dehumanization that happens on death row.

I choose to support the Death Row Support Project because I believe that Domineque Ray was a human being who deserved so much better than the things we gave him. Not because he was innocent, but because his crime was inconsequential. Domineque Ray himself did not dispute the truth of his conviction. He also didn't argue against the justness, or even the constitutionality of his sentence, as I would have. All he wanted was to die with his faith advisor by his side...and we refused him. We refused him even that one little shred of decency and mercy. It's no wonder that so many people on death row around the United States exist without any affirmation of their basic humanity. So many die, completely alone, afraid, and they die alienated from any hope that they can be redeemed in this life or the next. That's what we allow to be done, in our name. That's what we allow through our indifference and our sense of moral righteousness. We endorse the notion, that what God has created, we have the right to tear down.

[background music]

But God has called you and we have the power to do lesser. We have a responsibility to breach that gap. It's on us to restore not only the humanity of men and women like Domineque Ray, but to refurbish our own humanity as well. To affirm the fundamental truth that Domineque Ray was one of us, and his rights were our rights; and his death, was our death. To say that his dignity, is our dignity. That the humanity we acknowledge in him, is the humanity we reveal in ourselves. I write for the Death Row Support Project because, if the tables were turned, I could only hope that someone would write to me. I hope you'll start writing, too.

[music]

J: The Dunker Punks podcast is the nationwide collaboration of modern-day stone catchers. That seems like something you would like to be involved in? Well, you already are. Listening to these inspiring stories, and living the Dunker Punk life, makes such an impact on the world around you. There's always more to be done, though, and if you have a story or a talent to share, email us at dpp@arlingtoncob.org, or find us on social media at Dunker Punks pod. Or you can share us with your friends, to be a light against the mean and cantankerous political posts. If you have a particular talent for typing what you hear, reach out to us. We're looking for someone who can transcribe our episodes.

This episode was produced by Emmett Witkovsky-Eldred. Executive producers are Suzanne Lay, and yours truly, Jacob Crouse. Until next time, keep showing the world you love them, Dunker Punks. Peace.

[music]