

SYMPOSIUM IGNITES STORM OF EMOTIONS

On the last night of February 2007, approximately 300 Avila students and community members were ushered into Goppert Theatre by dime-sized hail and torrential rain.

But they would be rewarded for braving the weather. They were here to participate in the two hour and forty-five minute

Forgiveness

& Reconciliation Symposium. They

would leave drenched in thought-provoking reflection about the value of human life. The Dead Man Walking Theatre Project swept attendees into an emotional evening with a range of presentations on forgiveness, death row, and peace.

The symposium began with an open-minded Interfaith Panel discussion where various representatives shared the Jewish, Hindu, Muslim and Christian perspective on forgiveness and reconciliation.

Although there were difficulties with the microphone either going off or getting suddenly loud during each presenter's speech, audience members heard the message loud and clear about the importance of forgiveness. Rabbi Vered Harris said that granting forgiveness and reconciliation tips the scales of balance for the whole world, for the better.

This thought was echoed by Arvind Khetia who added that Hindus believe there is divinity within every human being and that God says he will forgive your sins when you learn to forgive someone else.

Avila Librarian, Farruk Hassan, presented the Muslim perspective, shared by one-fifth of the world's population. She said that God has 99 names and many are related to mercy and forgiveness. She added that "God forgives us easily and he expects us to forgive too." Avila Professor, Mary Hynes, Ph.D., shared multiple Bible scriptures that teach followers to turn the other cheek and not cast stones. She spoke about the Catholic Bishops' movement to join with organizations

trying to put a stop to capital punishment; in part because it is pure retribution and Jesus taught us to forgive.

Following the panel discussion, the audience watched a stirring video on Restorative Justice. It documented the journey of two family members requesting to meet with the convicted killer of their relative. The purpose of the mediation project is to give power back to the victims and help them find closure with their situation.

When the now-adult daughter of the murdered woman learned that her mother's last words to her killers were "I forgive you and God will too", the daughter said it gave her peace to know her mother had some peace in her last moments. At the end of mediation, the convicted killer shared with the mediator "I'm not going to make the mistake again of doing something my conscience says ain't right". You could tell the audience was moved, by the sounds of sniffing or crying as they watched 15 minutes of selected clips of the 8-hour mediation session.

When the video ended, the audience was asked to gather in the lobby to participate in an interactive art therapy exhibit. Many



Sister Helen Prejean, Author of *Dead Man Walking*

attendees pieced together mirror pieces, cellophane paper, and cut out newspaper headlines for a collage. They were encouraged to create something that represented their thoughts about death row and our criminal justice system at a visual dialogue table with art supplies.

Amber Davis, a graduate student in the

Art Therapy program helped coordinate the project. She said, "Our goal was to bring the community in to express their thoughts and feelings." Throughout intermission, hidden voices interspersed throughout the lobby sang melodic tunes.

A stirring portion of the program was the opportunity to hear first-hand what life on death row was like. Joe Amrine, an exonerated death row inmate, and his lawyer, Sean O'Brien, J.D., shared the story of Amrine's life in prison for 17 years, before he was found not guilty and released.

As one of nine inmates whose appeal was denied by the Supreme Court, he was told one inmate would be executed on the first Tuesday of each of the next nine months. At the end of eight months, only Amrine and one other person were not executed. While Amrine spoke, the storm outside grew intense and audience members could hear the thunder roll and the sound of hail beating wildly on the Goppert Theatre roof.

The dramatic weather played like a movie soundtrack to the discussion, as Amrine said that when people tell him he looks good, he wants to reply "this is a masquerade, if you could see on the inside, I have issues. I have lots of problems. But I wouldn't trade it, I love being here...I love being here." Amrine shared with the audience that when a convicted felon serves their sentenced time and is released, they are provided: Section 8 Housing, food stamps, therapy, medical aid, and counseling to help them get a job. But when Amrine was found not guilty of a crime he had already served 17 years for on death row, they just opened the gate and he walked out – no planning, no assistance, nothing. Recently, he was also denied his case for punitive damages.

The highlight of the symposium was a lecture by Sister Helen Prejean, CSJ, "the death row nun". She said, "Granted, some people have done truly horrendous crimes

that outrage us. But then to take that outrage and say the only way to restore justice is to kill them; this behavior is killing the soul of this country."

She got involved with death row, because

she got involved with poor people, in her home state of Louisiana. The audience laughed as Sr. Helen joked that "if you would have given me a questionnaire when I became a nun, I wouldn't have said that I wanted to be a

death row nun. But if you Google 'death row nun' today, my name comes up...it's what every nun dreams of!"

Author of the book *Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States*, Sr. Helen stressed to audience members that the Avila theatre production, *Dead Man Walking*, is the "closest they will actually get to an execution". She said it "brings people in and deepens the journey that we all have to take so that we can ultimately choose life." She said, "there are three ways in our culture that we can go deeper into our souls; one way is education, one is religion, and the other is the arts". Earlier that day, Sr. Helen met privately with the cast of Avila's *Dead Man Walking* production. Cast member Andy Perkins said she was "the funniest person I've ever met." Whitney B. said she is really easy to talk to and instantly becomes your friend. Joy Donze relayed that Sr. Helen said she is traveling around the country to support and see the college and high school productions of *Dead Man Walking* because theatre is the most intimate way a story can be told and she is really passionate about this message getting out.

As attendees left the Goppert Theatre, they noticed the weather had let up and the rain and hail had subsided, but they carried a new storm internally. They had been presented a wide range of information on forgiveness and reconciliation, and only one plea from Sr. Helen: "Put your hands to some kind of action, even if it's just to keep the discussion going."

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