Living life on death row; a powerful reality

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By Josh Hall

Linda Taylor will never forget a visit to the Potosi Correctional Center over 10 years ago.

Potosi is home to 52 Missouri death row inmates, or "capital punishment offenders," as they are called by the Missouri Department of Corrections. That is where her son, Michael, has spent the last 18 years. He now waits for his sentence to be carried out.

Linda Taylor had not fully comprehended the reality of a death sentence. Not until that visit showed her firsthand.

Linda and George Taylor come see Michael about four times a year. It's usually a happy time for the Taylor family, but on this visit, they got a glimpse of what was soon to come.

Not far from them in the visiting area, children were saying their last good-byes to their dad, whose execution was hours away. Linda recalls the guards having to take the man's three children out of the visiting room as they cried hysterically.

"They were crying so hard because the state was going to kill him," Linda Taylor said. "Those three kids were victims…along with his wife being a widow.

"The death penalty creates more victims."

**A Death Sentence**

Michael was sentenced to death in 1991 for the abduction, rape, and murder, of 15-year-old Ann Harrison. On March 21, 1989, while under the influence of cocaine, Michael and Roderick Nunley forced Harrison into their stolen car while she was waiting at a bus stop. Nunley then drove to his mother's house, where Michael raped the victim. Afraid that she would later identify him, the two men decided to kill Harrison. Nunley retrieved two knifes from the kitchen, and both men stabbed her. They put her in the trunk of the car and parked it in a nearby neighborhood.

Michael and Nunley later confessed to the murder, and both pled guilty. They are now capital punishment offenders at the Potosi Correctional Center.

"I wish I could change it," Michael said. "I don't have any excuses for what happened, other than, it shouldn't have happened."

But Michael does not want to be executed. He points out other cases of first-degree murder, where the offender received life in prison instead of the death penalty.

"Being locked up for the rest of your life is a death sentence," Michael said. "It's a lasting death sentence."

**Early Trouble**

Linda remembers her son being very playful as a child, no different than any other kid his age. Michael played basketball, and football, but his favorite sport was baseball.

"Oh, he loved baseball," Linda recalls.

When Michael was younger, Linda worked at Ford motor company, and her husband, George, was a cook. Linda believes the start of Michael's deviant behavior was a result of the number of hours her and George spent at work.

Sitting in a visiting room in the basement of the Potosi facility 30 years later, Michael remembers first getting involved with drugs when he was 13. Around that time he also got into burglary. When he was 17, Michael was sent to prison for five years for auto theft.

He got out when he was 22, which is when he and Nunley murdered Harrison.

**Remembering the Victim**

Linda remembers sitting in the courtroom during Michael's sentencing trial in 1991. Across the courtroom sat Ann Harrison's parents.

While she wanted to, attorneys instructed Linda, not to say anything to them.

"I want to tell them that my heart bleeds for them, and I'm so sorry for their loss," Linda said. "I hate what happened to their daughter."

Michael hopes that God will forgive him for what he did in 1989, and says he thinks about Ann Harrison everyday.

"If I could go back to that day, their daughter would not have lost her life."

**Bonne Terre**

On Jan. 3, 2006, Michael learned that his execution date had been set for Feb. 1. He was taken to Bonne Terre, Mo., about 20 miles away from Potosi, where executions in Missouri are conducted.

Upon finding out the news, Linda's worst nightmare had come true, her son was about to die.

"You would think that somebody had just cut your heart out," Linda said. "I was a nervous wreck."

George and Linda stayed in Bonne Terre four days prior to the execution. They wanted to be in the witness room when it happened.

On the day of his execution, Michael, Linda, and George, talked about Michael's childhood, and all the good memories the three had shared together.

Michael was two hours away from being executed when he was read his death warrant, just a few feet away from the execution chamber. That is where Michael would be strapped to a gurney, and the execution would take place.

First, he would be injected with five grams of thiopental, which would render him unconscious, making him unable to feel pain. Next, 60 milligrams of pancuronium bromide would flow through his veins, paralyzing his muscles. Finally, a 240-milliequivelant injection of potassium chloride would stop his heart.

Michael remembers spending his last hours praying to God for forgiveness.

Soon after, Michael got news from the superintendent. A stay of execution had been put in place by the 8th circuit court and upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court, despite a request by the state for a last-minute execution.

"The superintendent told me the process was not going to go through," Michael said.

Michael said the tension did not subside, however. He remembered fellow inmate, Tim Johnston, who was given a stay, but was executed later that night when the stay was lifted. But Michael's execution didn't happen.

"I wouldn't wish that on anybody," Michael said. "Not even my worst enemy."

**Daily Life**

Nearly four years after he was scheduled to die by lethal injection, Michael sticks to a routine in his double-celled cage.

"It's a process of maintaining," Michael said. "You've got to maintain your sanity."

He begins the day by saying his prayers and doing a couple set of push-ups and sit-ups. Most days Michael is allowed a few hours of recreational time, where he is able to lift weights and play basketball. He has even participated in the prison's home run derby.

In his cell, it would seem like a normal life for most people, as he has access to his TV, 24 hours a day. Michael watches the Young and the Restless, Bones, Son's of Anarchy, and Grey's Anatomy. While he enjoys the freedom, Michael spends most of his time doing legal research in the library.

**Reason for Living**

Michael believes he can serve a purpose in life if he is kept alive.

While in prison, Michael said he has made efforts to make a difference in other people's lives. He has been involved in hospice care and the Youth Enlightenment Program, where he spoke to teens who were going in the same direction he was when he was younger.

Michael also believes he has learned from his mistakes by being in prison for over 20 years.

"You get to see what you did, reflect on that, and pass that on to someone who is on a deviant path," Michael said. "Everyday you have the opportunity to change someone's life… everyday."