

NEW HOPE HOUSE

Support for People on Georgia's Death Row and Their Families



2017 Holiday Edition

STANDING UP FOR LIFE IN A DEATH PENALTY STATE

By Mary Catherine Johnson



The newly renovated guesthouse is a bright blue ("Aruba Blue" to be specific!) beacon of light and life in a state that continues to carry out the death penalty.

One of the more memorable moments of 2017 for me happened in a courtroom in Forsyth, Georgia in June. Christopher Calmer was on trial for his life, convicted of killing a police officer and waiting to hear his fate: the death penalty or life imprisonment. Chris's lawyers had done an incredible job of telling the story of Chris's life that had been defined by chronic pain coupled with mental illness, giving the jury every possible reason to spare his life, yet the facts of this crime threatened to overshadow all of the mitigating evidence. When the judge told Chris to stand to receive his sentence, those of us sitting with him, including his mother, uncle and legal team, automatically stood up with Chris. Whatever sentence Chris was to receive, we would receive it with him. I held the hand of Chris's mother, and we were both shaking, preparing for the worst but hoping for the best. I thought that I was about to hear someone be sentenced to death for the first time, and I was filled with dread.



Christopher Calmer (right) looks back at his mother during his trial.

As the judge looked over the paper that the jury's foreperson had given him, he had a confused look on his face. "I don't see the page with the aggravating factors," he said to the foreperson. (In Georgia, the jury must find at least one aggravating factor in order to impose the death penalty; the murder of a peace officer is one such factor.)

"We didn't find any, judge." It took a moment for the meaning of that statement to sink in. No aggravating factors = no death penalty! I burst into tears, as did everyone around me. In that moment, life prevailed, and it was a glorious feeling.

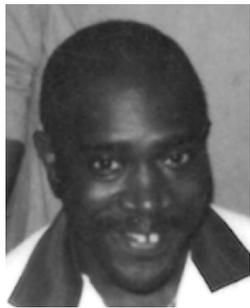
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Although Georgia continues to carry out executions at an alarming rate, we have not seen any new death sentences here since 2014. As I have said many times, this is largely due to the excellent work being done by the Georgia Office of the Capital Defender. District attorneys in Georgia continue to issue death notices, but this amazing



Mary Catherine (far right) with Brawny McCullough's legal team after Brawny received a life sentence.



Bo Tharpe

legal team works tirelessly to defend their clients, often avoiding the death penalty by keeping the cases from going to trial. There will still likely be several trials in 2018, but no matter what happens, I remain ready to attend all trials and hearings where the death penalty is at play to support the defendants, their families and their legal teams.

Another memorable moment of 2017 was the evening of Keith “Bo” Tharpe’s scheduled execution on September 26, when he received a last-minute stay from the U.S Supreme Court. As I reported in the last newsletter, a group of us were standing up for Bo’s life outside the prison, telling the stories of his life, when the news of his stay came. I have seen and spoken to Bo many times since that night, and it is always such a boost for me to get to hug him and hear his voice – to feel his amazing life force

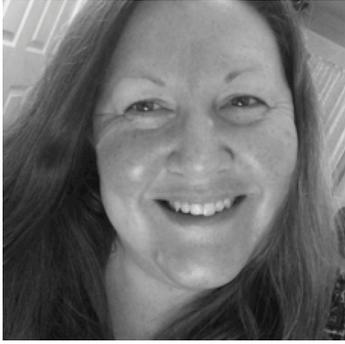
continue to take up space in this world. It has been an honor to host Bo’s friends, family members and legal team here at New Hope House as they accompanied him through the many challenges of these past few months. As this newsletter goes to press, we are still waiting for a decision from the U.S. Supreme Court on Bo’s case, and Bo continues to appreciate all of the prayers being offered on his behalf.

The execution of J.W. “Boy” Ledford on May 17 was one of the most heartbreaking moments of this past year. I got to know Boy’s family during this ordeal, and was in awe of their strength and courage, and of how they demonstrated their love for Boy through honoring his wishes during his final days. Social media allows me to stay in regular touch with this remarkable family, and I continue to admire them as they struggle to find meaningful ways to cope with their grief and honor Boy’s life.



Boy Ledford

The intermittent emotional highs and lows of this work are linked together by my daily activities that are grounded in a sincere desire to know the stories of those impacted most directly by the death penalty. I spend the majority of my time writing emails and cards to death row prisoners and visiting them; driving families to and from the prison for visitation; making phone calls and sending cards to friends and family members on anniversaries of executions, birthdays of their executed loved ones or just to check in; and preparing the guesthouse for visitors and then cooking for them. These activities bring me into community with the people served by New Hope House, where I hear their stories and learn what their needs are. Laughing, crying and exchanging stories with them is the best way I know how to affirm life in this death penalty state.



2017 Annual Appeal

Dear Friends of New Hope House,

As I complete my second year of service to New Hope House, I remain deeply committed to this ministry. Despite the horror and sadness that comes with this work, I feel a great deal of joy much of the time - the joy that comes when one's heart's desire meets the needs of the world.

Sound financial stewardship is one of my top priorities, and I come to you now to ask for your support in this regard. The death of Ed Weir and the retirement of Lora Weir have left a gap that was once filled by their substantial contributions from their government incomes, and I need your help to make up for this deficit. In addition to regular monthly expenses and the costs associated with hospitality for death row prisoners and their families, I have an ambitious Wish List for 2018, which I have constructed in concert with the wonderful New Hope House Board of Directors. This list includes becoming a 501(c)(3), establishing a website and listserv, continued enhancements to the guesthouse, and renovations to the portion of the staff house formerly occupied by the Weirs, to prepare for an individual or couple who feels called to come here to share this work with me.

As I write this, I have a view of the gorgeous woods surrounding New Hope House, and the last of the fall leaves are drifting to the ground. (Note to self: Put "leaf blower" on 2018 Wish List!) These are the woods that Ed and MaryRuth Weir and Bill and Lora Shain once lovingly cared for, and where I now have the great honor and privilege to be the caretaker. Even though I am physically alone out here, I am constantly surrounded by so much love from all of you who support this ministry, and this is what keeps me going. With your help, I will continue to face down the death penalty, and care for those impacted by it, for a long time to come.

With gratitude and warm holiday wishes ~

Mary Catherine

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OUR MINISTRY

New Hope House is a Christian community offering hospitality to families of people on Georgia's death row and support to people whose family members are involved in death penalty trials. We also visit people on death row and work to replace the death penalty with just alternatives.

New Hope House is part of Possum Trot Ministries, a nonprofit (501c4) organization. We are financially dependent on gifts (not tax deductible).

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June 29-July 2, 2017. For the past five years I have participated in *Starvin' For Justice: The Annual Fast & Vigil to Abolish the Death Penalty* at the U.S. Supreme Court. This amazing group includes death row exonerees, death row family members, murder victim family members and many other activists working to end the death penalty in the U.S.