

Scrap death penalty, bereaved families say

Murder victims' kin want debate on capital punishment, arguing it brings no closure

Bud Welch lost his only daughter, Julie, in the Oklahoma City bombing that claimed the lives of 168 people on April 19, 1995. His 23-year-old daughter was working as a Spanish translator at the Social Security Administration in the federal building targeted.

Until the tragedy, Welch, who had operated a Texaco gas station for 37 years, had opposed the death penalty all his life. But the incident affected him so deeply that he wanted the two bombers executed.



"I was so full of anger, so full of revenge. I wanted the death penalty both for Timothy McVeigh and

Terry Nicols," Welch said in a recent interview in Tokyo, revealing that after his daughter's death he had self-medicated with alcohol to such an extent that his body ached from alcohol poisoning. He was also smoking four packs of cigarettes a day, he said.

Amid his grief and anger, however, Welch said he began to question how he could move forward with his life. After nearly a year's reflection, he had rationalized the issue and felt strongly that executing the perpetrators was not going to help him.

"I reached a conclusion that on the day we take Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nicols from their cage to kill them, it will simply be not part of my healing process. That killing wasn't

Death penalty opponent: Bud Welch, who lost his daughter in the Oklahoma City bombing, gives an interview to The Japan Times in Tokyo on Thursday. SETSUKO KAMIYA PHOTO

going to help me," Welch said.

In fact, on June 11, 2001, the day McVeigh was executed, Welch said he felt nothing out of the ordinary and did not feel that his wounds had healed. Several family members of the 168 victims have come to him after the execution and told him that it didn't help them either, he noted.

About 1 1/2 years after his beloved daughter's death, Welch began to travel domestically and internationally to campaign against the death penalty and raise awareness of the fact that, contrary to what many believe, families of murder victims do not necessarily support executions.

Welch is currently visiting Japan along with four other Americans who are members of the Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights. Through June and early July, the group is touring East Asia to share their experiences in the hope that they will help promote public debate about the death penalty in societies that still use capital punishment.

The group, which arrived in Japan after visiting South Korea, began their speaking tour in Tokyo on Friday. After leaving the capital, they will this week continue their travels to Kobe, Kyoto, Hiroshima and Okayama. Their tour is being supported by the European Union, whose member states have all abolished the death penalty and are pushing Japan, the United States and other countries and regions to follow suit.

Among the members visiting Japan is Bob Curley from Massachusetts, a technical assistance official at the Cambridge Fire Department. On Oct. 1, 1997, Curley's 10-year-old son, Jeffrey, was sexually abused and murdered by two men. The men stole the boy's bike and lured him to their car with the promise of getting him a new one.

In the months that followed, Curley led the political fight to reinstate the death penalty in Massachusetts and started a political debate on the issue.

"Losing a family member, a loved one like that, I would think you would be insane not to seek that revenge. I was with so much anger and so much pain," said Curley, whose previous opinion about the death penalty had swayed both ways.

As he observed the trials of the two murderers, however, Curley said he began to realize that the criminal justice

system was not being applied fairly. The main perpetrator was convicted of second-degree murder and a life term with the possibility of parole. But the other man, who Curley said was the "tag along," was convicted of murder in the first degree and a life term without parole.

The financial situation of the two families made the difference as the main culprit's family was able to hire a better lawyer, Curley observed.

"The criminal justice system is a very good system but it's not perfect. I was able to see that firsthand, and was able to take a step back and take a good look at the death penalty," he said.



On a mission: Bob Curley from Massachusetts, whose son was murdered, talks about capital punishment in Tokyo on Thursday.

Meeting Welch and other families of the victims who were against capital punishment also helped him through the process. "Until that point, I would feel obligated, like I would be disrespectful to Jeffrey if I wasn't in support of the death penalty," Curley said.

It took a couple of years before Curley could publicly or privately admit that he had changed his mind. But the change doesn't mean that he has forgiven the perpetrators, he said, adding that he also respects other opinions victims' families may hold toward the death penalty.

"I think the best way to honor Jeff is to live my life and try to do much good," said Curley, who often works on child safety and supports the rights of victims.

A public opinion poll by the Japanese government in December revealed that 85 percent of those surveyed said they supported the death penalty. Among the major reasons of support, 54.1 percent replied that they believed that abolishing executions will not heal the pain of the victims and their families.

To a multiple choice question, 53.2 percent also said that those who committed heinous crimes should atone for it with

their lives. Another 51.5 percent said abolishing the death penalty would increase heinous crimes.

Welch, however, rejected these opinions, pointing out that perpetrators do not care what is written in the law.

"The justice system is about trying to bring justice to what happened, but also having a system that corrects or stopping that from happening in the future," he said. "I think that's where the death penalty really fails dramatically because (perpetrators) didn't care about the laws on the book. They couldn't care less," Welch said. "The only way you can stop those kinds of people is to have information and to be able to physically stop them before it happens," he said.

Welch, who is visiting Japan for the second time to share his experience, also believes that speaking about his experience and views is a mission on behalf of his daughter, who was in fact an antideath penalty advocate. "It's like I'm keeping her alive. Julie, if she were living, would be 38 now. She'll be turning 39 in September. But she will always be 23 years old."

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