

"But I say to you..."

PTS Alum Reflects on Her Cousin's Execution

by Erika Marksbury

In April of 2002, Sarah Griffith, then an M.Div. senior at PTS, made the following disclaimer to those who had gathered in Stuart Hall to hear her speak: "I am not telling my story because I want recognition or applause for being with my cousin at this point in his life. I did what families across the country do when their loved one is executed by the state.

"I am not telling my story in order to teach others how to do prison ministry or to be an example of how to be a good chaplain or spiritual advisor or Christian.

"I am not telling my story because I want sympathy.

"I am telling my story because I feel it is my duty to report what is intentionally kept secret and hidden from the majority of our country's population. Regardless of your political position for or against the death penalty, I believe everyone needs to know what actually happens when the death penalty is enacted. My story will provide you with one perspective, as a family member of the executed one...."

She then shared her reflections on the death of her cousin, Paul Kreutzer, at the hands of the State of Missouri, and of her last days with him as his family member, friend, and, at his request, spiritual advisor. She recounted being repeatedly assured by prison staff that since Kreutzer was "saved," his impending death need not worry her. She lamented that she was not allowed to touch Kreutzer, nor were any of his family or friends, even in his last hours. She relived aloud her witness of the execution, and explained that the pronouncement of "mission accomplished" from an overhead speaker meant her cousin was dead.

She told her story again this past spring on the steps of the Trenton State House, at the Easter Vigil Against the Death Penalty sponsored annually by PTS student organizations. She wrote of the experience for seminary classes, and it informed her work at Rutgers University, where she graduated in May with a Masters of Social Work. Telling the story helps her heal, she says, but it also makes a painful truth even more real.

She speaks for Kreutzer, who told her that he wanted to be the last person executed. And although that hope went unfulfilled—the U.S. has put to death more than sixty-eight people since Kreutzer's April 10, 2002, execution—Griffith feels compelled to speak, as her part in helping end the practice that killed him.

In the days before the execution, Griffith was overwhelmed with questions about God's presence in the midst of the horror surrounding her. And though two other (prison-employed) chaplains were present with

Kreutzer's family, they were eerily silent, she reports. Griffith read Scripture to her family, prayed with them, and shared with them happy memories of her cousin.

But happy memories, obviously, aren't all that remain. Now to interrupt her reminiscences of a young Kreutzer rescuing kittens or picking strawberries with her and her siblings, into Griffith's mind will forever flash another picture of her cousin: thirty years old, lying on a gurney, poison racing through his veins, an incarnate revenge for the life he had taken ten years earlier. And in her outrage that this cycle of violence seems unending, Griffith will continue to decry it throughout her future work.

Ordained in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) last October, Griffith will spend the next two years as associate minister of outreach at Plymouth Congregational Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota. As a participant in the Transition into Ministry program funded by Lilly Endowment, Inc., she will serve as a bridge between the church and the community. She is excited that the position highlights what she considers the heart of the gospel: "Jesus' ministry of active compassion."

Until then, she will continue as chaplain and counselor at Womanspace, a nonprofit agency providing services to women in crisis in Mercer County, New Jersey. She values her work at Womanspace as one way of positively participating in a system that can help others—undoing the damage that similar systems did to her cousin.

"My work with Womanspace helps address the issues that surrounded Paul's case, like sexual abuse—Paul was abused, and then became an abuser," she says. "I hear the stories of these women, who've been raped and abused, but I also have the perspective of having a family member who has been the rapist and the abuser.... It just makes it more real. It helps me understand the depths of human suffering. I mourn for my cousin's victims family because I know the pain of losing a loved one to senseless violence." ■



Paul Kreutzer, as a child, at his grandparents' farm



Sarah Griffith

Photo: Beth Godfrey

Erika Marksbury graduated from PTS in May 2003.

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<http://venus.soci.niu.edu/~archives/ABOLISH/nov98/0681.html>
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