

**THE DAILY BRUIN ONLINE**

**4/7/2006**

<http://www.dailybruin.ucla.edu/news/articles.asp?id=36598>

## **Conference rounds up death penalty opponents**

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As part of "The Faces of Wrongful Conviction" conference to be held at UCLA this weekend, several exonerated individuals who have collectively spent more than 356 years combined in prison are scheduled to tell their stories Saturday in front of an audience of students, political leaders, legal experts and other advocates for abolishing capital punishment,

The conference, hosted by the UCLA School of Law, plans to examine the causes and consequences of wrongful conviction and discuss the application of the death penalty in California.

The California Commission on the Fair Administration of Justice will also hold one of its meetings during the conference.

The 22-person commission was created by the California Senate in 2004 to investigate problems in the criminal justice system and make recommendations to the state Legislature by the end of 2007.

"We believe there is a need to streamline and narrow the cases that are eligible for the death penalty," said state Sen. Gloria Romero, D-Los Angeles.

"That's why we created the commission – to come up with some recommendations to reform the application of the law in California."

Besides becoming the largest gathering of California's exonerated individuals, the conference also aims to bring together a number of important figures in the movement for abolishing the death penalty.

"This is a historic conference," said David Elliot, communications director for the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty, "because nowhere in the United States and not in the modern history of the anti-death-penalty movement have so many experts come together under one roof to discuss the innocence issue."

Key speakers at the event include Romero, Barry Scheck, co-director of the Innocence Project, two eminent death-penalty lawyers, Stephen Bright and Bryan Stevenson, and judge Kenneth Starr.

"I think it is an opportunity for people working on these issues in different arenas to gather together and make connections and thereby perhaps embark on a strategic effort," said Cathy Mayorkas, executive director of public interest law and policy at UCLA.

Mayorkas said that the diversity of the participants lends itself to a large variety of goals, methods and perspectives relating to the main issues of wrongful conviction and the death penalty.

Topics to be discussed at the conference include the impact of race and geography on the probability of wrongful conviction and sentencing, as well as improved technologies – such as DNA testing – used to determine innocence.

In the U.S., 123 people have been exonerated and released from death row since 1973, according to the Death Penalty Information Center Web site. The average time spent in prison by people wrongfully sentenced to death is nine years.

"The problem is when it comes to the death penalty, there is no instant replay; there's not do-overs. You can't un-execute someone," Elliot said.

Elliot said there is growing momentum for the movement nationwide, citing New Jersey's passage of a moratorium on the death penalty.

With 649 inmates, California currently holds about 20 percent of all death row inmates in the country.

"California has by far the largest death-row population in the United States," Elliot said. "And yet California has a particular hesitation when it comes to the death penalty. The state is really starting to think about the issue."

Only 13 people have been executed in California since the death penalty was reinstated in 1977.

"People are starting to realize that the criminal justice system isn't always getting it right," Elliot said.

A moratorium is being considered by California legislators, but Elliot said it is not expected to pass.

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