

Center for Death Penalty Studies at Lamar University

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LAMAR UNIVERSITY
 CENTER FOR DEATH PENALTY
 STUDIES
 P.O. Box 10026, Beaumont, TX
 77710
 TELEPHONE (409) 880-8549
 FACSIMILE (409) 880-2324

CDPL Mission:

A Dialogue worth a Lifetime >

The Center for Death Penalty Studies, as part of the Criminal Justice Department, was founded in December 2013 by the Center's Director, Dr. Sanaz Alasti and Dr. Eric Bronson, Director of Strategic Planning and Development. This Center's mission is to promote engaged research, scholarship and discussion, with a focus on the ways in which issues of capital punishment and democracy impact the lives of global citizens.

GHOSTS OF DEATH ROW

Sean Sellers was born to a 16-year-old mother and raised by various family members. As a sophomore at Putnam City High School in Oklahoma, Sellers was said to drink his own blood, carry the Satanic Bible to class, and converse with demons. In his own blood he wrote, "I renounce God. I renounce Christ. I will serve only Satan. To my enemies, death".

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Samereh Alinejad forgave her son's killer

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRIS CASTILLO

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Chris Castillo and his mother



Sean Sellers

FORGIVENESS THAT WILL NEVER BE FORGOTTEN

In April of 2014, a grief stricken mother by the name of Samereh Alinejad was faced with a decision to participate in the Islamic Sharia Law or allow the man who murdered her son to be set free.

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Upcoming Executions in Texas - Page 7



CENTER FOR DEATH PENALTY STUDIES
LAMAR UNIVERSITY

CDPL Directors



Criminal Justice Faculty and Students at the Contemporary Issues in Criminal Justice workshop in Spain



Dr. Sanaz Alasti

Center for Death Penalty Studies in Spain

The Contemporary Issues in the Criminal Justice Systems workshop took place over a two-day period from May 21-22, 2015 at the Onati International Institute for the Sociology of Law.

The workshop focused on critical issues in contemporary criminal justice in order to provide a profound collective reflect on the new problems facing criminal justice systems in the world.

Professor Sanaz Alasti brought 25 participants from various prestigious universities, such as Harvard University, University of Hull in England, Ariel University in Israel, Alexandria University in Egypt and University of Naples in Italy to talk about various aspects of the criminal justice systems.

The workshop addressed the major problems of justice from the harsh punishments, constitutional foundations of criminal justice, Middle Eastern criminal justice systems, and mediation. Each of the panels were a self-contained, stand-alone session, but participants were expected to attend them all because every one of them emphasized key principles of good research design in the field of criminal justice systems.

The workshops brought together leading international scholars, practitioners and activists from the United States, Europe and Middle Eastern countries for intensive discussions. This workshop was the result of a competition by scholars who propose topics and invite participants.

Dr. Sanaz Alasti is Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice at Lamar University, Texas State University, where she teaches criminal justice and legal classes. She is the author of several books on criminal law, the criminal justice system, and comparative punishment practices. In addition to her professional experience as a post-doctorate at Harvard University School of Law. Alasti attended numerous conferences in the US, Middle East and Europe to discuss the arbitrariness of capital punishment.



Dr. Eric Bronson is Associate Professor of Criminal Justice & Director of the Criminal Justice Program at Lamar University in Texas. His teaching and research interests include inmate subcultures, newsworthiness of the death penalty, and victim closure.

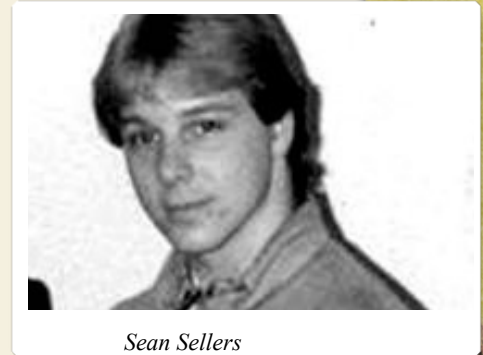
Ghosts of Death Row

Brittany Wood, Criminal Justice Graduate Student, Lamar University, bawood@lamar.edu

Sean Sellers was born to a 16-year-old mother and raised by various family members. As a sophomore at Putnam City High School in Oklahoma, Sellers was said to drink his own blood, carry the Satanic Bible to class, and converse with demons. In his own blood he wrote, "I renounce God. I renounce Christ. I will serve only Satan. To my enemies, death". September 8, 1985, Sellers, 16, shot and killed convenience store clerk Robert Bower. Six months passed and on March 5, 1986 Sellers shot and killed his mother and stepfather while they slept in bed. Sellers willingly admitted his part in the crime as a practicing Satanist. He was sentenced to death at 17 years of age. While on death row, Sellers found a new religion: Christianity. He began to write and produce artwork surrounding his newfound religious awakening. He began a religious ministry from prison and viewed his past as a great example to other young adults struggling with their faith, even though others say it was an act. In post-conviction examinations, Sellers was found to be chronically psychotic and to display symptoms of paranoid schizophrenia and other major mood disorders. He was diagnosed with Multiple Personality Disorder (MPI), now known as Dissociative Identity Disorder, in 1992. The diagnosis, by a Texas psychiatrist, came 6 years after Sellers was sentenced. Oklahoma, currently, has a legal procedure that allows post-trial consideration of newly discovered evidence under certain circumstances. According to Sellers attorney, Steve Presson, Sellers' case overwhelmingly met the circumstances.

The Oklahoma Court of Criminal Appeals (OCCA) refused to consider the evidence believing that Sellers waived his right to the mental health evaluation during his trial. The panel concluded that while Sellers may have been insane at the time of his crimes, the claim was made too late to be

raised on appeal. The Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals was shocked with the OCCA's decision, and wrote that OCCA made several errors in the case. However, due to the limited nature of habeas corpus relief, the Tenth Circuit Court would not intervene. One of the trial jurors, Diana Craun, appealed for clemency recalling that the jury never believed that he would be executed but that they feared his early release if they sentenced him to life imprisonment. Before the parole board she stated, "It is very obvious that he's found God, and God has changed his life. I was touched...and I truly don't want him executed." There were two options at the time Sellers was sentenced: a life sentence with the possibility of parole or the death penalty. Oklahoma now has a third alternative: life without the possibility of parole, which was instated in 1987, one year after his sentencing. Archbishop Desmond Tutu also wrote a letter addressing his disapproval of the death sentencing. In a letter to Gov. Frank Keating, Tutu wrote that the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child provides that "neither capital punishment nor life imprisonment without possibility of release shall be imposed for crimes committed by persons below 18 years of age." The United States has never ratified the CRC, which includes Article 6.1 stating, "States Parties recognize that every child has the inherent right to life". On January 27, 1999 the Oklahoma Pardon and Parole Board voted 5-0 to deny Sellers clemency. The board was swayed by the testimony of the prison officials who claimed they witnessed his attorney coaching him in his



Sean Sellers

Every issue an author will examine and detail past or present death row cases. The overwhelmingly sensitive topic of death sentencing is something that should be discussed. We hope that the cases highlighted in this section will provide the catalyst to begin open discussion and consideration of the abolishment of the death penalty completely. If you feel that a case should be examined or would like to become involved with this delicate topic feel free to contact the author by the email address provided.

An Interview with Chris Castillo: Forgiving Mother's Killer Helped Healing Process

Chris Castillo has been named the Texas/National Organizer with Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation. Castillo, based in Beaumont, works with family members throughout Texas and in numerous other states. He has more than a decade of marketing and public relations experience. He also has a personal connection to this issue - his mother was murdered in November 1991, and he has taken a stance against the death penalty for years.

INTERVIEW BY KNECO JONES (CRIMINAL JUSTICE GRADUATE STUDENT OF LAMAR UNI.)

1. What was your mother's cause of death?

My mother was strangled to death in the bedroom of her Houston home.

2. How do you feel you can make a difference within the population of murder victims' families?

I try to make a difference by telling my story of murder and forgiveness to people. I was talked into doing prison ministry many years after my mother's murder. I did it to help keep others from suffering the pain of loss that I had felt. My hope was to teach inmates empathy. I did that but also learned to forgive, and freed myself from the anger and hatred I had for the men who killed my mother.

3. If there was something you could say to your mother's perpetrator, what would it be?

I would tell them I pray that you find forgiveness from God. And I would ask them why they killed my mother.

4. Was your mother's perpetrator punished for his/her crime?

My mother was killed by at least two men who are from Honduras. They killed her and fled the U.S. to escape prosecution. The case remains unsolved.

5. Were you, at all, involved in the punishment process of your mother's assailant? If not, do you feel you should have been involved in the process and why?

No, because the men escaped. I feel that crime victims always should be able to talk with the district attorney who takes the case to trial.

6. Are you against the Death Penalty? If so, what are your reasons for being against the Death Penalty?

Yes, I am against the death penalty because it only causes more victims and solves nothing. It takes too long for crime victims' to get justice and they must wait as many as 20 years for the case to be resolved. Every time the case comes up for appeal it reopens the crime victims wound. Both the family of the crime victim and the family of the assailant feel the pain of death. As well, it costs 2 to 3 times more financially to pay for a death penalty case in Texas vs. a non-death penalty case.

7. What other types of punishments do you feel would be appropriate for the type of crime committed against your mother other than the death penalty?

I believe in life in prison without the possibility of parole is a good alternative.

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Chris Castillo and his mother

It took me several years to forgive the men who killed my mother. I worked with a program called Bridges to Life for many years before I started feeling that the inmates in prison were very much like me.

Blurred Lines: Self Defense or Murder

CYNTOIA BROWN IN TENNESSEE & REYHANEH JABBARİ IN IRAN

By Crystal Jones, Criminal Justice graduate student of Lamar University

Reyhaneh Jabbari and Cyntoia Brown, both accused of murder, claimed they killed in self-defense but only one was sentenced to death and executed. Reyhaneh was executed on October 25, 2014 after killing her alleged rapists in self-defense. When this crime took place, in 2007, Reyhaneh was nineteen years old and spent seven years on death row. Although, she plead guilty to the crime there was still a part of the story that was not investigated thoroughly, putting solely blame onto her. "Jabbari confessed to stabbing Morteza Abdolali Sarbandi in the back in the apartment where he allegedly tried to sexually abuse her. She claimed that another man in the apartment was the one who killed Sarbandi, though she refused to identify him. According to Amnesty International, Jabbari's claims were

never properly investigated." Despite, Amnesty International, the UN, and European Union calls for a retrial and pleas for clemency the courts found her guilty and proceeded for the execution to be carried out. In Iran, Jabbari was executed for killing the man she says tried to rape her. In Iran if a woman is raped and is unable to prove the accusation has truth or not, she might be charged with adultery. If a woman kills her attacker, she can be charged with murder. Both are punishable by death. "In Iran, if a woman is raped, she is considered an adulteress and faces death by stoning. But if a woman fights off a sexual predator and kills him, she might then be tried for murder and face death by hanging if she cannot prove that it is self-defense." In comparison, Cyntoia Brown of Tennessee, who was sixteen at the time of conviction killed one of

her clients and claimed the act was in self-defense. She was a working girl and killed the forty-three year-old guy who picked her up for sex. She claimed that he began to behave strangely. "He drove her back to his house where his strange behavior frightened her and made her want to escape. When she couldn't sneak away, she said she wanted to nap. He laid down with her but didn't fall asleep. He kept getting up and standing over her. She became more panicked; convinced something was going to happen to her. Finally, she shrugged off his advances and, as he rolled over, she took a gun from her purse and shot him once in the head." In this case, she was prosecuted and found guilty. She was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole. *Continued on Page 8*



Reyhaneh Jabbari



Cyntoia Brown

Forgiveness That Will Never be Forgotten

By AmunIQUE Love, Criminal Justice graduate student of Lamar University

In April of 2014, a grief stricken mother by the name of Samereh Alinejad was faced with a decision to participate in the Islamic Sharia Law or allow the man who murdered her son to be set free. In the autumn of 2007, Samereh Alinejad's son Abdollah Hosseinzadeh was stabbed to death in a street brawl in Iran. This would be the second child she lost in a tragic manner. The infuriated mother was certain that when the day came for the sentencing of Balal, her son's murderer, that she would exercise her right to kick the chair from under this murderer's feet. Days before the execution was to take place, her thoughts were ambivalent and she even had dreams of her son speaking to her. "Ten days before the execution was due I saw my son in a dream asking me not to take revenge, but I couldn't convince myself to forgive," she told the Guardian. "Two nights before that day, I saw him in the dream once again, but this time he refused to speak to me." (Dehghan, 2014)

Balal's mother embraced after Samereh's husband removed the noose from around their son's murderer's neck.



Samereh Alinejad forgave her son's killer

When the day came to administer the ultimate form of revenge, Alinejad shocked the crowd of men, women, and children. She looked her son's killer in the eye, slapped his face, and forgave him publicly. Samereh Alinejad and

This act of forgiveness went viral on social media news, and struck hearts around the globe. "Forgiveness liberates the soul. That is why it is such a powerful weapon" stated Nelson Mandela 1993 Nobel Peace Prize winner. We can be sure that it takes an insurmountable amount of strength and courage to forgive the murderer of your child. However to take a step beyond forgiveness and to spare a life of another human, whom in the moment had no regard for the life of your love one is astonishing. This remarkable act of courage, humility, and more over forgiveness is motivation to all. For this reason Lamar University Center for Death Penalty Studies would like to nominate Samereh Alinejad for the Nobel Peace Prize.

"Forgiveness liberates the soul. That is why it is such a powerful weapon" stated Nelson Mandela 1993 Nobel Peace Prize winner.



Lamar Students supporting Samereh

Latest News & Upcoming Executions in Texas

TEXAS DEATH ROW CONTINUES TO SHRINK

With 2015 two-thirds over, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice this year has yet to process a single new prisoner into its death row unit in Huntsville. The dramatic slowdown has caused the Polunsky Unit's population to plunge to 257 residents, the lowest number since it peaked at 460 in 1999. The main reason is a drop in new death sentences. In 1999, 48 people were sentenced to Texas death row, according to BJS data. In 2008, that number was nine — and has stayed in that range ever since. This year, there have been no new death sentences so far, according to the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ).

JUVENILE DEATH PENALTY IN PAKISTAN

Courts in Pakistan have refused to consider evidence that a man set to be executed at dawn on Tuesday, September 29 was a child at the time of his conviction. Ansar Iqbal was arrested in 1994 on murder charges — which he denies — and sentenced to death in 1996, despite telling the court he was 15 at the time of his arrest.

CRUCIFIXION IN SAUDI ARABIA:

Ali al-Nimr, the nephew of firebrand Shiite cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, faces execution by beheading and an additional rare punishment of “crucifixion,” which means publicly displaying the body after death as a warning to others, according to Saudi state media. Ansar Iqbal, who comes from a poor family, was not registered at birth. At trial, he presented school records and a bay form which showed he was a child of 15 at the time of arrest. The Court dismissed the records. They decided to rely on a guess given by police instead — they guessed he was “22-23”.

Juan Garcia (October 6)

Licho Escamilla (October 14)

Christopher Wilkins (October 28)

Julius Murphy (November 10)

Gilmar Guevara (November 10)

Raohael Holiday (November 18)



THE SOUTH HAS THE HIGHEST MURDER RATE

This November the Justice Department released its annual Uniform Crime Report for 2013. The report revealed an overall decline of 5.2% in the national murder rate, but the South again had the highest murder rate (5.3). The Northeast had the lowest murder rate—3.5 murders per 100,000 people—and the sharpest decline from last year. The West had the second-lowest murder rate (4.0), followed by the Midwest (4.5). The states with the highest murder rates in the country were Louisiana (10.8) and Alabama (7.2). The states with the lowest rates were Iowa (1.4) and Hawaii (1.5). The Northeast has also had the fewest executions in the modern era, with 4, and none since 2005. The South has had the highest number of executions (1,132) since 1976. The average murder rate for states with the death penalty (4.4) was higher than the average rate for states without the death penalty (3.4).

US SUPREME COURT ALLOWS USE OF EXECUTION DRUG

On June 29, 2015, in a 5-4 decision, the U.S. Supreme Court issued its opinion in *Glossip v. Gross*, ruling that the anti-anxiety medication midazolam is

three-drug lethal injection formula. The case was brought by death row prisoners in Oklahoma, who argued that the state's use of midazolam in this manner creates an “objectively intolerable risk of harm.”

INNOCENCE: ALFRED DEWAYNE BROWN IS RELEASED FROM TEXAS DEATH ROW

Texas prosecutors in Harris County announced on June 8 that they have dismissed charges against Alfred Dewayne Brown, who had been sentenced to death in 2005 for the murders of a Houston police officer and a store clerk during a robbery. The Texas Court of Criminal Appeals had overturned Brown's conviction last year because prosecutors withheld a phone record that supported Brown's alibi. He is the 154th person exonerated from death row since 1973, the 13th in Texas, and the fourth in 2015.

REPUBLICANS AGAINST THE DEATH PENALTY

A Pew Research survey published this April indicates support for capital punishment among Republicans has fallen 10 percent in the past two decades. While the decline appears gradual, Gallup Poll numbers show that Republican support for the death penalty dropped 5 percent from 2013 to 2014, from 81 percent to 76 percent. *Continued on*

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8. Do you believe in forgiveness? Why or Why not?

Yes. You forgive to help heal yourself, it's not for the assailant. It helps you continue your life and find peace in your walk with God.

9. At what point in your life, did you begin to forgive your mother's perpetrator?

It took me several years to forgive the men who killed my mother. I worked with a program called Bridges to Life for many years before I started feeling that the inmates in prison were very much like me. All of us had done things we were ashamed of that were against the law. I just didn't get caught. For that reason I feel I am more alike than different than most of the men I've met in prison. We are all Children of God.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5

In conclusion, both cases are very similar except one's life was taken away. The Iran criminal justice system is very flawed, and the Cyntoia Brown case shows just how unfair it is. It was also confirmed that Cyntoia had mental illnesses and had a poor background being placed in foster care and homeless. At the time of the crime she was sixteen years old, had nowhere to live and knew nothing about self-respect or how she

would want to be treated by others. "In this case, the defendant argued that she killed the victim in self-defense after he made unwelcome sexual advances toward her." This is the same argument that Jabbari claimed. Cyntoia was a child at the time of the crime, and during the sentencing phase the jurors did not see a sixteen year-old homeless child working the streets to survive, but a mature woman.

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Nebraska on Wednesday, May 27 became the first conservative state in more than four decades to repeal the death penalty. Nebraska legislators overrode a veto from the state's governor, Republican Pete Ricketts, with the bare minimum number of votes needed to force through a bill in the state's unicameral legislature. Ricketts vetoed the bill last week, arguing the state should at least have the option to pursue capital punishment to protect the public, even if used rarely. Despite the news regarding the abolition of death penalty, the referendum to repeal a law that abolished the death penalty in Nebraska has passed with enough approved signatures and will now be on the ballot during the 2016 general election on Nov. 8.

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If clemency had been granted Sellers sentence would have been converted to life without the possibility of parole. The United States Supreme Court denied Sellers last appeal on Wednesday, February 3, 1999 at 7 p.m. He was executed on February 4, 1999 at 12:17 a.m., a little over five hours after his last appeal was denied. Sellers', 29 years of age at the time, spoke his last words singing, "Set my spirit free that I might praise thee. Set my spirit free that I might worship thee". Sean is one of over 20 individuals put to death after the death penalty was reinstated in the United States in 1976. The United States was and is in clear violation of Article 6.2 of the CRC, which reads "States parties shall ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child" while it still holds the possibility of delivering a death sentence to a juvenile.



Your Success, Our Support: Students' Success Story

Mayra Picon, Former Criminal Justice Graduate Student, Lamar University - Current: Ph.D student, Florida State University

The Criminal Justice program at Lamar University, along with the supportive faculty, provided me with many opportunities to become a successful, well-rounded individual.

A required internship as an undergraduate student eventually led to my first job in the field, which I worked in as I completed my Masters degree. Now, as a first-year doctoral student studying Criminology and Criminal Justice at Florida State University, I feel confident knowing that Lamar has prepared me with the knowledge and experience that a successful career in academia requires.

Girraud Stephens, Lamar University, Criminal Justice - Current: Emerging Leader Intern Washington, DC

The Congressional Black Caucus Foundation Internship program has prepared me to become a principled leader, skilled policy analyst and informed advocate on Capitol Hill. Lamar University's Criminal Justice Department was very instrumental in helping develop the skills necessary to succeed in any government arena.

Activities and Internships: U.S. Department of Interior –Bureau of Land Management, Office of Safety, Occupational Health and Emergency Management, Congressional Black Caucus Foundation Leadership Institute student



Mayra Picon



Girraud Stephens

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- BS Criminal Justice
- MS Criminal Justice

Contact Us: Department of Sociology, Social Work and Criminal Justice
Lamar University
Maes Building, Room 55
P.O. Box 10026

Beaumont, TX 77710
Phone: 409-880-8538
Fax: 409-880-2324

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EDITOR: BRITTANY WOOD
ASSOCIATE EDITOR: AMUNIQUE LOVE
MANAGING EDITOR: DR. SANAZ ALASTI

Inquiries: For information concerning CDPL & membership, please contact: P.O. Box 10026, Beaumont, TX 77710
Email: salasti@lamar.edu



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