
Interview: Bill Pelke



Capital Punishment Won't Heal Loss When Murder Strikes

Bill Pelke is president and co-founder of the organization Journey of Hope . . . From Violence to Healing (www.journeyofhope.org). Pelke's grandmother was bludgeoned to death in Indiana in 1985 by four teenage girls, seeking money to play a video game. He describes here the account of his transformation, from being a supporter of capital punishment, to his leading role today in fighting it. EIR met Pelke on April 15, when he addressed a rally at the Pennsylvania state capitol in Harrisburg, in support of a bill to impose a moratorium on executions in that state. He was interviewed by Marianna Wertz on April 18.

EIR: What is the Journey of Hope trying to accomplish?

Pelke: The Journey of Hope . . . From Violence to Healing is led by murder victims' family members who are opposed to the death penalty in all situations. We are joined by death row families, death row survivors (people who've been on death row and were found to be innocent), along with other people who support abolition of the death penalty. We share our stories, of from violence to healing, how violence did come into our lives, and the subsequent healing that we've been able to get; and sharing our stories about how the death penalty has nothing to do with what murder victims' family members need when a loved one has been killed.

Quite often, people want the death penalty purely as a matter of revenge, and we say that revenge is not the answer, it's just never the answer. The answer is love and compassion for all of humanity, and for people who have done terrible things; to hate the sin but love the sinner, is sort of our philosophy.

EIR: Can you tell me what happened to your grandmother?

Pelke: Sure. There were four ninth-grade girls, from Lew Wallace High School in Gary, Indiana, who decided on May 14, 1985, that they were going to skip school during their lunch hour. They went to one of the girl's homes, they drank some wine, they smoked some marijuana, they decided they would like to play video arcade games at a local arcade a few blocks away, but they had one problem: They didn't have any money. After discussion among themselves, one of the girls said, "Well, there's this old lady that lives across the alley from where I live, and she teaches Bible lessons. She's old, she lives by herself, she doesn't have a dog, she has money."

She said, "She would recognize me," but she told the other three girls that if they go knock on the door and tell the old lady they would like to take Bible lessons, you can get into the house and once you get into the house, they could rob her.

So they knocked on my grandmother's door. They said, "Mrs. Pelke, we'd like to take your Bible lessons." My grandmother said, "Come on in." And to know my grandmother, this is what my grandmother would do. One of the girls got into the hall, my grandmother turned her back to go to her desk to get information on the Bible classes, and one of the girls hit her over the head with a vase. She fell on the floor and another girl pulled a knife out of her purse and began to stab her. As she was being stabbed by Paula Cooper, the other two girls looked around the house trying to find money. They couldn't find any. They came back. A girl named Karen Korders took over with the knife. Paula also went to look for money. They came up with a total of \$10 and the keys to her old car. Then they went back to the high school they had left earlier, with her car, and offered their friends rides, to go joy-riding, and left my grandmother to die there on the dining room floor.

EIR: My God. I've read about this case.

Pelke: Yes, there was a lot of media attention to it.

EIR: So, that confronted you with what you had to do?

Pelke: The State of Indiana originally said that it was going to seek the death penalty for all four girls. They ended up going for the death penalty for just two of the girls, the two with the knife. The first girl, the judge elected not to give the death penalty, but to give her 60 years in prison. But Paula Cooper, he did sentence her to death. She pled guilty, so there was no trial, just a sentencing hearing. The judge talked about how he was opposed to the death penalty, but according to law, he had no choice.

At that time, it was fine with me. I really didn't know much about the death penalty, but I knew there was one, and different people were being sentenced to death for various crimes of murder, and I felt that if they didn't give the death penalty to Paula Cooper, then they were telling my family, "We're sorry, your grandmother just wasn't an important enough person. Her death doesn't merit giving somebody the death penalty." I felt my grandmother was a very important

person, and so for that reason alone, I had no problem that the death penalty was given.

That was on July 11, 1986. About three and a half months later, on Nov. 2, 1986, I had a total change of heart. I was at work, where I worked as an overhead crane operator for Bethlehem Steel. I'd been there for 20 years at that time. I had some free time, and I was up in my crane cab, and I became convinced, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that my grandmother would have been appalled by the fact that the State of Indiana was going to put this girl into the electric chair. I felt that my grandmother would not have wanted this girl's family to go through what a family would go through, to see a person that they loved strapped in an electric chair.

Paula's grandfather had been in the courtroom the day of her sentencing hearing, and was actually kicked out of the courtroom, because, as the judge began to deliver her sentencing, he cried and wailed very loudly, "They're going to kill my baby, they're going to kill my baby."

I was convinced that my grandmother would not have wanted this old man to have to watch his granddaughter be put in the electric chair. I felt she [would have] wanted someone in my family to have that same sort of compassion. I thought about my grandmother's faith, I thought about forgiveness. I thought, well, I guess forgiveness is the right thing. I pictured my grandmother in tears, with love and compassion for this girl and her family. I pictured an image of a picture that was shown of her in the newspapers, but with the distinct difference of tears coming out of her eyes. I felt she wanted somebody in our family to have that same compassion. Even though I knew forgiveness was the right thing, compassion I didn't have a bit of. But those tears that I pictured dictated to me to try to generate some kind of compassion. I felt that if I didn't, then I would feel guilty whenever I would think about my grandmother again.

Up to that point, it had been a year and a half since her death, and whenever I would think about her, it was very painful, because I pictured how she died. She was basically butchered on the dining room floor where she lived.

So, with tears coming out of my eyes, I begged God to give me a little compassion for Paula and her family, and I did that on behalf of my grandmother, and that short, simple prayer changed my life, because I realized immediately that I no longer wanted her to die. I wanted to write her a letter, tell her about my grandmother, share my grandmother's faith, and just do whatever I could do to try to help her. I knew that once there was compassion, the forgiveness was automatic. That forgiveness brought a tremendous healing. I just knew immediately that I would no longer picture how my grandmother died, but when I would think about my grandmother, I would picture how she lived and what she stood for and what she believed in, and just the beautiful, wonderful person she was. I knew a tremendous healing had taken place. And I also knew that I wanted to do whatever I could do to help Paula.

I ended up getting involved in an international case on her behalf. There was a campaign started, mostly in Italy, to get petitions to have her taken off death row. I ended up travelling to Italy on three occasions. . . .

In 1989, the Pope had asked the State of Indiana to take Paula off of death row. They had petitions they presented to the Governor. The legislators in the State of Indiana became embarrassed, when it was internationally publicized that the law in Indiana calls for the death penalty for a ten-year-old. So, the legislators in Indiana said, we've got to raise the age limit. So they raised it to 16, but stipulated that Paula was still to be held and executed under the old law. But, on her automatic appeal before the Indiana Supreme Court, they said that it would be exclusionary if she was the only one executed under the old law, and so they took her off death row and commuted her sentence to 60 years in prison.

EIR: Is she in prison today?

Pelke: She's in prison today in Indiana. In Indiana, you're eligible for parole in half-time with good behavior. So, in the year 2015, when she is 30 years old, then she'll be eligible for parole.

I met a few people and organizations against the death penalty while I was involved in Paula's case, and I heard about a march that was taking place in 1990, in the spring. It was a spiritual march to ignite the churches' consciousness against the death penalty. So, I took two weeks of my vacation. It was a march to Atlanta, Georgia, to the burial site of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It was there that I met Sister Helen Prejean, who was one of the organizers and spiritual adviser for the march. After two weeks of marching down the highway with a group of people, getting a real education about the death penalty and becoming aware of the statistics and the facts, I dedicated my life to the abolition of the death penalty. . . .

The first Journey of Hope event was in June 1993. It turned out to be a very successful event. We thought that it was going to be a one-time thing. But it was so successful, the following year we went to Georgia, then in 1995 California, in 1996 Virginia. Then I retired in 1997. I had over 30 years at the steel mill. We took the Journey of Hope . . . From Violence to Healing, rather than just being a two-week event under the Murder Victim Families for Reconciliation, we organized it into a separate organization to be a full-time, ongoing thing, of travelling around, more or less a tour of people sharing their stories. We still do a major event each year. But we also do limited events in different states, with different numbers of people, just sharing our stories of "from violence to healing," and how the death penalty isn't what murder victims' families need.

EIR: Is that how you ended up in Pennsylvania, at the rally for a moratorium?

Pelke: Last year, they had a rally around the end of April,

first of May, and I spoke there. People say, well, if you had someone in your family who was killed, you'd feel different about the death penalty. So, here is an organization that says, "We've had somebody in our family who has been killed, and we say the death penalty is not the answer. It's not what we need."

EIR: Do you see hope in the coming days that the movement for a moratorium on executions will actually succeed?

Pelke: I do. Of course, I've seen what's happened in Illinois [where Gov. George Ryan imposed a moratorium on executions on Jan. 31, 2000]. I've been travelling around the world; I just got back from Amsterdam last week, and I'm going to Italy in another week. There's a worldwide effort for the moratorium. Most countries don't have the death penalty. In Illinois, the Governor has called for a moratorium; I think Pennsylvania is not that far behind.

EIR: Plus you have a Federal call for a moratorium now, from Rep. Jesse Jackson, Jr. (D-Ill.).

Pelke: Right. Because there are innocent people who have been sentenced to death, there's been innocent people who have been executed. There's a book called *In Spite of Innocence* [by Radelet, Bedau, and Putnam, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1994)], which documents the cases of 23 people who were sentenced to death in our country and found to be innocent. There was a conference that I was at in Chicago a year and a half ago, of the wrongfully convicted. At the time they began to plan the conference, there were 74 people who had been released from death row, who had been found to be innocent. By the time the conference actually took place, there were about 10 more people, and I think the number now is up to about 90 people.

The people were found to be innocent, not through the court system, but through efforts outside of court—law students, other people confessing to crimes, and DNA evidence and that sort of stuff. Even people who strongly support the death penalty don't want to see innocent people executed, at least the majority don't.

EIR: It's true that many people who support a moratorium, still support capital punishment.

Pelke: Right, but it's just the way the system has worked in our country: It's not working. It's only the poor people who are sentenced to death. They're given poor legal assistance. People turning state's evidence and giving testimony, and you don't know who's telling the truth and who's lying, and they're being sentenced to death on the word of somebody else who's not telling the truth. The evidence isn't being considered. There's not very much money put into the defense, to go out and hire the experts that are needed to do a thorough investigation. There are just a whole lot of reasons why the death penalty doesn't work. At least people who do support the death penalty want it to be fair.

Even the Supreme Court has realized that there's a big difference between the death penalty and other situations, because it does involve human life.

EIR: Even if some Supreme Court members don't believe that innocence is a reason not to execute someone.

Pelke: Yes, they say innocence is irrelevant!

EIR: Let me ask one last question, in the political realm. As you probably know, our magazine editorially supports Lyndon LaRouche's Democratic Presidential candidacy. He has opposed capital punishment all his life. He's raised it in the election campaign. The two nominal front-runners are both avid supporters of the death penalty.

Pelke: Right.

EIR: Is your organization going to try to intervene in the elections on this issue?

Pelke: We're a 501(c)(3) [tax-exempt charitable or educational organization], so we're not allowed to get into lobbying and political stances. Individually, I know what a lot of people are going to do, but as an organization, you can't take a stand. But I sure wish him the best of luck. I know how difficult of an uphill battle it is, that's for sure.

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