

PUBLIC

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Death penalty

USA (Oklahoma)

Robert Wesley Knighton (m), white, aged 62

Robert Knighton is scheduled to be executed in Oklahoma at 6pm local time on 27 May. He was sentenced to death in December 1990 for a double murder committed earlier that year.

Virginia Denney, aged 64, and her 62-year-old husband Richard Denney were shot dead in their home in rural Noble County in northern Oklahoma on 8 January 1990. The murders took place in the context of a four-day crime spree involving 48-year-old Robert Knighton and his two co-defendants, Rene Williams (f), aged 20, and 17-year-old Lawrence Brittain (m). Lawrence Brittain pleaded guilty to two counts of first-degree murder and was sentenced to life imprisonment. Rene Williams pleaded guilty to a lesser charge and was sentenced to 15 years in prison. Both then testified against Robert Knighton at his trial.

After the jury convicted Robert Knighton of the two murders, the trial moved into a sentencing phase, at which the prosecution presented "aggravating" evidence as reasons for a death sentence, and the defence presented mitigating factors in an attempt to persuade the jury to vote for life imprisonment. The mitigating factors presented included evidence that Robert Knighton had been abused by his father and neglected by his mother, that he had had six stepfathers before leaving home at the age of 15, and that he had not been provided appropriate psychiatric or rehabilitative care during previous prison terms and was left ill-equipped to function in the outside world. The jury voted for a death sentence.

One of the people campaigning against the execution of Robert Knighton is Sue Norton. Richard Denney was her adoptive father and Virginia Denney was her stepmother. Over the years, Sue Norton and Robert Knighton have been in regular communication and she says that she has forgiven him for the crime against her family. She has become an active campaigner against the death penalty. Sue Norton told Amnesty International on 1 May 2003: "My wish for our country is no more victims. Executions make more heartache, more victims and no closure for anyone."

In Oklahoma, the Governor can grant clemency if he or she receives a recommendation to do so from the state Pardon and Parole Board. The Governor can ignore such a recommendation, as has occurred in a number of recent cases. The Governor also has the power to issue a temporary reprieve. Robert Knighton has a clemency hearing before the Pardon and Parole Board on 20 May.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Amnesty International opposes the death penalty unconditionally in all cases. Every death sentence is an affront to human dignity, every execution a symptom of, rather than a solution to, a culture of violence. The death penalty has not been shown to have a unique deterrent effect, and extends the suffering of one family – that of the murder victim – to another, the loved ones of the condemned prisoner. A growing number of relatives of murder victims in the USA are speaking out against the death penalty, arguing that an execution represents an appalling memorial to their murdered family member, continues the violence, and extends their own suffering to others (for more information see website of Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation, www.mvfr.org).

Oklahoma is one of the main executing states in the USA. It is currently ranked third among the death penalty states in terms of the number of executions carried out, but 27th in the size of its population. Of 849 executions carried out in the USA between January 1977 and 1 May 2003, Oklahoma accounted for 62. Seven of the 29 executions this year have been carried out in Oklahoma, including, in violation of international law, the only execution of a child offender (under 18 at the time of the crime) known in the world

so far this year. The state has regularly violated international standards in its use of the death penalty (see AI report, *Old habits die hard: The death penalty in Oklahoma*, AMR 51/055/2001, April 2001).

Today, 112 countries are abolitionist in law or practice. The USA, which frequently claims to be a champion of human rights, is clearly out of step on this fundamental human rights issue.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in English or your own language, in your own words:

To both addressees:

- expressing sympathy for the family and friends of Richard and Virginia Denney, and explaining that you are not seeking to excuse the manner of their deaths or to minimize the suffering they will have caused;
- opposing the execution of Robert Knighton, and suggesting that clemency is a way to stop the cycle of violence and to begin to promote more constructive responses to violent crime;
- applauding the opposition to the execution by family member Sue Norton, one of a growing number of relatives of murder victims in the USA who have recognized the futility and brutalizing nature of the death penalty;

To the Board:

- calling on the Board to recommend clemency for Robert Knighton;

To the Governor:

- calling on the Governor to accept such a recommendation or to issue a reprieve in the absence of one, in order that he can urge the Board to reconsider in the interests of humanity and the reputation of the State of Oklahoma;
- expressing concern at the high number of executions in Oklahoma, and urging him to support moratorium efforts in his state.

APPEALS TO:

Please note: Appeals to the Board should be sent to arrive by 20 May. Appeals to the Governor may continue until 27 May.

Pardon and Parole Board
4040 North Lincoln, Ste. 219
Oklahoma City, OK 73105, USA

Telegram: Pardon and Parole Board, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, USA
Fax: +1 405 427 6648
Salutation: Dear Board Members

Governor Brad Henry
Office of the Governor
State Capitol Building
2300 N. Lincoln Blvd., Room 212
Oklahoma City, OK 73105, USA

Telegram: Governor Brad Henry, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, USA
Fax: +1 405 521 3353
Email: governor@gov.state.ok.us
Salutation: Dear Governor

COPIES TO: diplomatic representatives of USA accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY.