

17 January 2000

Further information on UA 316/99 (AMR 51/205/99, 13 December 1999) and follow-up (AMR 51/06/00, 14 January 2000) - Death Penalty / Legal Concern

USA (Virginia) Steve Edward Roach, aged 23

Amnesty International has just received a copy of the full statement given by Steve Roach's lawyer after he was executed on 13 January:

"Steve Edward Roach was put to death tonight by the Commonwealth of Virginia. He died at 9.04pm, Eastern Standard Time, on January 13, 2000. He was 17 years old when he committed the crime that led to his execution, and 23 when he died: the youngest person to be executed by the Commonwealth in modern times. As his lawyer, I witnessed his death. Steve asked me to make this public statement, which we discussed earlier this week at length, on his behalf.

It was important to Steve Roach that he be remembered, not just as the boy who killed Mary Ann Hughes, but also as the man who married Elasa Roach; not just as the teenager who committed a horrible crime, but also as the adult who accepted responsibility for it and begged the forgiveness of those he caused to suffer; and not just as someone who ended a life for no reason, but also as someone whose own life was ended to no one's benefit.

As Steve faced death, his thoughts were first of his wife, now his widow. They were then of Mary Hughes, his neighbor and friend, and of her family and community. They were of other young people, very like Steve himself, who might have been saved from the consequences of broken youths by his participation and his example. He sincerely wished that James Gilmore, Governor of Virginia, had found it in his heart to spare his life, so that he might have been able to make some small effort to help to save the lives of others.

But the Governor chose not to intervene. So be it. Steve wanted to be certain that the reports of his death at the hands of the Commonwealth also reflected four of the beliefs that he carried with him to the very end: his love for and gratitude toward those who selflessly tried to prevent this from happening; his genuine remorse for the terrible act he committed; the confidence that in life he had secured the forgiveness of his God, even if he never quite persuaded himself that he was worthy of that forgiveness; and the certainty that the deliberate, methodical killing of children is inconsistent with the values of any civilized society. He knew that his apology, however heartfelt, would not fill the void left by Mary Hughes, but neither will his death.

Steve died without bitterness, but with a great deal of regret. He never understood what really happened in the instant in which he took the life of someone who loved him. And he was unable to grasp, even to his last breath, why we kill people to teach other people that killing people is wrong. The principal lesson he wanted his own death to communicate is that this makes no sense. Killing kids makes no sense, and it must be stopped. It is too late to save Steve Roach; it is not too late to save the life of the next young man or woman who, in a moment of bewildered rage or utter confusion, commits an act totally out of character in its violence and awful in its result, yet which does not place its perpetrator forever beyond the power of redemption in this life.

Mary Hughes did not deserve to die. But Steve Roach wanted us who live after his death to know that he was not a monster: he was a human being, a young man, with flaws and with promise, who deserved to live."

No further action by the UA Network is requested.