

1-1-1991

Wrongly Convicted Man Speaks Out Against Death Penalty

UB Law Forum

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/ub_law_forum

Recommended Citation

UB Law Forum (1991) "Wrongly Convicted Man Speaks Out Against Death Penalty," *UB Law Forum*: Vol. 5 : No. 2 , Article 13.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/ub_law_forum/vol5/iss2/13

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Alumni Publications at Digital Commons @ University at Buffalo School of Law. It has been accepted for inclusion in UB Law Forum by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ University at Buffalo School of Law. For more information, please contact lawscholar@buffalo.edu.

Wrongly Convicted Man Speaks Out Against Death Penalty

The man on the stage of the Moot Court Room in John Lord O'Brian Hall looked for all the world like just another professor. In a necktie and gray tweed jacket, he paced as he lectured, pausing occasionally to sip from his can of Pepsi.

But the audience of about 150 law students was listening to a man whom the State of Texas came very close to executing. An innocent man.

This was Randall Adams, one of the most celebrated capital-case defendants in recent memory. He was brought to UB Law School by the Human Rights Center's Working Group on the Death Penalty to speak during Human Rights Week. Adams had languished on Death Row after his conviction for murdering a Dallas policeman during a routine traffic stop in 1976.

Millions know him as the subject of a 1988 documentary by filmmaker Errol Morris, "The Thin Blue Line." The film included an astonishing interview with David Harris, a key witness against Adams, who practically confessed to the murder. The movie also raised questions about Adams' trial, focusing on the contradictory evidence that was used to frame him.

Sentenced to death on shaky testimony and inconclusive polygraph results, Adams spent 12 1/2 years in Texas' Eastham State prison, and his family became impoverished from his legal fees, before he finally won release last year. When the judge overturned his conviction, he cited suppressed evidence and perjury by witnesses under oath.

Speaking at UB, Adams made a strong case that he was the victim of a

politically ambitious district attorney who was under intense public pressure to find the cop-killer.

According to the documentary, Harris pegged the murder on Adams, a hitchhiker he had picked up and dropped off at a motel two hours before the killing. "Even though I had no previous record, I was of the conveniently executable age of 28 at the time," Adams said.

"The public, the media and the justice officials all demanded that the death penalty be given to the murderer of a cop," Adams explained. "But in 1976, when Harris was 16 — and bragging all around that he killed a cop — you couldn't give a minor the death penalty."

Adams' presentation, which followed a screening of "The Thin Blue Line," consisted entirely of answering questions from the audience. He seemed at times to struggle with his anger, and it was clear that bitterness is a constant companion in his new life as a free man.

"Dallas County and the people put the mark of Cain on me in 1977," he said, "and it will go with me to my grave. It is a death sentence, and they can't remove that even if I die when I'm 98 years old in my bed.... I felt raped by the system, and I didn't even get kissed."

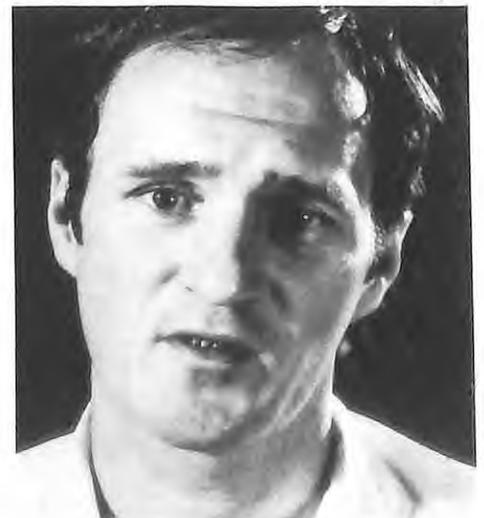
One questioner asked why Adams didn't think to ask for an attorney when the Dallas police were badgering him into a confession. "Had I been in trouble before, I probably would have known to do so," he said. "I'd never been in trouble, never needed an attorney, never seen the inside of a courtroom.

"If you don't go to law school, the only other way to know the system is to get in trouble."

Questions about the fairness of the death penalty obviously struck a nerve with Adams, who had been out of prison for about a year. He's against capital punishment, and not simply because of personal experience.

"Until you show me a system that's 100 percent foolproof, not 99.9 percent, I think it's wrong," he said. "You have innocent people on Death Row in

"I felt raped by the system and I didn't even get kissed."



Randall Adams as he appeared in "The Thin Blue Line," top, and as he appeared at the Law School, opposite right.

America. How many? I personally don't know. You have guilty people on Death Row that don't need to be executed. And you have guilty people walking the streets who should have been arrested many times over."

Regarding Dale Volker, the state senator pressing for the reinstatement of capital punishment in New York, Adams said, "Volker needs to be scared" by the legal system "the way I was."

Adams asserted that media attention works to keep the legal system honest in capital cases. The problem, he said, is that such attention waxes and wanes. "After the publicity fades," he said, "after executions become routine, that's when you get prosecutors hiding evidence" and other abuses.

Adams said he was skeptical about "The Thin Blue Line" and what it did for him. He has since had a falling-out with director Morris: Adams had to begin legal proceedings against Morris to secure necessary evidence.

"The state today wants you to think this movie is garbage," Adams said.

"People ask me what I thought of 'The Thin Blue Line.' I always say it's fair. It's not accurate, but it's fair. I have my own problems with the film.

"I wasn't going to win my release out of a theater," Adams said. "It took legal work, legal briefs, legal argument. The film helped, but I had to win my release in a courtroom before a judge. Not in a theater. It wasn't gonna happen.

"If the film did anything, it pushed my release up about five years. I would have won my case eventually (without the film)."

Adams now lives in Columbus, Ohio, and travels extensively for speaking engagements. Speaking, he said, is therapeutic for him.

"I have no recourse against Texas except talking bad about them, which I do all day long," he said.

"I fly around and talk. I sit in bars and talk. I sit at home and talk. I talk. I dream about talking about it. I talk and talk. I have to, or else I'll go crazy." ■

Human Rights Week

The abuse and defense of human rights in South Africa, Argentina, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Colombia, Peru, the Philippines, Cambodia and the United States was at issue in Human Rights Week, celebrated this spring at UB.

Coordinated by the Human Rights Center at UB School of Law, 15 separate events drew people from throughout Western New York as well as the University community. Human Rights Week was co-sponsored by 21 campus and off-campus organizations. Press coverage was substantial.

Among the high points was a screening of the film "The Thin Blue Line" and a talk by Randall Adams, who was exonerated of murder after the film told his story. (See accompanying article.)

Other events included speakers on Puerto Rican self-determination and U.S. foreign policy in the Mideast; and luncheon panels on Native American women and refugees in North America. Some of the highlights:

- A "Free South Africa Rally" to celebrate the release of Nelson Mandela and call for an end to apartheid in South Africa.
- A panel discussion on "Critical Legal Studies and International Human Rights." Panelists were law professors Virginia Leary, Muhammad Kenyatta and Guyora Binder.
- A presentation on discrimination against people with AIDS, given by Dee Cosby of the Niagara Frontier AIDS Alliance.
- An "Observer Report" of the recent elections in Nicaragua by field observers Carol Alt and Roger Cook of VIVE, a Western New York refugee organization.
- A discussion on the plight of refugees seeking asylum in Canada and the United States, featuring Kathleen Rimar, director of UB Law's Immigration and Asylum Clinic, among others.
- A screening of the film "The Killing Fields," followed by discussion with Cambodian refugee Dith Pran and the actor who portrayed him in the film, Haing Ngor.

