



PRESS RELEASE
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Death Row Survivor Tours San Antonio

Juan Roberto Melendez-Colon visits at critical moment in Bexar County dialogue about the death penalty

Austin, Texas – Juan Roberto Melendez-Colon, who survived nearly 18 years on death row for a crime he did not commit, will share his story of wrongful conviction and ultimate exoneration with people of faith, students, and community members throughout San Antonio from April 12-15, 2012. “Death Penalty No Más” is sponsored by the Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty (TCADP), a statewide grassroots membership organization, with support from the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty.

A native of Puerto Rico, Mr. Melendez spent 17 years, 8 months, and 1 day on Florida’s death row for a crime he did not commit. He was exonerated and released from death row on January 3, 2002 after the discovery of a long-forgotten transcript of a taped confession by the real killer. No physical evidence ever linked Mr. Melendez to the crime, and his conviction and death sentence hinged on the testimony of two questionable witnesses (one of those witnesses later recanted and the other is deceased).

Since 1973, 140 people – including 12 in Texas – have been exonerated from death rows nationwide due to evidence of their wrongful conviction. On May 2, 2012, Anthony Bartee, who was convicted in Bexar County of the 1996 murder of David Cook, may be put to death by the State of Texas, despite the fact that DNA testing ordered recently by State District Judge Mary Román has not been completed or considered by the courts. Mr. Bartee has consistently maintained that although he was present at the house, he did not kill Mr. Cook.

“Mr. Melendez will be visiting Texas at a critical time, as concerns about the risk of wrongful conviction continue to call into question the reliability and fairness of the state’s death penalty system,” said Kristin Houlé, Executive Director of TCADP. “Increasingly diverse voices, including those of law enforcement, religious leaders, murder victim family members, and state legislators all have called for an end to this arbitrary and error-prone form of punishment.”

This tour is part of the Bexar County Campaign to End the Use of the Death Penalty, a community organizing effort that seeks to reframe the debate about the death penalty by focusing on its local impact as an expensive public policy that diverts scarce resources from effective crime prevention measures and meaningful victims’ services.

“Bexar County can be smart on crime while also using taxpayer dollars to invest in public safety and in the human resources of our community,” said Anita Grabowski, Bexar County Campaign Coordinator. “We see that attitudes toward the death penalty are shifting as public confidence in the ultimate form of punishment continues to erode. This tour aims to encourage dialogue among concerned citizens and community leaders about the wisdom, efficacy and virtue of the death penalty as a means of confronting crime and achieving justice.”

Since 1976, Bexar County juries have sentenced 75 people to death, the third-highest number among all counties in Texas, behind Harris and Dallas Counties. Of these death sentences, 36 have resulted in execution, 21 have been commuted to sentences other than death or otherwise removed from death row, and 18 are still pending. New death sentences in Bexar County have dropped in recent years, however, reflecting both statewide and national trends. Overall, new death sentences in Texas have declined more than 70% since 2003, and remained at a historic low level in 2011, when just eight people were sentenced to death statewide.

Bexar County has sentenced three people to death since 2007, with the most recent sentence in 2009. In this same time period, Bexar County juries rejected the death penalty in two capital murder trials, opting instead for the sentence of life in prison without the possibility of parole.

The full schedule of events for “Death Penalty No Más” is available at <http://tcadp.org/bexar-county-campaign/>.

More information about Juan Melendez is available at <http://www.voicesunited4justice.com/>.

For more information about the tour, please contact Bexar County Campaign Coordinator Anita Grabowski at 512-496-6695 or anita@ncadp.org or TCADP Executive Director Kristin Houlé (512-441-1808 [office], 512-552-5948 [cell], or khoule@tcadp.org). To arrange an interview by phone or in person with Juan Melendez (English or Spanish), please contact Anita Grabowski.

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