



Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty

2709 S. Lamar Blvd., Austin, Texas 78704

Tel/Fax: 512-441-1808 – Email: khoule@tcadp.org – Website: www.tcadp.org

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

November 5, 2009

CONTACT: Kristin Houlé, Executive Director
512-441-1808 (office); 202-494-3578 (cell)
khoule@tcadp.org

Death Row Survivor to Tour the Rio Grande Valley

Juan Roberto Melendez-Colon will visit at critical moment in state's death penalty debate

Austin, Texas -- “Witness to Injustice: A Speakers' Tour Featuring Death Row Survivor Juan Roberto Melendez-Colon” will share his story of wrongful conviction and ultimate exoneration with communities throughout the Rio Grande Valley from November 8-12, 2009. This tour is sponsored by the Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty (TCADP), a statewide grassroots membership organization.

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).

“Mr. Melendez will be visiting Texas at a critical time, as concerns about the likely wrongful execution of Cameron Todd Willingham and ongoing exonerations call into question the reliability and fairness of the state's death penalty system,” said Kristin Houlé, TCADP Executive Director. “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.”

Since 1973, 139 people – including 11 Texans – have been exonerated from death rows nationwide due to evidence of their wrongful conviction. Mr. Melendez is the 99th person on the list of 139 exonerees.

“Texas remains far out of step with the rest of the country in terms of the number of executions carried out each year,” said Houlé. “Yet attitudes toward the death penalty are shifting as public confidence in the accuracy of the ultimate form of punishment continues to erode. Through this tour, TCADP is educating residents of the Valley about the flaws and failures of the Texas death penalty system and mobilizing constituents to effect change at the state legislature.”

New death sentences have declined more than 60% in Texas in the past six years as prosecutors and juries have accepted the alternative punishment of life in prison without the possibility of parole (LWOP) as a reliable way to protect society, punish the guilty, and guard against convicting and executing innocent people. Earlier this fall, a Hidalgo County jury rejected the death penalty in the case of Mario Quintanilla, who was convicted of the 2005 murder of Larissa Cavazos, and sentenced him to life without parole.

“Witness to Injustice” is co-sponsored by the Diocese of Brownsville, Pax Christi Brownsville, Valley Civil Rights Team, Pax Christi Rio Grande Valley, UTPA Criminal Justice Department, People for Peace and Justice in the Rio Grande Valley, and Witness to Innocence.

All events are free and open to the public. See the [full schedule](#).

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