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Abolitionists Gather in Austin for Annual Conference

Death row survivor Anthony Graves and his family to receive Courage Award

(Austin, Texas) — More than 120 anti-death penalty advocates from across Texas will gather this Saturday, February 19, 2011 in Austin for the annual conference of the Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty (TCADP). This event, "Seizing the Momentum – Advancing Statewide Vision through Local Action," will feature workshops and a panel discussion on the impact of the death penalty on Texas counties. Panelists include Sam Millsap, the former district attorney of Bexar County; Karen Peissinger, the coordinator of El Pasoans Against the Death Penalty; and Dennis Reeves, Assistant Public Defender of the Regional Public Defenders Office for Capital Cases. Sachin Chheda, the Deputy Director of the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty, will moderate the discussion.

During the conference, TCADP will honor Anthony Graves, his family, and his legal team with its annual Courage Award, in recognition of their tenacity, faith, and dignity throughout the ordeal of his wrongful conviction and incarceration. Graves spent 18 years in prison, including 12 years on death row, for a crime he did not commit. In October 2010 prosecutors dropped all charges against him and declared him innocent after conducting their own investigation of the case. The Texas Comptroller's Office recently denied Graves' compensation, however, because the word "innocence" was not used in the document ordering his release.

TCADP will present a Media Award to Pamela Colloff for her extraordinary article about Anthony Graves, which was published in the October 2010 issue of *Texas Monthly* just one month before his release and exoneration. Long-time TCADP members Jim and Sherry Coombes, Marj Loehlin, and Dennis Longmire each will receive an Appreciation Award in recognition of their innumerable contributions to the organization and commitment to ending the death penalty in Texas.

In addition, Reverend Carroll Pickett will receive the first-ever Dave Atwood Founder's Award for his tireless efforts to educate Texans about the realities of the capital punishment system and the toll it takes on those charged with carrying out lethal injections. A Presbyterian minister, Rev. Pickett served as the death house chaplain at the Walls Unit in Huntsville for 15 years and gave comfort to 95 men before their executions.

"The theme of this year's conference reflects the momentum toward abolition generated by growing awareness of the flaws and failures of the Texas death penalty system and as evidenced in the continuing decline in new death sentences," said Kristin Houlé, the Executive Director of TCADP. "It is time for elected officials in Texas to recognize the shifting climate on this issue and evaluate the impact of the death penalty on our counties and the state as a whole."

In the 82nd Texas Legislature, Representatives Jessica Farrar and Marisa Marquez have authored House Bill 819, which calls for the repeal of the death penalty in Texas. TCADP urges lawmakers to call the bill to a hearing and to engage in a fair and open dialogue on this important issue.

The 2011 TCADP Annual Conference will take place at the Schmidt-Jones Family Life Center of the First United Methodist Church, 1300 Lavaca, from 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM. The awards ceremony will take place from 12:00 to 2:00 PM. All are welcome.

For more information, visit <http://tcadp.org/what-we-do/annual-conference/>.

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