



# Seizing the Momentum

Spring 2018

Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty

## The Power of Stories

*"The power of storytelling is exactly this: to bridge the gaps where everything else has crumbled."*

I recently came across this quote from Paulo Coelho, the author of *The Alchemist*. I certainly felt like we were bridging gaps during the awards luncheon at the TCADP 2018 Annual Conference, which took place in Dallas this past February. Along with 120 special guests and conference attendees, I sat spellbound while **Reverend Sharon Risher** shared her story of grief, healing, and, ultimately, forgiveness in the wake of the murder of her mother, Ethel Lee Lance, and eight others at Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015.

We barely had time to recover from Rev. Risher's powerful keynote address before it was time to present our annual awards. I can honestly say it was the most remarkable collection of honorees and storytellers we've ever assembled together in one room.

We heard from three men from Dallas County who between them spent more than 50 years in prison as innocent men, and we wept with the widow of **Johnnie Lindsey**, who was incarcerated for 26 years for a crime he did not commit. Johnnie who died of cancer on February 2, just a couple of weeks before the conference.

We honored defense attorney **Jeff Newberry** for his tireless efforts to stop the execution and tell the world the story of his client, Robert Pruett.

We heard from **Reverend DeAnna Golsan** about her journey from supporting the death penalty to witnessing the execution of a man whose mother is a member of her congregation, and from **Reverend Wes Magruder** about his work to raise awareness of the death penalty within his religious tradition.

I was particularly mesmerized by **Glen and Judy Cherry**, whose quiet dignity belies their forceful advocacy for mercy and justice. Their only child, Jonas, was murdered in Fort Worth; his parents strongly opposed the execution of the man convicted of killing him.

I still get goosebumps thinking about that day and the extraordinary individuals who shared a piece of themselves with us, bridging the gaps between life and loss, pain and healing, anger and forgiveness.

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### Also in this issue:

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Thank You, Donors!

Photos from the TCADP 2018 Annual Conference

### Scheduled Executions 2018

April

25– Erick Davila

May

16– Juan Castillo

June

21– Clifton Williams

27– Danny Bible



Just four days after the conference, I sat in the Speaker's Room at the State Capitol in Austin with another parent – **Kent Whitaker** – as he waited for the Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles to decide on whether to grant the clemency petition of his son, Thomas Whitaker. Kent had begged the Board for mercy, even though his son had orchestrated the murders of his own mother and brother. Kent also was shot in the ambush but survived and forgave his son.



Kent and Tanya Whitaker, photo courtesy of Texas Tribune

When attorney **Keith Hampton** announced that the Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles had voted unanimously to recommend clemency for Thomas Whitaker – something that never, and I mean *never* happens – Kent and his wife, Tanya, sobbed with relief. Two days later, on February 22, just 30 minutes before the scheduled execution, Texas Governor Greg Abbott accepted the Board's recommendation and commuted Whitaker's death sentence to life in prison.

Kent Whitaker's story moved people across the nation and inspired even the harshest death penalty proponents in Texas to open their hearts and minds to the possibilities of restorative justice.

In this issue of *Seizing the Momentum*, you'll find a review of *Infinite Hope*, a new book by our dear friend **Anthony Graves**. Anthony spent 18 years in prison, including 12 and a half years on Texas death row, for a crime he did not commit. He is among the best storytellers out there and holds audiences hanging on his every word. Do yourself a favor and read Anthony's book today.

While you're at it, set your DVR to record the extraordinary documentary film "True Conviction," which will air on PBS stations nationwide starting on Monday, April 30. The film explores the investigative and philanthropic work of Dallas exonerees **Christopher Scott, Johnnie Lindsey, and Steven Phillips**, who collectively spent more than sixty years in prison for crimes they did not commit. After their exonerations, the three friends formed House of Renewed Hope to help other wrongfully convicted prisoners and advocate for criminal justice reforms. I've seen the film twice - it's incredibly moving and inspiring. Check your local PBS station for air times - you won't want to miss it.



Steven Phillips, Christopher Scott, and Johnnie Lindsey

As we move forward in 2018, TCADP will continue to tell the stories of individuals who have been impacted by violence and the death penalty. We're also looking for opportunities to hear new voices. Specifically, we would love to talk with anyone who has served on a death-qualified capital jury in Texas. If you served on a jury or know someone who did and would be willing to speak with us about that experience, please contact me at [khoul@tcadp.org](mailto:khoule@tcadp.org) or 512-441-1808.

I am immeasurably grateful to all of the courageous, generous people who have shared their stories as part of our collective quest to end the death penalty. Thank you for bridging the gaps in our understanding and empathy.



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#### Seizing the Momentum

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TCADP would like to give a special thanks to everyone who volunteered during the 2018 Annual Conference and at recent tabling events!



## Texas Death Penalty Developments (As of April 20, 2018)

**Executions:** 4 out of 8 nationwide

**Clemency granted:** 1

**Scheduled executions in 2018:** 6

**States that have carried out executions this year:** 4 (Texas, Alabama, Florida, and Georgia)

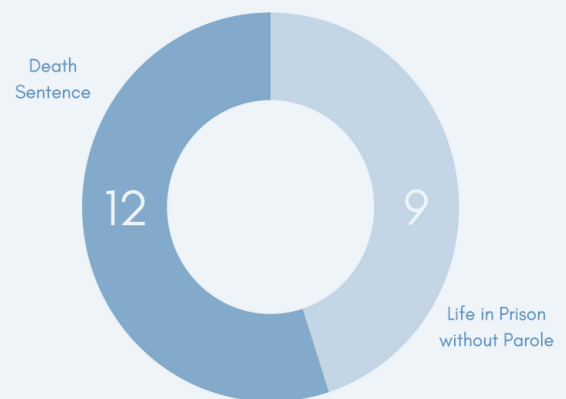
**Individuals currently on death row in Texas:** 229

**Jury rejections:** 1 (Atascosa County)

**New death sentences:** 2 (Hardin and Tom Green Counties)

More information on specific cases is available at [www.tcadp.org](http://www.tcadp.org).

### Death-Qualified Case Results in Texas (2015-2018)



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View photos from our events, connect with more than 5,000 other supporters, and learn about important death penalty developments. "Like" us today!



## In Memoriam by Kristin Houlé



Photo courtesy of San Antonio-Express News

TCADP member, **Father Martin ("Marty") Elsner**, passed away on February 4, 2018 at the age of 86. He was the longtime pastor of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in San Antonio, Texas and a dedicated advocate for social justice. Father Marty generously offered the use of his church as meeting space for TCADP, served as a member of the planning committee for our "Religious Leaders Dialogue on the Death Penalty" in San Antonio in 2011, and lent his name in support of numerous actions that conveyed faith-based opposition to capital punishment. When I spoke with him last fall, his voice was frail but his words of compassion and solidarity were as strong as ever. We will miss his kind and gentle spirit.



Ron with Sister Helen Prejean in 2013; photo courtesy of Karen Stone

**Ron Stone** of McKinney, Texas died on April 4, 2018 at the age of 75. Through the Ministry of the Imprisoned at St. Gabriel the Archangel Catholic Church, Ron corresponded with and visited several men on death row. He was a passionate abolitionist and would tell anyone (and I mean *anyone*) who would listen about the exorbitant cost of the death penalty, which he felt was the strongest argument against its use. We express our condolences to his wife, Karen, and his friends at St. Gabriel.

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## TCADP Welcomes New Board Members

TCADP is proud to introduce two new board members. They bring to their service diverse professional and personal experiences and a shared passion for abolishing the death penalty. Niki and Janice were approved by members at the General Membership Meeting, which took place on February 17, 2018.



**Dr. Janice Ahmad** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Criminal Justice at the University of Houston-Downtown. Her teaching and research interests include police management issues, community engagement, volunteers in policing, program evaluation, and crime victims. Recently, Dr. Ahmad and two department colleagues conducted an evaluation of Houston Police Department's G.R.E.A.T program. She has also been involved in a DUI court evaluation, writing questions for police promotion tests, developing police officer training curriculum and conducted a job task analysis of state correctional officers resulting in revision of the academy curriculum.

Dr. Ahmad was a police officer, director of a prosecutor-based victim witness program and researcher for a public safety consulting company prior to her academic appointments. She is a former chair of the Academy of Criminal Justice Science's Police Section and a member of the International Association of Chiefs of Police, Police Administration Committee. She first became involved with TCADP in 2009 and joined the TCADP Board in 2018.



**Niki Bergin** is a native Texan and 22-year resident of Dallas. She received a Bachelor's Degree in Medical Technology from Louisiana Tech University in 1996 and, save for a three-year stint in the investment banking field, has spent her entire career working in the Special Hematology Laboratory at Baylor Scott and White Health (formerly Baylor University Medical Center). In 2008, she returned to school and received a Master of Liberal Studies degree with a concentration in The Arts and Cultural Traditions from Southern Methodist University. It was during graduate school that she began her advocacy against the death penalty. Niki has been married to her husband, Hayden, for 18 years and is active in her community, volunteering at her sons' schools, serving as treasurer for her neighborhood parent group, and delivering lunches for Meals on Wheels. Niki served on the TCADP 2018 Annual Conference Committee. She joined the TCADP Board in 2018.

The TCADP Board of Directors also elected new officers in February:

- DJ Compton, President
- Prof. Ana Otero, Vice President
- Dr. Lauralee Harris, Secretary
- Casey Magnuson, Treasurer

### North Texas Roundup By Jim Webner

**Greetings from North Texas!** 2018 got off to a busy start for TCADP in North Texas! Over the past few months:

- South Dallas hosted TCADP's annual conference
- Tarrant County members held their inaugural chapter meeting
- Representatives attended a series of forums in the Dallas District Attorney Democratic primary race
- TCADP was represented at many local Senate District conventions (both Democratic and Republican)
- Faith communities across North Texas held execution vigils and banded together to successfully advocate for clemency in the case of Thomas Whitaker

As spring approaches, there is no sign of us slowing down. On Thursday, April 26, TCADP will host investigative journalist Alison Flowers at First Congregational United Church of Christ in Fort Worth for a Q&A about her book, *Exoneree Diaries: The Fight for Innocence, Independence, and Identity*, which tells the stories of four exonerated prisoners from Cook County, Illinois. Copies of Alison's book will be for sale at the event with half of all proceeds going to TCADP! Later that week, PBS affiliate KERA will air the documentary *True Conviction* on its program *Independent Lens*. This documentary tells the story of three Dallas County exonerees, including Christopher Scott who spoke at the 2018 TCADP conference, and their continuing work to aid the wrongfully convicted in Texas. Be on the lookout for information about how you can host a local viewing party with resources from TCADP.

As I continue to meet with faith communities, civic organizations, criminal justice reformers, legislators, attorneys, and activists around North Texas, my belief that we can effectively end the application of the death penalty in two of the state's highest-use counties only grows stronger. As members of TCADP, your energy, passion, and dedication are the driving force behind that goal. As we progress through this vitally important election year, I look forward to amplifying your voices and supporting your work toward a new, restorative vision of justice in North Texas and beyond!

It is a gift to be able to work with you on the front lines of change and justice in North Texas. Let's make 2018 a truly transformative year for our region and our state!





## Thank You for Your Generous Support

TCADP thanks the following organizations and individuals who contributed between January 9 and April 16, 2018. Your financial support is critical to the activities and events described in this newsletter. Please let us know if we inadvertently left you or anyone in your household off this list. We apologize in advance if we missed anyone.

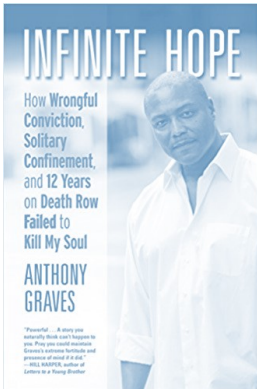
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^ Indicates donors to Amplify Austin

## Book Review of *Infinite Hope: How Wrongful Conviction, Solitary Confinement and 12 Years on Death Row Failed to Kill My Soul*

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Anthony Graves has dedicated his life to reforming the system that tried to kill him. He has spoken in front of Congress, addressed universities, and founded a non-profit. His new book, *Infinite Hope*, is an autobiographical account of the 12 years he spent as an innocent man on death row.

Graves details the case against him, ginned up by an unscrupulous prosecutor and backed by the state. The prosecution's story was plagued by a string of disturbing misconduct almost too long to list. Perhaps the most damning act by the District Attorney, Charles Sebesta, was the dramatic intimidation and blocking of a key witness in the middle of the trial. Sebesta was later disbarred but only after Graves had spent almost two decades behind bars.

*Infinite Hope* is quick to quell any belief that Graves is an anomaly in a just system. Many other innocence cases akin to Graves' are mentioned throughout the book. He contextualizes the inequalities well beyond his own case and shows that unethical investigation tactics are far-reaching across counties.

The intimacies of Grave's life and thoughts are painfully relatable. On the night of the murders, Graves was eating burgers, clowning on his brother, and cuddling his girlfriend. He writes of his mental escapes from death row--fantasies of playing baseball on a dusty diamond, having a wife and a daughter, and eating a hot plate instead of gruel. He is a father longing to guide his sons, a man pining for companionship, and a son fueled by his mother's relentless faith. His perseverance and supernatural capacity for forgiveness is extraordinary--he later shakes the hand of the prosecutor who tried to seal his fate.



Anthony Graves at BookPeople Event in Austin on March 23, 2018

The depiction of life on death row is grim. Graves tells of the experimental food given to inmates, which was later found to be harmful to humans, as well as routine exposure to violence and solitary confinement. The story is full of men, many who became friends of Graves', who maintained their innocence up until death, of others who were mentally unfit for execution, and of many more who have sought redemption for their crimes.

Graves had a narrow escape; he evaded his "date with death in Texas" twice before his exoneration. *Infinite Hope* poses the powerful questions of how many before, and how many more? Believers in criminal justice reform will find inspiration in Graves' strength. For readers who support in the death penalty, *Infinite Hope* will kick up dust that may not settle gently.

You can get your copy of *Infinite Hope* from [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).

Review submitted by TCADP Spring Advocacy Intern [Annie Hamdani](#). Annie graduated from Earlham College with a B.A. in English. As an undergrad, she volunteered with the Earlham Progressive Union and Get Like Me, a mentoring group for teenagers interested in higher education. After college, she was a caseworker for Abode Services, a non-profit dedicated to housing and serving homeless families in the Bay Area. Annie joined TCADP in January of this year.



**TCADP 2018 Annual Conference: Transforming the Landscape**  
February 17, 2018  
Photography by Chris Baylor



**Visit TCADP's Facebook page for more photos from the conference!**