

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Tuesday, February 27, 2024

CONTACT: Kristin Houlé Cuellar, TCADP Executive Director
512-552-5948 (cell); kristin@tcadp.org**Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty to hold annual statewide conference
in Fort Worth***Ms. Opal Lee to deliver keynote address; organization to honor stakeholders, leaders for raising
awareness of death penalty flaws*

(Austin, Texas) — Advocates from across Texas will gather for the annual conference of the Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty (TCADP) this Saturday, March 2, 2024, at Texas Wesleyan University in Fort Worth, Texas. The conference, titled *Creating Conscious Communities*, will feature a variety of workshops, a panel discussion, and a keynote address from civil rights icon and the “Grandmother of Juneteenth,” **Ms. Opal Lee**.

A native Texan, Ms. Lee was a key figure in the fight to make Juneteenth a national holiday. As part of her efforts, she led a successful walking campaign and an online petition that garnered over 1.5 million signatures. She was present for President Joe Biden’s bill signing in 2021, officially establishing Juneteenth as a national holiday. Ms. Lee has received seven honorary doctorates, was named the 2021 Texan of the Year by the *Dallas Morning News* editorial board, the 2021 Unsung Hero of the Pandemic, and *Fort Worth Inc.*’s 2022 Person of the Year, is a Nobel Peace Prize nominee, and most recently became the second African-American to have her portrait hung in the Texas State Senate.

The conference will include a powerful panel discussion with three people who have established relationships with individuals on death row in Texas and North Carolina. Panelist **Dewey Williams** is the author of [Finding Joy on Death: Unexpected Lessons from Lives We Discarded](#), based on his award-winning sermon series. **Tom Mooney**, of Tyler, Texas, is a member of Bikers for Christ who began visiting Texas death row in 2022. Since 2016, **Ali Nichols** has been writing to Charles Don Flores, who has maintained his innocence during more than two decades on death row in Texas.

TCADP will present Appreciation Awards to two mental health advocates and one longtime member in Fort Worth:

- **Greg Hansch** is the Executive Director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Texas and a Licensed Masters-Level Social Worker. Greg played a key role in the campaign to save Andre Thomas, a man with severe mental illness who faced execution on April 5, 2023. That date was eventually withdrawn to give Thomas’s legal team time to prepare a threshold showing that he is incompetent for execution.

- **Professor Brian Shannon** is the Paul Whitfield Horn Distinguished Professor at Texas Tech University School of Law in Lubbock and the author of six editions of Texas Criminal Procedure and the Offender with Mental Illness. Professor Shannon has advocated for the fair and humane treatment of several individuals who faced execution in Texas despite their severe mental illness, including Andre Thomas and Scott Panetti, who was deemed incompetent for execution by a federal judge in September 2023.
- **Scott Ruthart** is a resident of Fort Worth and a longtime supporter of TCADP. He became involved with the organization after visiting death row while working in former State Representative Lon Burnam's office in the late 1990's. Since 2013, he has been a member of the TCADP Lobby Corps, a dedicated group of volunteers who work with TCADP staff and board members to advance our legislative agenda and build relationships with elected officials.

TCADP will present the 2024 Courage Award to **Rev. Dr. Jaime Kowlessar**, the Founder/Executive Director of Raise Your Voice Academy and the Executive Director of Faith in Texas. Dr. Kowlessar also played an instrumental role in the campaign for clemency for Andre Thomas as a participant in a national press conference and author of an op-ed about Thomas's case. Dr. Kowlessar's vocal presence in the campaign was met with some backlash, yet he persisted for the sake of justice and mercy.

Workshop sessions during the conference include the following:

- *Junk Science and the Texas Death Penalty*, featuring two capital defense attorneys and innocence experts
- *Finding Common Ground: Understanding and Engaging Conservatives on the Death Penalty*, featuring Nan Tolson, the Director of Texas Conservatives Concerned About the Death Penalty
- *The Trauma of the Death Penalty Process*, featuring a capital defense attorney, a United Methodist minister who lived in Huntsville, where executions in Texas occur, and the daughter of an Oklahoma City bombing victim
- *Pursuing Justice in Tarrant County*, featuring two local defense attorneys and a faith leader and long-time criminal justice advocate

The TCADP 2024 Annual Conference will take place at the Martin University Center (3165 E. Rosedale St., Fort Worth, Texas 76105) from 10:00 AM to 4:00 PM on Saturday, March 2, 2024. The keynote address and awards ceremony will take place from 12:30 to 2:30 PM. Media are invited to attend the conference. Free parking is available in Lots C and D before 10:00 AM and also in Lot B after 10:00 AM.

For detailed information about the panelists, keynote speaker, and award recipients, visit <http://tcadp.org/what-we-do/annual-conference/>.

The **Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty** is the only statewide grassroots advocacy organization dedicated solely to ending the death penalty in Texas. Led by staff in Austin and Dallas and a statewide Board of Directors, TCADP has more than 17,000 supporters and 36 organizational affiliates. TCADP collaborates with local, state, and national partners to reduce use of the death penalty and advocate for change at the county and state level.

###