

Conference Report Spring 2021

The LifeLines spring conference this year was held on Zoom and was attended by over 160 people. The conference opened with breakout rooms for 20 minutes where members were able to chat to one another about LifeLines and their experiences.

Jan Hall then welcomed everyone to the spring conference especially new members and people who haven't been able to come to a conference before. She introduced Jan Arriens, the founder of LifeLines. Jan explained some of his history and expressed how grateful he was for the support he had had from people in LifeLines. He then introduced the speaker, Robin Konrad.

Robin lives in Montgomery, Alabama, and is a Federal Defence Attorney and the chair of the board of directors at the National Habeas Institute. Robin had spent time in Arizona and it was there that she met Beth and John, two members of LifeLines, who were writing to one of her clients.

Robin presented slides showing updates on the current situation with the US death penalty. Firstly, she showed a map of every state showing that 27 states have the death penalty and 23 have no death penalty. If, however, you take into account the three with governor imposed moratoria it means that more states are without the death penalty than with. The really good news is Virginia recently abolished the death penalty. It is not normally seen as a liberal state and the fact that it has got rid of the death penalty is an encouraging sign. Robin talked about racial disparity in executions and the history of this, especially in Virginia, is quite shocking. Some states now have a Racial Justice Act so things are changing and progressing. In the last 10 years eight states have abolished the death penalty. There are currently 2553 people on death row as at October 2020 but now the death row population is ageing with lots of people in their 50s and 60s who have been on death row for 20 to 30 years.

The number of new death sentences is dropping has been dropping for the last 20 years. This is probably due to the defence community ensuring better representation plus more progressive prosecutors. There are also declining executions due in part to the global pandemic, with 17 in 2020. Sadly, ten of these were in Federal which is the US government under the Trump administration. 12 states have not had executions for 10 years however some states seem to go to any lengths to ensure that they can execute. For instance, Arizona recently spent \$1,500,000 for execution drugs and they must have felt that was a good use of their budget.

Robin then talked about exonerations. 185 people on death row in total have been exonerated in 29 different states. In 2020, five were exonerated. Robin suggested people might ask 'will the death penalty in the US be abolished?' and although she thinks we're heading that way, we are not there yet. There are two ways this could happen - the current Supreme Court would need to ban it and this is unlikely. The Biden administration, who are against the death penalty, could impose a moratorium on Federal but can't influence the individual states. Biden could personally commute each case of the death penalty in theory but obviously there's a way to go for this to happen. Robin highly recommends the website of the Death Penalty Information Centre for up-to-date information about the death penalty in the United States.

Robin then took questions from members. Some members queried life without parole which Robin sees as the brother or sister of the death penalty.

The conference paused at 3:00pm for a time of reflection for all those affected by the death penalty – the victims, those on the row and all their families and friends. We also remembered Prince Philip alongside a national minute of reflection in the United Kingdom, and thought of Shirley Williams, a British politician who passed away recently and who was a long-time member of LifeLines.

Robin continued her talk saying that everyone has their stories. She showed a montage of pictures of some of the people that she has known who have been on death row. They were all from different backgrounds and some are no longer with us, some are no longer on death row and some will face an execution at some point in the future. Some of them never actually killed somebody but still face the death penalty. Robin cares about them all and wanted to share with us some of her stories. She introduced us to Ricky who was raised in Alabama. He has a deep voice, and always sings happy birthday to Robin. He grew up in unimaginable poverty. His father was killed when he was a child and his mother was an alcoholic. He was sent to prison at 16 after he killed someone in stressful circumstances. He had murder charges as an adult which is why he's now on death row. His lawyers only spent four hours putting up a kind of defence which was really no defence at all. The trial only lasted one day and it only took 12 minutes for the jury to come to their guilty verdict. He was sentenced the same day. It was Robin's job to mount appeals for him. She lost her state court appeal 14 years ago then the Federal court found in his favour and he is now entitled to a new sentencing hearing. Eventually she hopes he will get off death row.

In Oklahoma Robin challenged the lethal injection procedure. In a case called Warner and Gross the state wanted to execute four men of whom Warner was the lead name. After losing on appeal, they filed in the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court only looks at 1 to 2% of the requests it gets so it is usually denied. In the meantime, Charles Warner was executed and concerns were expressed that his execution was 'botched' as he complained of a burning feeling shortly before he died. A few days after his death the Supreme Court decided to review the issues in the case. As Warner had been executed, the case name changed from Warner to Glossip v Gross. The Supreme Court ruled against the prisoners in a 5-4 decision.

Robin stressed that we have to see the humanity in people and help others to do the same. There followed a short time of questions. Jan Arriens then thanked Robin for her interesting and uplifting talk and pointed out that people in LifeLines draw enormous encouragement from people like Robin who work so hard and with such great humanity. As someone said in the comments, 'If I were a capital habeas case I'd want Robin to defend me.'

The conference then concluded with Jan Arriens reminding members that his book, 'A Crack in the Wall' is available on the LifeLines website. Jan Hall mentioned the revamped website and thanked Michelle Baxter for all her work on the old website.

The conference closed with optional time in breakout rooms for those who wished.