

Statement of Chris Simmons for Amnesty International

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On September 8, 1993, Chris Simmons and two others burglarized the home of Shirley Crook, tied her up, and killed her. Chris was 17 years old at the time, and is 26 at the time of this publication. At present, he has run out of appeals and Attorney General Jay Nixon has asked the Missouri Supreme Court to set an execution date. The Missouri State Legislature is presently considering a bill to ban the execution of Juvenile offenders.

I grew up in Fenton, MO, which is rural and about 15-20 minutes south of St. Louis. I was a fairly average teenager, but around 14 years old, I was beginning to deal with abuse from my stepfather. At 15, I started doing drugs and small crimes to get them. By 17, I was running away from my stepfather's aggression and anger and not coming home for over a month. At one of [these times] I was arrested for my first conviction and this death sentence.

I don't think I ever had any aspirations or role models that stand out for me to mention. I didn't care about much of anything. I ran from reality by getting high, and I didn't really know yet what should be valued in life. I grew up, in many ways, on death row....

Oftentimes the only thing I constantly had with me was a bible, one book filled with such great values and depth about changing a man into a Christ-like person that finds peace and joy in life through faith, goodness, and love, regardless of the tortures around him. This one book has helped me to quit running, to fill all my voids, and to love the things in life that are truly important and good.

I want to continue to help troubled teens, as I once was, and I presently get the opportunity to in a Youth Enlightenment Program (Y.E.P.) that we have here at this prison. (It has to be a very rare program that is allowing teens to learn and sit with death row inmates as we talk about choices and consequences, and it's all run by action inmates.) Role models for me are, of course, Christ, but also ministers coming to prisons—like the ones I meet here—and those that are helping troubled teens in any way.

What family do you have on the outside and how has your death sentence affected them?

My mother and father, step-parents, a few grandparents and four younger brothers. My parents have had a hard time with this in many ways. I will never forget the sounds of my mother when she cried out as the judge sentenced me to death. The hardest thing for me is to know that my little brothers have went through a lot of problems and ridicule at school, etc. Some family, even close [ones], have negative feelings towards me or don't stay in contact....



Chris with his mother Sheryl, during a recent holiday visit at Potosi Correctional Center.

"I will never forget the sounds of my mother when she cried out as the judge sentenced me to death."

What thoughts or feelings do you have about the possibility of being executed?

At the worst moments, I'm frozen with panic, unable to keep from crying or breathing, with a great weight on my chest. I get helplessly and desperately caught between breaths. More often than not, I have a hard time keeping hope for my life here. I get tired of suffering like this and of watching other guys and friends get tortured and killed.

I have never been to a school dance. I've never been on a real date with a girl or even danced with one. I've never owned much of anything—not even a checkbook or credit card. I never had the adult rights to vote, be a juror, or hold office because the government doesn't recognize 17 as an adult [age]. And yet, when it's convenient, [they will] kill me as one. I just pray for mercy and for God to keep me able to endure this torture.

Were you friends with anyone who has been executed at Potosi?

Yes. He was about ten years older but we still had a friendship. We laughed together and spent time getting to know one another a bit. He was funny, but his good spirits diminished as he came closer to be executed and he was visibly troubled and nervous.

I'll never forget the last day I saw him, the day the guards took him away. He looked at me and waved. I'll never forget that I was frozen to some degree and didn't know what to say or do. I couldn't do anything. I couldn't even wave back to my friend.

If you are guilty of the crime that you are convicted of, do you feel regret or remorse for those who have suffered because of your actions?

I wish and pray that I could in any way positively help the victims of my case, that my life could be somehow sacrificed to bring back the victim.

I wish and pray that I could in any way positively help the victims of my case, that my life could be somehow sacrificed to bring back the victim. I wish I could do something good for them or anyone—even if I had to work in prison for the rest of my life. I am human and I just wish people could give me a chance to show my regret for the victims of suffering that I've caused.

If you had the chance to tell the Governor and the legislators of Missouri about the death penalty or "Death Row", what would you say?

I came to death row a very messed up, drug addicted, 17-year-old runaway that had to grow up here in the worst of prison realities. I've had to wake up every day facing the pain and suffering I've caused others, my loved-ones, and myself as I look at this pathetic person in the mirror every day. There is the drastically maturing idea that I will never know what an adult's life is like, and that there's no one that really cares to know how I earnestly pray I could change my mistakes, and have people know my sorrow for them, as well as the new Christian man that's become of a troubled teen. There's much evidence of my change growing up in the programs here, and with the way I'll continue to live. I went from a teen that didn't really care about my own life to one that would give his to bring another's back if it were possible.