

Why Are We Visiting Episcopal Churches?

Arkansas' decision to schedule eight executions in 10 days, just after Easter 2017, drew intense national scrutiny, sparked a sudden re-examination of the death penalty, and served as a catalyst to a resolution put before the 79th General Convention seeking to build on the Episcopal Church's longtime advocacy on the issue. (Episcopal News Service 7/2018).

The staged reading of *On The Row* is a call to action that supports longstanding Episcopal resolutions for parishes and dioceses to explore and understand the reasons for our opposition; the inequity as applied to minorities, the poor and those who cannot afford adequate legal representation, the contribution to continued violence, and the violation of our Baptismal Covenant.

The men we served on Arkansas' death row didn't dwell on their pasts or blame others for their crimes. Some of them had found an immense peace that eludes many of us in the free world, and they wanted to share it purely out of gratitude for having found it. By facing their crimes, enduring their sentences, and accepting their impending deaths, they each found ways to survive, seek self-forgiveness, experience God's redemption and retain their humanity.

We didn't know how they would react to our presentation of their writing. When the performance started, we fell to silence and listened deeply. As one of the men wrote us afterwards in a thank you letter, we were all transformed by the writing we heard that day: inmates, teachers, and actors. The writing, he said, culminated in something that's bigger than all of us. This is how we change the world.

Four of the men we served were on the list of eight to be executed.

Don Davis and Stacey Johnson received last minute stays of execution.

Jack Jones was executed on April 24 at 7:06pm, pronounced dead at 7:20pm.

Minister Kenneth Williams was executed on April 27 at 10:52pm, pronounced dead at 11:05pm.

Kenneth was proud to know that while he was on death watch the night before his execution, we were holding a community poetry reading of his work at St. Paul's Church (video on our website). He requested that we read some of his writings at his funeral in Pine Bluff after his execution. We were honored to do so.

FUNDING FOR ON THE ROW 2019 TOUR

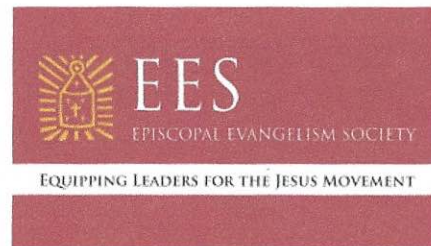


MID-AMERICA ARTS ALLIANCE

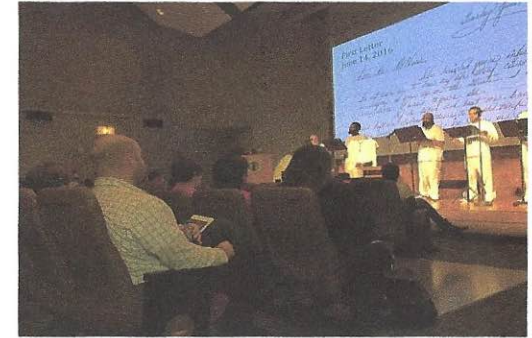


This project is generously funded by Mid-America Arts Alliance, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the state art agencies of Arkansas, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and Texas.

With Matching Funds Provided By:



Fayetteville, Arkansas
A Jubilee Ministry



Presenting *On The Row* To Your Congregation & Community

The staged reading is suitable for mature audiences.
It runs 1 hour and 10 minutes
with an opportunity for Q&A afterwards.

What's Needed to Present in Your Church:

- Space for 6 actors and musician (see photos)
- Electrical outlet for musician
- Space near actors for projection screen (we provide if needed)
- Audience seating

There is no charge to your church for having us. We suggest a \$10 donation at the door which we send to the men on the row for commissary items, but we never require anyone to pay.

Kathy McGregor is founder and project director of The Prison Story Project, a ministry of St. Paul's Episcopal Church. She is a seminary student at the Arkansas Iona Initiative on the diaconate track for 2020.

Troy Schremmer is our theatre director and communicate of St. Paul's Episcopal Church.

David Jolliffe is a resident actor with On The Row, and former warden and vestry member at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Fayetteville, Arkansas.

COMMENTS FROM ON THE ROW AUDIENCES:

(AT EACH OF THE STAGED READINGS, THE AUDIENCE IS INVITED TO FILL OUT COMMENT CARDS THAT WE THEN COPY AND SEND TO THE WRITERS ON THE ROW.)

"Thank you for your dignity. You made humanity impossible to deny. God bless you"

"Thank you for this performance. I feel as though I have a lot of thinking to do. There was so much beauty and pure humanity in your writing despite the apparent despair of the situation. Thank you for having the courage to share that with me and with the world. You have my prayers."

"I have worked as a psychologist for 20 years. If all my clients wrote as you have, they would not need to talk with me. Thank you for sharing your thoughts and allowing us a glimpse into your lives."

"It's God's work to give voice to the voiceless."

"I was moved by your stories. It was a very much needed reminder that everyone, whether behind bars or walking the streets, is a human being."

"Performances like this are what change hearts about the 'justice' of the death penalty. The reflections about facing your true selves make us, the audience, feel the need to do the same in our lives. Thank you."

"Your words were so powerful. No one, regardless of their situation, deserves to have their life and worth reduced to any single event or aspect of who they are, and your stories remind everyone who has the privilege of hearing them to be kind and compassionate to each other."

"Now I know why the caged bird sings. The man can imprison everything but the soul and spirit of a human being. Voicing your experience liberates you and me."

HOW WE CAME TO ARKANSAS' DEATH ROW

In 2015 and 2016 the Prison Story Project took the stories of incarcerated women we were working with in Fayetteville, Arkansas to incarcerated men at Randall L. Williams Correction Center in Pine Bluff, Arkansas as a staged reading. Afterwards we provided a creative writing intensive for 24 men at RL Williams over two days. We then began a storytelling exchange between incarcerated men in Pine Bluff and incarcerated women in Fayetteville with both prison and public performances of those exchanges.

At each of the staged readings in Randall L. Williams Prison, we invited the warden of Varner Prison's death row to attend. It was his witness of those staged readings that allowed us to gain unprecedented access to the men on the row. Eleven of the thirty-four men on death row at the time agreed to participate.

From May – October 2016, we were allowed to meet with the death row inmates in person once a month using poetry, personal story and writing prompts that were then edited into a staged reading, following up between visits through the mail.

The stories and poems the death row inmates wrote were presented back to them on October 8, 2016 by professional actors in a cramped aisle between cages that held the men and then to audiences in Northwest Arkansas six months before we learned of the mass executions scheduled for April, 2017.

Since the 2017 executions, *On The Row* has toured to communities, high schools, and college campuses across Arkansas and nationally to college campuses in Denver, North Carolina, Notre Dame, and West Virginia.

Please visit our website to view a video excerpt of *On The Row* and to learn more about us.
www.prisonstoryproject.com



On The Row

Stories from Arkansas' Death Row

Founded in 2012 as a ministry of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Fayetteville, Arkansas by storyteller Kathy McGregor, the Prison Story Project benefits incarcerated women and men. Inmates explore their truths through poetry, creative writing, literature, songwriting, and visual art.

Their work is then curated into a staged reading performed by actors. The goal of the Prison Story Project is to enable those whose voices have been locked away to tell their stories, allowing communities to witness the humanity and redemption of the incarcerated through their own words.

To book a performance of *On The Row* at no cost to your church, please contact Kathy McGregor, Project Director

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