

Many speak minds on execution

From Staff Reports

In front of Gov. Ben Nelson's mansion. At the Nebraska State Penitentiary. Or at home, watching television. The city of Lincoln waited Thursday night for the execution of Harold Lamont Otey. Some applauded. Some protested.

But most had something to say. Death penalty opponents camped in front of the governor's mansion from early afternoon into the evening. Lincoln resident Joyce Melvin spent much of Thursday evening at The Coffee House, 1324 P St. Melvin said the death penalty was morally wrong. "I don't see the point in telling someone that it's wrong to kill and then killing them to prove it," Melvin said. "That's like someone with a cigarette in his hand telling you it's wrong to smoke."

John Miller, a University of Nebraska-Lincoln freshman, disagreed. "I think that killing Otey will show other people that if they kill, then they have a chance of being killed themselves," Miller said, speaking at Lambda Chi Alpha Fraternity.

Many said capital punishment was a racial issue.

"When you look at the statistics, you can't deny the racial issue," said Mike Gaither, a Nebraska Wesleyan student. "If you kill someone who is white, then you will most likely get the death penalty, but if you kill a minority, you may just get 20 years in jail."

Gaither spent Thursday night protesting the execution at the governor's mansion. As the sun set over the Capitol, the gathering outside Nelson's house turned into a candlelight vigil.

Scott Wesely, state coordinator of Nebraskans Against the Death Penalty and coordinator of the protest, said he hoped for a stay of execution.

"For us to go around trying other countries' human rights trials and then carrying out capital punishment in our country is hypocrisy," Wesely said.

There were more than 70 people at the vigil when it began. The numbers dwindled near midnight, when half the



Mike Gaither, a Nebraska Wesleyan student, picks up signs at a protest in front of the Governor's Mansion Thursday afternoon.

Gerik Parmele/DN

group moved to the penitentiary.

Other Lincoln residents said they believed the execution was something that should have happened long ago.

And they were satisfied it finally was carried out.

Staff Reporters Chad Lorenz and Jeff Randall and Senior Reporter Paula Lavigne contributed to this report.

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in the eye after his death warrant was read to him.

"He looked at me in the eye for a brief moment, and the only way I can look at it was he was saying 'I hope you can live with yourself,'" he said. "That's the way I saw it."

Witnesses described four 2,400-volt jolts of electricity that were administered to Otey. They said smoke rose from near his left knee after the third jolt. Howard called the burn on Otey's left leg "enormous."

The witnesses also said Otey's friends and witnesses cried softly.

Howard said Otey remained strong.

"You would think the roles were reversed," he said. "He looked like he was someone there to encourage others."

Howard said he heard a clunking noise when the volts were sent through. The time between the jolts was distorted, he said.

"The best way for you to describe it away in your mind is a few seconds and several eternities," Howard said.

The witnesses refused to comment on their opinions of the death penalty. However, State Auditor John Breslow, an official observer of Otey's treatment before the execution, said the whole week had been traumatic.

"We're all going to have to deal with what we've witnessed and observed tonight," he said.

Earlier Thursday, Gov. Ben Nelson said he took no pleasure in carrying out the sentence, but was obligated by his position.

"In a capital case, every safeguard against error or abuse must be taken," he said. "However, once the judicial process has established that these safeguards have been taken, it is the responsibility of the state to see that the sentence is carried out in a timely manner."

Nelson said he felt sorry for people on both sides of the issue. He said he had kept an open mind when it

came to information on Otey's changing attitude toward his crime.

However, Nelson said it was always important to carry out the law, and that he did believe in the death penalty.

The 17 years since McManus' murder and the more than 50 appeals have been too much, Nelson said.

"It has drifted away from the original crime so far ... that it's ... academic for some," he said.

The governor said he favored a process of compacting the appeals process to prevent a sentence from being carried out so late.

Nelson's office has, since July 15, received 61 letters supporting the death penalty and 214 against it. The office also has received 364 phone calls — 97 were against the death penalty.

At the State Capitol, tension finally broke at the attorney general's office after confirmation from the penitentiary warden that the execution had been carried out.

Dan Parsons, spokesman for Attorney General Stenberg, read a statement from Stenberg after the execution.

"On June 11, 1977, Harold Lamont Otey robbed, raped, repeatedly stabbed and finally strangled Jane McManus to death. Under the laws of the State of Nebraska, the penalty for these crimes is death," Parsons said.

"... Mr. Otey's cruelty and violence brought about his own death and brought about grief and violence for the McManus family and to his own family and to the friends of both families."

The statement expressed sympathy for the McManus family and all Nebraskans.

"The law of the State of Nebraska has been carried out and justice has been done," Parsons continued from the statement. "Those who engage in extreme acts of unlawful violence in the State of Nebraska should now clearly understand the consequences of those acts."

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