

OPINION PACES

Our VIEW

Silent sorrow

All human beings deserve respect

On Tuesday morning, the State of Nebraska carried out its ultimate act of justice.

The recipient of the justice was Robert E. Williams, the tool was the electric chair and the act was nothing more than the flips of a switch — brief motions that ended Williams' life.

And in a state that has shown overwhelming support for capital punishment, a state that has used the electric chair three times in the last four years, Williams' death seemed to be somewhat of an anticlimax.

There were no drunken, angry mobs gathered in front of the state penitentiary, the State Capitol or the Governor's Mansion. The manic chanting and screaming that accompanied the deaths of Harold Lamont Otey and John Joubert were absent yesterday.

Instead, small groups gathered to mourn lives lost both that morning and 20 years ago.

And, thankfully, those groups were relatively silent in their mourning.

Perhaps this was the result of Nebraskans losing their zeal for loud protest. Perhaps we have all become anesthetized to the death penalty debate in the last few years, or maybe it was just too damn early in the day to yell and scream.

Whatever the cause, it was a welcome change.

In the hours surrounding past years' executions, Nebraskans haven't made themselves out to be the most civilized citizens.

We made the national news in 1994 when several of us paraded in front of the Nebraska State Penitentiary and turned Otey's death into a tailgate party. We did the same thing in the summer of 1996 for Joubert.

In doing so, we made a reality out of the stereotype of Nebraskans as violent, obnoxious, boisterous, beer-drinking fans.

Killing is never pretty, but we made it downright appalling.

When the state carries out its most final, brutal and ugly punishment, it never should be a cause for celebration — even if you're glad it happened.

Even if their deaths were justified or long overdue, you shouldn't cheer.

Even if they killed and raped and did unspeakable things, you shouldn't applaud.

Because even if they weren't people you liked, the people who have died in Nebraska's electric chair were — just that — people. And the death of a human being, no matter how monstrous that person's life was, is still a death.

On Tuesday morning, the people of Nebraska finally may have showed that they understand and respect that fact.

And in doing so, Nebraskans gave Robert Williams the one thing that they didn't give to Otey and Joubert. They gave him the one small thing every human life deserves:

Respect.

Haney's VIEW



Guest VIEW

Self-worth

Girls need to have faith that they can do anything

LAURA VANERKAM is a columnist for The Daily Princetonian at Princeton University.

(U-WIRE) PRINCETON, N.J. — The girl's face in the New York Times was as set as the newsprint telling the story from Chautauqua County, N.Y. Amber Arnold, 18, sat outside a health clinic, waiting to have her blood drawn for an AIDS test.

Like nearly 50 other young women, she had slept with Nushawn Williams, a man from New York City who had been in and out of the city's jails for charges ranging from car theft and drug possession to murder. Williams found out he was HIV positive more than a year ago. Now he is facing assault charges for knowingly infecting an unknown number of people.

Barely an adult herself, Arnold was one of Williams' oldest victims — authorities have already found a 13-year-old girl he infected. Many of the girls are homeless. Almost all are high school dropouts. Most met Williams through his drug pushing, spending their nights in his crack den when it was too cold to sleep outside or the local runaway shelter was too full.

Though it was clear Williams was not exactly faithful to her and that he had knowingly put her life at risk, Arnold was not mad at him. She described the thrill of being with someone from the city, of escaping the boredom of blue-collar Chautauqua with its dead factories and abandoned houses. With nothing else in her rootless life to cling to, Arnold had followed the only man who paid her attention, who had let her feel she was worth something.

This phenomenon of girls ruining their lives for men who look like not-so-great catches is hardly limited to upstate New York. In Indiana, where I live, my mother teaches a GED class for young women who dropped out of school to have children. The women are about my age. Many already have two or three children, whose fathers are diverse members of the South Bend deadbeat dads club. Two women in the program found out their sons (who are roughly the same age) were actually half brothers — the boys' father had been making the rounds at a rate

Williams would have approved of.

Some of the women earn their GEDs. Some find jobs. Some escape South Bend's housing projects with their recent nearly nightly shootings.

But many have found men who pretend to promise a way out. Like Williams, some of the men come from the big city (for Indiana, that's Chicago). Others deal drugs and have money to buy jewelry and nice clothes, things a welfare check can't cover. The trade-off is clear: For a while, the man will treat the woman like she's someone, with unprotected sex as the price. Then the man leaves and the woman is stuck with another baby or, like in Chautauqua, an HIV infection.

And like Arnold, she doesn't think her life is worth enough to tell him no.

Dr. Mary Pipher caused a stir a few years ago with "Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls" when she pointed out this phenomenon of female self-esteem plummeting during the teenage years.

Before then, the girl is on top of the world. Anyone who lived through childhood will remember the invincibility of being 10. By day the trees became launching pads for a mission to Mars and a box of old clothes in an attic could inspire the belief that one was the Queen of England. By night one could hide beneath a pillow with a flashlight, devouring Nancy Drew books — the old ones, that is, before she became more interested in shopping than fighting crime.

But then, something happened. The reasons are as varied as the girls involved. The girl grows up and now keeps up with the first commandment of adolescence, preached by the gospel of Seventeen magazine that something is wrong if you don't have a boyfriend. No longer are Saturdays spent planning a pirate's conquest of the Mediterranean. Rather, they are spent navigating the mall. Take a look sometime at the books and toys aimed at 12-year-old girls. The mindlessness of it all can make a person crazy.

And that's even for girls in the safe suburbs with daddy around. Imagine how hard it must be growing up on a welfare check in the housing projects when your mother dropped out of school to have you at age 15. There's

every chance you won't get out. That realization is enough to make a person's sense of worth plummet.

Eventually, for some, it becomes so low that a drug-dealing, faithless man with several children by several women starts to look good. She thinks she needs a man. She feels lucky to have him. And she'll do whatever he asks without expecting much in return. When Pipher interviewed some girls about their criteria for choosing sexual partners, one mentioned that he should first take her somewhere nice to eat, like McDonald's.

McDonald's? To that girl, sharing part of herself was worth only the price of a Big Mac. \$2.99 is a long way down from thinking you're the Queen of England.

But this doesn't happen to everyone, as many of Princeton's women can attest to. A quotation a while ago in the Nassau Weekly summed it up. One male student said to another, "You've got to realize two things. First, the girls here are smart. Second, they don't need you."

That's miles from the philosophy of Williams' victims or the women in my mother's class. Why are we here in the Ivy League while Arnold waits for her test results from the Chautauqua Health Clinic? Maybe it has something to do with believing the same thing at 20 as at 10 — that you can do absolutely everything you think you can.

This is the only way to make it through adolescence unscathed. I don't know why some girls from rough circumstances make it while others don't, but I also know that no government program can give a person the self-esteem she can't muster on her own. No militantly declared war on men can stop young women from falling for the wrong guys. And no Congress-approved abstinence-at-all-costs sex education program is going to convince a girl that she's worth a hell of a lot more than dinner at McDonald's.

I do know that families, churches, schools and communities can't give up on their girls. Chautauqua county is starting to realize this. Too bad it took an AIDS epidemic through the underground of rootless teenagers to make people realize that no one should have to fight through adolescence on her own.

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