

Victims' family members lobby board to spare murderer's life

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and be better for it."

Gus and his daughter Audrey Lamm came to Lincoln this weekend to lobby state officials to commute Reeves' sentence to life in prison.

They are motivated not only by personal beliefs but by the knowledge that both Victoria Lamm and Janet Mesner would have opposed this execution.

"This whole thing (the execution) is very profoundly disturbing," said Audrey Lamm, who was 2 years old the night her mother and Janet Mesner were killed in the Quaker meeting house. "It sickens me to think that my mother's death would lead to another loss of life."

Friday morning the Lamms met with two of the three members of the Nebraska Board of Pardons, Attorney General Don Stenberg and Secretary of State Scott Moore, to discuss the case and the possibility of a pardons hearing.

The third board member, Gov. Ben Nelson, declined to meet with them, saying he would be out of office before the board could hear the case. Gov.-elect Mike Johanns said he wanted to meet with the Lamms but could not fit them into his schedule on such short notice. Johanns takes office Jan. 6, just eight days before the scheduled execution.

The Lamms said they were greeted with a mixed reception when they met with state officials — some more receptive than others.

Moore listened to the Lamms' message and agreed they have a right to be heard in a public forum, the Lamms said.

But they could not seem to reach Stenberg, they said. Both Gus and Audrey Lamm described him as cold and dispassionate in their meeting.

"He put up a stone wall the moment we walked into the room," Audrey Lamm said. "He didn't hear us as we pleaded with him to look at Randy as an individual."

"But we have to trust him with everything we have. We have to continue to be optimistic."

Reeves' lawyer, Paula Hutchinson, said that in the past Stenberg has been a strong supporter of the death penalty and victims' rights.

But she was unsure how he would act in this case where those two ideas conflict.

The Lamms and the parents of the other victim, Ken and Mildred Mesner, also met Friday with the parole board, which is the information-gathering body for the board of pardons. After investigating the parole board can make a recommendation to the board of pardons.

Throughout the 18-year process since the trial, the Lamms have remained silent, choosing to focus on building their own lives in their Portland, Ore., home. Meanwhile, the Mesners, who live in a Quaker community in Central City, have been trying to keep Reeves from death.

"What happened was a tragedy," Gus Lamm said. "If I had focused on that event for the last 18 years, I think that would make me a bitter, mean-spirited man."

However, a few family members feel different and have supported the execution.

Victoria Lamm's father, Al Zessin, has been a vocal supporter of execution since Reeves was arrested. Her brother Greg also wants Reeves executed.

On March 29, 1980, Reeves stabbed and killed Janet Mesner and Victoria Lamm at the Quaker meeting house in Lincoln where Mesner lived as the caretaker. Mesner and Reeves had been friends since childhood when they were raised in the same Quaker community.

Defense attorneys never disputed that Reeves, now 48, killed the two women; instead they argued he should be convicted of second-degree murder or manslaughter and that Reeves was unaware of his actions at the time.

Reeves had been drinking since 9

Former governor, tribal members rally for reversal of death penalty

By JOSH FUNK
Senior staff writer

The Omaha Tribe of Nebraska does not know how to deal with the planned execution of one of its own, tribal leaders said at a rally Saturday.

About 80 people, including families of the victims, attended a rally at the Indian Center, 1100 Military Road, to stop the execution of Randolph Reeves, which is set for Jan. 14.

"There has not been an execution of an Omaha (tribal member) in living memory," said Jerre Moreland, a member of the Omaha Tribe. "On the reservation they don't know what to do with (the execution)."

"They don't have a custom for this."

Reeves, also known as Randolph Blackbird, was taken from his Omaha family on the Winnebago Reservation in northeast Nebraska when he was 3 years old and was later adopted by a white family.

He was raised in a Quaker community near Central City, though his American Indian mother never surrendered her parental rights.

Reeves was convicted of the 1980 murders of Janet Mesner and Victoria Lamm, who were killed at a Quaker meeting house in Lincoln.

Families of both victims spoke out at the rally along with tribal leaders and former Gov. Frank Morrison.

Reeves told his lawyer Paula Hutchinson on Saturday morning that he was humbled and overwhelmed by the show of support.

Morrison said society has made the death penalty a scapegoat for its inability to handle its problems.

"The state's motto is 'equality before the law' — what a hypocrisy,"

Morrison said.

He said they would not be having a rally if Reeves had been a rich man.

Had Reeves been able to afford psychiatrists and top-dollar lawyers to testify at his trial, he wouldn't have been facing death, Morrison said.

Supporters have rallied around Reeves from both conventional and unconventional sources.

Amnesty International, Nebraskans Against the Death Penalty and other groups are lobbying to have Reeves' sentence commuted.

Family members of both victims are against the death penalty, and the case has garnered some national attention.

SueZann Bosler, a woman who fought for 12 years to have her father's killer sentenced to life in prison, not death, arrived in Lincoln on Saturday to offer support and share her experiences with the families.

Both the Lamms and the Mesners spoke at the rally in favor of commuting Reeves sentence to death.

The Lamms and the Mesners have been lobbying the Nebraska Board of Pardons, which is the last stop in the process, to hear their pleas.

"I'm portrayed as a victim, but I am not a victim," said Gus Lamm, Victoria's widower, "and I will not remain a victim."

Hutchinson said there was no mechanism for input from the victims' families at the trial, so now they are trying to shed light on the situation.

"The lights shine brightest when it is darkest," Lamm said. "That's what is happening here. That light is going to shine on Randy."

"What happened was a tragedy. If I had focused on that event for the last 18 years, I think that would make me a bitter, mean-spirited man."

GUS LAMM
victim's widower

a.m. on the day of the murders, and witnesses testified that he was in a stupor that night when he went to visit Mesner.

In 1981 Reeves was convicted of felony murder — prosecutors argued the murders took place during the commission or attempt to commit sexual assault — which meant they did not have to prove intent.

In the years since conviction, Reeves' case has been examined by several higher courts, including the U.S. Supreme Court, but his sentence remains death.

Hutchinson said the federal courts refused to address some of the issues, saying they were state questions, but the state has never answered them either.

Unless the pardons board heeds the families' pleas for mercy, Reeves will be executed Jan. 14.

"The government is saying do what we say, not what we do," Audrey Lamm said.

"Why kill people who kill people to show that killing is wrong?"

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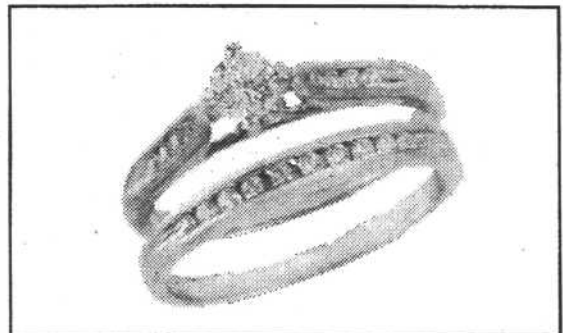
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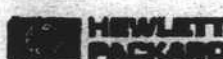
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