

Fate of murderer divides Lincoln

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■ **Protesters on both sides of the death penalty issue, including victims' families, fight over Randy Reeves' sentence.**

By **JOSH FUNK**
Senior staff writer

For two years prior to June 8, 1998, Randy Reeves could look forward to life in prison.

An 18-year legal battle had secured Reeves relief from execution for two 1980 murders, but the U.S. Supreme Court reversed the decision and cleared the way for Reeves' death.

With Reeves' claim dismissed, last fall the wheels of justice hastened toward a January execution date.

Pleas from both Reeves' and the victims' families fell on the deaf ears of the Pardons Board, which refused to hold a hearing.

Reeves came within two days of the electric chair before the State Supreme Court stayed the process to consider a motion for post-conviction relief filed mid-December that the District Court refused to hear.

This Friday, the State Supreme Court will hear oral arguments in the case before ruling on Reeves' claims of discrimination, rights violations and cruel and unusual punishment.

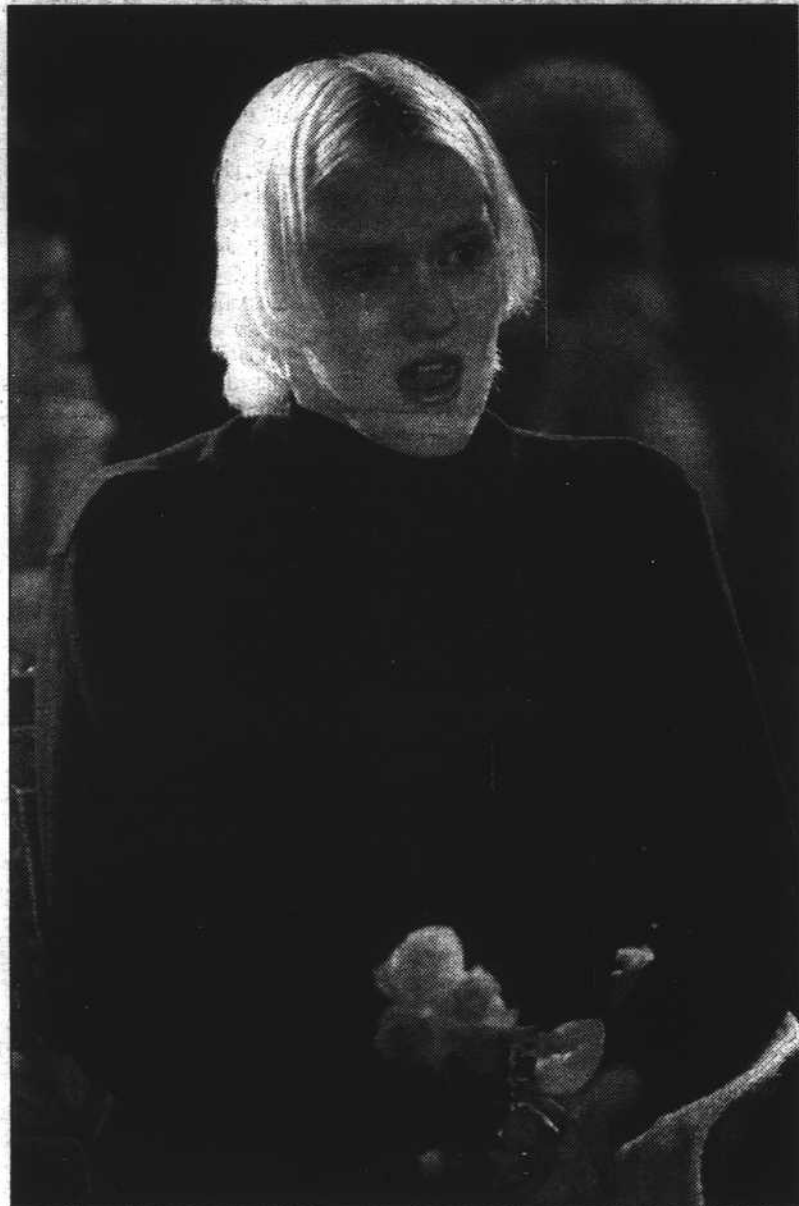
The final push for clemency involved some unlikely supporters — the family and friends of the two women Reeves murdered.

Those families faced tremendous pain in 1980 when Janet Mesner and Vicki Lamm were stabbed in the Lincoln Quaker meeting house. Reeves had been drinking all day before the murder.

Reeves was convicted of two counts of felony murder, because of evidence of sexual assault, and in 1981 he was sentenced to death.

Gus and Audrey Lamm, Vicki's widower and daughter, came to Lincoln in December from Portland, Ore., after 18 years of silence to speak on Reeves' behalf.

"We must have the ability to for-



AUDREY LAMM REACTS to the Nebraska Pardons Board declining clemency for Randy Reeves on Jan. 11 at the State Capitol. Reeves murdered two women in 1980, including Vicky Lamm, Audrey's mother.

AP PHOTO/S.E. MCKEE

give," said Gus Lamm, Vicki's widower. "We take the most horrendous circumstances (in life), deal with them and be better for it."

The Lamms were motivated not only by personal beliefs but by the knowledge that both Victoria Lamm and Mesner would have opposed this execution, they said.

"This whole thing (the execution) is very profoundly disturbing," said Audrey Lamm, who, at 2 years old, was present the night her mother and 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."

Along with Mesner's parents, Ken and Mildred, and Reeves' adoptive and birth families, the Lamms tried to share their concerns with the Pardons Board in January.

After the Nebraska Board of Pardons decided not to grant Randy Reeves clemency, the crowd of family members and supporters started sobbing and pleading for his life.

The meeting broke down into an emotional display when Secretary of State Scott Moore took a 15-minute recess. Family members and people in the crowd unloaded on the remaining board members:

"Please don't do this to my mother," Audrey Lamm asked Attorney General Don Stenberg and Gov. Mike Johanns.

Occasionally voices from the crowd offered comment:

"Even Jesus would give a hearing."

"At least grant him a hearing."

"I hope you sleep at night, Governor."

During the pleas, Johanns sat somberly tapping two fingers against his lips, avoiding eye contact. Stenberg listened, blank-faced, to the pleas.

Vicki Lamm's brother, Greg Zessin, who supports the death penalty, became irritated with the display:

"This is a recess, not a time to address (the Board)."

The next day those emotions changed to relief or frustration, depending which side people favored, when the State Supreme Court issued the stay.

Stenberg said the court was rewarding the defense counsel's delay tactics by issuing the stay.

But for Reeves' attorney, the families of the victims and Reeves' family, the stay provides a chance for their concerns to be heard by a judge.

"For the first time, a court is finally willing to listen to the fairness issues in the case," said Paula Hutchinson, Reeves' attorney, "and determine whether death is appropriate."

The Nebraska Supreme Court agreed to hear argument on a motion alleging execution would violate Reeves' rights under the state's newly adopted equal protection amendment.

Both the state and the defense have filed written briefs to the court, and Friday attorneys will defend their positions in oral arguments.

Then the Supreme Court will decide whether to commute Reeves' sentence to life imprisonment or to carry out the execution.

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