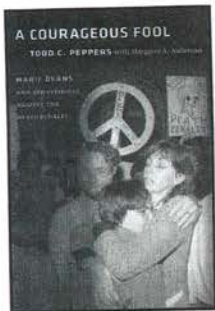


BOOK REVIEWS

A Courageous Fool

Marie Deans and Her Struggle Against the Death Penalty

By Todd C. Peppers
with Margaret A. Anderson
Vanderbilt Press (2017)
Reviewed by Robin C. Konrad



Unless people have worked within the small death penalty circle in the United States, they most likely have never heard of Marie Deans. Even then, people may not know about Marie's work on behalf of

condemned men unless they were involved in capital cases in the South — particularly Virginia — during the 1970s, '80s or '90s. If, however, someone wants to see how one person can understand the basic human need for forgiveness and healing, then learning about Marie Deans — a woman who selflessly used her own suffering to expose the humanity in others — is imperative. By gaining an understanding of both Marie and the people she came to know through her work fighting against capital punishment, one can truly recognize the social cost incurred with the use of the death penalty.

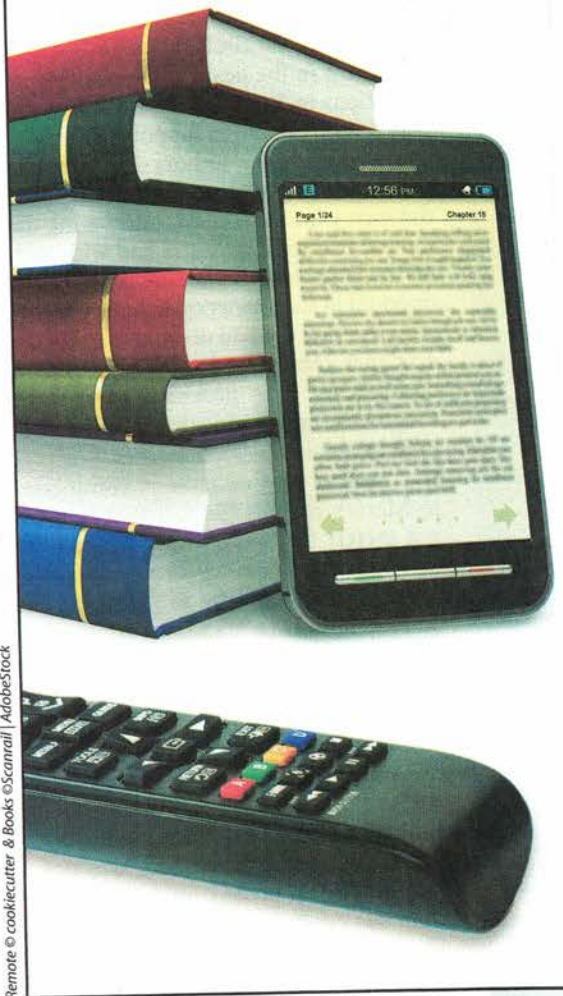
In the book *A Courageous Fool: Marie Deans and Her Struggle Against the Death Penalty*, authors Todd C. Peppers and Margaret A. Anderson eloquently share the remarkable and complex journey of Marie Deans's seven decades on earth by focusing on her unwavering battle to save the lives of people who society easily discards. The book combines excerpts from a memoir that Marie started, but never finished, with the authors' own narrative to weave together Marie's personal life and work, showing that the two are inextricably linked. The reader gains genuine insight into Marie's pain and suffering within her own personal and familial relationships. In a seemingly effortless manner,

the authors depict one woman's struggle to heal her life's wounds by helping save numerous others' lives.

One of the men who was executed during Marie's time in Virginia uttered a last statement that ended with a question: "How can we heal if we become that which wounded us?" The recognition and understanding of pain, both within ourselves and others, is crucial to the healing process. Marie had an uncanny ability to see this and bring it to the foreground.

Marie's life started on a path similar to so many of the lives of those who face the death penalty in America. When she was a child, Marie was sexually and physically abused, and abandoned by the people who were supposed to protect and love her. As she worked her way through adulthood, she finally found true parental love via her third husband's mother. However, that relationship was stolen from her all too soon when her mother-in-law was murdered during a home invasion. In the opening chapter of their book, the authors draw the reader in by using Marie's own words to describe the tragic loss of her husband's mother; she explains that the grief she experienced was "so dark and heavy it smothers out life." Marie could have used the pain from her mother-in-law's murder to seek vengeance, which would have resulted in a very different life trajectory. Instead, she sought to find out "why there was so much violence, why we [as humans] seemed so good at it, and why we seemed so poor at love."

Using excerpts from Marie's own writing throughout the book, the authors dive into the depths of her strong desire to mend a criminal justice system plagued by the desire to seek revenge. Although Marie criticized society for being "more interested in satisfying our own emotional needs than ... in finding real solutions to our problems," she sought to be part of the solution. In doing so, she used her own tragedy to reach the broken souls of those who were facing a death sentence in a way that most cannot.



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Marie worked as an investigator, uncovering the troubled backgrounds of those facing the death penalty in hope of mitigating their crimes and showing juries why these individuals' lives should be spared. During nearly two decades in the 1980s and 1990s, Marie worked on approximately 220 trial cases in Virginia; only three resulted in a death sentence. Those results are truly remarkable given that between 1981 and 2000, Virginia imposed 120 new death sentences (an average of six new death sentences per year).¹

Marie also worked with men who had already been sentenced to death and

About the Reviewer

Robin Konrad is Assistant Professor of Lawyering Skills at Howard University School of Law in Washington, D.C. Previously, she represented clients sentenced to death in challenging their convictions and death sentences.

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who were therefore facing execution. For those whom she could not save, she was with them in the death house. During 34 executions in Virginia, she was often the only person present in support of the prisoners. As such, the authors devote a large portion of the book to sharing stories of the men who were killed, uncovering the unique relationship Marie had with each of them. Although she was vehemently opposed to state-sanctioned killing, Marie was clear that she had no sympathy for the acts that these men were convicted of committing. She provided them with tough love, recognizing that they were still human despite their vile crimes.

Adding another layer of complexity to Marie's story is the fact that she was not merely focused on the prisoner; she had all-encompassing compassion for everyone impacted by the system. The authors reveal Marie's work with victims' family members who struggled to make sense of the world after losing their loved ones, and they describe Marie's recognition of the damage suffered by the officers who had the gruesome task of carrying out executions. Throughout the book, we learn that Marie was keenly aware that the death penalty was not a system that impacted only the person who was dealt the punishment. Indeed, Marie hurt for a modern society that continued the systematic killing of people. In doing this work, Marie posed the question: "What happens to human beings when horror becomes routine?"

Perhaps the answer to her question can be gleaned from her own life. Marie spent so much time trying to save others from routine horror that she devoted little time to care for her own personal and health needs. By sharing Marie's less-than-picture-perfect life, the authors allow the reader to understand the toll that death penalty work takes on human beings. At times, her relationship with her children was strained, as there were not enough hours in the day to combat the system and be a devoted mother. She lived a life below the poverty line, often forfeiting meals, and her health suffered from long habit as an avid chain smoke which ultimately resulted in her death. Through learning about Marie's life the reader comes to appreciate that the death penalty system does not only destroy the individuals who are subjected to the punishment; it also contaminates the souls of those who are tangentially involved in it. The social cost of capital punishment is not talked about as often as financial cost, but the toll is immeasurable and has no price tag.

The authors explain that, toward the end of her life, Marie felt forgotten because the newer generations of attorneys and activists did not know her. That may have very well been true before this book was published. Out of full disclosure, I became a capital defense attorney in 2005 and practiced for over a decade, and I did not know Marie Deans or the great contribution she made to the fight against capital punishment. Now, that is no longer true. Peppers and Anderson took on the daunting project of piecing together Marie's unfinished memoir, and because of that, they have honored her and her desires by illuminating her life and work for future generations.²

Notes

1. See Death Penalty Information Center, *Death Sentences in the United States From 1977 By State and By Year*, available at <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/death-sentences-united-states-1977-present>.

2. Since Marie Deans's death in April 2011, the death penalty landscape in the United States has changed. Death sentences are being imposed less, and states are carrying out fewer executions. In the most recent Gallup public opinion poll, only 55 percent of those surveyed said they support capital punishment. This is the lowest support by Americans since the death penalty was reinstated in 1976. Marie Deans would have no doubt been happy to know that Virginia has not sentenced anyone to death since the year she died. ■