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Scharlette Holdman, Pioneer in Defense of Death Penalty Cases, Dies

Scharlette Holdman, a human rights activist and pioneer in the defense of death penalty cases, died in her home in New Orleans on Wednesday, July 12. Ever since the U.S. Supreme Court upheld new death penalty statutes in 1976, Holdman had been at the forefront of the movement to ensure that death-row prisoners and those facing capital charges had access to lawyers and investigators trained to tell their clients' life stories and equipped to challenge the use of the death penalty in their cases.

“Scharlette Holdman, was one of the handful of dedicated people who, forty years ago, saw what needed to be done to save clients' lives and simply began to do it,” said Robert Dunham, Executive Director of the Death Penalty Information Center. Her comprehensive approach to developing “mitigating” information about a capital defendant's life and background set the standard for how to represent individuals facing the ultimate punishment.

Before devoting her energies entirely to the representation of death penalty defendants, Holdman served as the state director of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) in Hawaii, Louisiana, and Florida. In 1978, she became director of a small non-profit organization in Tallahassee that advocated for prisoners' rights and criminal justice reform. Faced with the specter of executions in Florida, Holdman took it upon herself to recruit *pro bono* lawyers for unrepresented prisoners facing execution. Her work at that time is chronicled in *Among the Lowest of the Dead*, David von Drehle's classic book about the return of capital punishment in Florida.

A non-lawyer who was trained as an anthropologist, Holdman soon found herself instructing the lawyers in how and what to look for in a client's life that might make a jury or

judge choose a life sentence rather than death. Over the ensuing decades, she continued to develop new and more expansive ways to view her clients' lives by exhaustively exploring multi-generational histories of mental illness, child abuse, economic and social marginalization, and virtually anything about a person that might engender compassion and mercy.

“In retrospect,” Dunham said, “Scharlette was the perfect person to develop the concept of the multi-generational family history investigation that is at the core of any good mitigation case. That investigation is really a form of social anthropology, and she understood that presenting a case for life was about storytelling that humanized the person the prosecution was attempting to portray as a monster. With her insight, compassion, and dogged determination—all tempered by a wonderful sense of humor—she put everything together. Death-row prisoners and their families were as devoted to Scharlette as were the lawyers and investigators she trained.”

In addition to her work on individual cases, Holdman was a dynamic and influential speaker on the issue of the death penalty as a fundamental human and civil rights issue. She worked on cases throughout the world and trained hundreds of people in how to properly conduct mitigation investigations, developing practices now formally recognized in American Bar Association guidelines for representing those facing the death penalty.