TEACHING KIT

DEAD MAN WALKING
An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States

HELEN PREJEAN, C.S.J.
CONTENTS

pg.3
INTRODUCTION

pg.4
TEACHER’S GUIDE

pg.6
SUBJECT AREAS:
ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS,
SOCIAL STUDIES, THEATER

pg.9
TIMELINE: DEAD MAN WALKING

pg.10
BIOGRAPHIES

pg.12
BIBLIOGRAPHY

pg.16
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

pg.17
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
INTRODUCTION

Jamie Nelson
Head, Special Collections and Archives

Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States was instrumental in bringing widespread attention to the human dimension of the death penalty. First published in 1993, it has been reprinted, translated, and adapted for film, theater, and opera. Universities, high schools, libraries, churches, and theater groups have hosted community-wide reading experiences, panel discussions, performances, and visits from Sr. Helen herself for nearly 25 years.

This teaching kit, including primary sources and curricular materials for teachers, is meant to complement, enhance, deepen, and challenge the experience for those reading, performing, or viewing Dead Man Walking. The digitized primary sources, available at spca.depaul.press/prejean, are but a sampling of the Sr. Helen Prejean papers, which provide a unique and intimate perspective on the death penalty and intersecting social justice issues, the development of Sr. Helen’s activism, and the creative and practical processes of writing and publishing books and bringing the story to screen and stage.

DePaul University Library Special Collections and Archives is honored to care for Sr. Helen’s archival collection and to make materials available for teaching, learning, engagement, and reflection. We are grateful to our partners from the DePaul University College of Education, David Bates and John Gieger, who shared their expertise gained from the Library of Congress Teaching with Primary Sources program.
A Note on Teaching Controversial Topics

Constructive discussions of controversial topics like the death penalty can build an array of life skills—a respect for civil discourse, an understanding of how laws are made and amended, and the ability to think metacognitively about how opinions and biases are formed. But discussing controversial topics also presents unique challenges for teachers and students alike. Following these five general rules can help your lessons run smoothly and effectively.

1. Scaffold appropriately. Too often, teachers treat controversial topics as though they are “just another unit.” Take time to prepare students for what is to come. If you plan on holding a class debate or town hall simulation, make sure to practice those strategies. If you plan on culminating the unit with a letter-writing campaign to legislators, make sure students understand how state and federal laws are made, and what impact they can expect their letters to have. If you’re concerned about discussions getting heated, create and consistently enforce ground rules throughout the year.

2. Use primary sources whenever possible. Primary sources—firsthand accounts of historical events—are crucial for exploring controversial topics. Primary sources force students to confront the opinions, feelings, and biases of people in the past, as well as the circumstances that gave rise to them. More importantly, a wealth of primary sources exists to support both sides of any given issue. Supplying students with firsthand arguments both for and against the death penalty, for example, destabilizes the idea of a “right answer” and forces them to critically weigh evidence and draw their own conclusions.

3. Allow students to discuss, debate, and reflect upon their opinions. Make sure that your unit includes space for students to discuss their feelings and opinions with one another, including space for disagreement and debate, and the opportunity for students to change their opinion. Most importantly, students must be given time to reflect on their opinions: What is their conclusion about this issue? How did they arrive at it? What evidence was most important? What are they still unsure about? Answering such questions not only deepens student understanding of the topic at hand; it also forces them to critically examine and re-examine their own beliefs and reinforces the need to justify their conclusions with evidence.
4. Create an atmosphere of respect. Your classroom must be a space in which every student can feel free to express his or her opinion, as long as it is stated respectfully and backed by evidence. Above all else, keep in mind that some of your students may have a personal stake in the topic you’re discussing. In the case of capital punishment, some may have a friend or relative in prison, or may have experience with the corrections system themselves; others may know, or may themselves have been, victims of violence. If students feel comfortable sharing such experiences with the group, encourage them to do so, validate them for having the courage to share, and make sure their stories are treated with sensitivity and respect by their classmates.

5. Make learning relevant. To carry learning forward, culminate your lesson or unit with an action project that provides students a way to act on their opinions. A letter-writing campaign is the simplest version of this, but many legislators are also open to face-to-face meetings with school groups. Similarly, you might ask representatives of nonprofit and advocacy groups to meet with your students and show them how to get more involved. Acting on their learning helps deepen understanding by connecting the abstract to the concrete, and offers students a chance to hone their skills in critical thinking and citizenship—skills they can use for a lifetime.
A significant portion of Sr. Helen’s personal papers that were donated to DePaul University Library’s Special Collections and Archives consist of correspondence she has with individuals and organizations. She often relies on the written word to engage with those who support the death penalty and those who oppose it by writing letters, opinion pieces for newspapers, and speeches.

These “raw materials” are the foundation on which Dead Man Walking is built. Understanding how to muster evidence and support one’s claims is critical to not only conveying an experience to others, but also in building a legal argument. Examining these sources individually and collectively reveals that Dead Man Walking is not one narrative, but many interwoven individual narratives.

Several of the primary sources provide a visual representation of Sr. Helen’s descriptions in Dead Man Walking. Two of Pat Sonnier’s letters to Sr. Helen (3/20/82 and 10/26/82) include drawings of the death row cell block and the visiting area, while a series of photos from 1984 chronicles Sr. Helen’s visit to the prison.

Questions/Discussion Prompts

• Compare and contrast the tone and arguments found in the “formal” publications like the Stand Up for Life flyer and newspaper clipping with those found in “informal” sources, like letters. How do they compare to similar sources today?

• Compare the letters between Sr. Helen, Sonnier, and Willie to those written to the Governor. Do these reinforce or refute your understanding of the situation as it is presented in Dead Man Walking?

• Sr. Helen writes to many different audiences, including those who oppose her. How does her tone and style change given these different audiences?

• Create a diagram showing the arguments made by Sr. Helen and/or the inmates to opposing groups and/or the Governor. How are they similar? How are they different?

• Closely examine and evaluate Dead Man Walking alongside the primary sources found here, paying particular attention to tone, word choice, and the point of view of the author. Do you find Sr. Helen’s arguments effective and convincing? Why or why not?
Though *Dead Man Walking* is often considered a work of literary nonfiction, its implications are perfectly suited for discussion in the social studies classroom. Many students will be familiar with the concept of executions from television and movies, but primary sources can illuminate the legal processes involved in the commission of a death sentence, as well as its effects on others.

In both *Dead Man Walking* and in a number of her personal papers, Sr. Helen makes emotional appeals against the death penalty. In *Dead Man Walking* and in her statement before the Louisiana Board of Pardons (11/19/84), Sr. Helen recalls consoling Pat Sonnier’s weeping family. She noted the “shaken, drawn faces of the victims’ fathers,” and claimed that the execution had a “dehumanizing effect...on the guards and all involved.” Later, Sr. Helen discusses at length her relationship with Vernon and Elizabeth Harvey, and realizes that advocating for the families of victims is as important as advocating for prisoners. In a letter to the Harveys, Sr. Helen thanked them in for “inspir[ing]...to understand the sufferings and struggles of murder victims’ families” and to begin advocacy work on their behalf.

These types of sources can complicate students’ traditional understandings of the death penalty debate by highlighting the centrality of personal experience and emotion. They also show Sr. Helen’s own growth as an advocate, as she realizes the pain her work can cause, and the need to expand her ministry into the realm of victim’s rights. Such a transformation forces students to widen their field of view beyond a simple binary debate by considering who is affected by the death penalty.

**Supplementing Dead Man Walking**

State of Louisiana Department of Corrections Regulation No. 10-25 lays out the regulations governing execution, while Sr. Helen’s thirteen pages of handwritten notes detail the execution of Robert Lee Willie in 1984, and an honorary membership to the so-called “Lifer’s Association,” given to Sr. Helen by death row inmates in honor of her custody of Pat’s body, states: “each time there is an execution, a part of us also dies.” Review these three documents alongside chapters 5 and 9 of Dead Man Walking and have students consider the following:

- How have your previous beliefs or ideas about execution been challenged? Is the process of execution different than you thought?
- Do you think the regulations surrounding executions are reasonable? Why or why not?
- What effect does an execution have on those left alive? How does this affect your feeling on the death penalty?
- To what degree was Sr. Helen able to preserve some dignity for Pat Sonnier and Robert Lee Willie and their families? How do these efforts relate to her campaign against the death penalty?

**Questions/Discussion Prompts**

- What role do anecdotal, personal, and emotional arguments play in civil debate?
- How can we expand our understanding of stakeholders in the death penalty debate? How does capital punishment affect the family members of the condemned? Relatives of the victim? Outreach workers like Sr. Helen? Prison guards? Society at large?
- What other issues are connected to the debate over capital punishment? Why are these connections difficult to disentangle? How do they complicate our efforts to resolve this issue?
In 1995, *Dead Man Walking* was developed into a major motion picture starring Susan Sarandon and Sean Penn and directed by Tim Robbins. In 2003, Tim Robbins adapted his screenplay into a theater version of *Dead Man Walking* and offered it to schools and colleges throughout the United States for production. Known as “The Dead Man Walking School Theatre Project,” it is managed by the Ministry Against the Death Penalty and has been staged by hundreds of high schools and colleges nationwide.

Like the film adaptation of *Dead Man Walking*, the stage version focuses on Sr. Helen’s relationship with death row inmate Matt Poncelet (a fictionalized combination of Elmo Patrick Sonnier and Robert Lee Willie) and explores ideas about the justice system, sympathy, forgiveness, and resolution through a variety of perspectives.

In any dramatization or adaptation, the final product has a narrative and perspective that may be only a portion of what “actually happened.” As you examine the primary sources in this set, think about how adapting them to live performance can be both powerful and problematic.

### Supplementing *Dead Man Walking*

- The character of Matt Poncelet is a blend of Elmo Patrick Sonnier and Robert Lee Willie. In what ways do you think synthesizing two (significant) individuals into one character changes the overall narrative?

- Examine the letters and images in the primary source set. With your understanding of the story and details presented in *Dead Man Walking* and these primary sources, how does the interpretation of the sources reinforce or differ from your previous understanding?

### Questions/Discussion Prompts, continued

- More than a decade elapsed between the publication of *Dead Man Walking* (1993) and its first performance as a play (2004). How does this distance between original events, adaptation, and performance impact the understanding of the topics contained in the play (both about the individuals and about the topic of the death penalty)?

- Unlike an unfolding dialogue/discussion in a classroom, theater invites audiences to view a performance and reflect along the way. How does performance create engagement? How can actors work to effect social change?

- How would viewing a performance impact someone’s understanding of the story of *Dead Man Walking*? How would it affect their perspective on the larger topics it explores? How is theater uniquely suited to provoking these considerations?
Sr. Helen starts corresponding with Elmo Patrick Sonnier who is on death row in Louisiana's Angola State Prison. She becomes his spiritual advisor and visits and writes frequently for the next two years.

October - Sr. Helen is asked to visit another death row inmate at Angola, Robert Lee Willie.

Members of Pilgrimage for Life, an organization co-founded by Sr. Helen, walk across the state of Louisiana as an information campaign against the death penalty.


The San Francisco Opera commissions composer Jake Heggie and playwright Terrence McNally to create a new opera based on *Dead Man Walking* for the fall opera season of 2000.

April 5 - Sonnier is electrocuted shortly after midnight with Sr. Helen witnessing his execution.

December 28 - Robert Lee Willie is electrocuted, with Sr. Helen witnessing as his spiritual advisor.

Sr. Helen establishes "Survive," a victim advocacy group in New Orleans.

*Dead Man Walking* is developed into a major motion picture starring Susan Sarandon and Sean Penn and directed by Tim Robbins.

The Dead Man Walking School Theatre Project is founded. Tim Robbins adapts the book into a stage production.
Sr. Helen Prejean released the book *Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States* in 1993. Prejean wrote this international bestseller based on her 1984 experiences as a spiritual advisor for death row inmates Patrick Sonnier and Robert Lee Willie. As a spiritual advisor she corresponded and visited with the inmates, advocated for reduced sentences, and ultimately witnessed their executions. Prejean also interacted with the victims' families, the inmates' families, prison officials, politicians, religious leaders, and the press. Influenced by these experiences, Prejean’s continuing activism included advocating against the death penalty with the non-profit organization Pilgrimage for Life. She also worked with the families of murder victims, starting the support group Survive. The book *Dead Man Walking* became the basis for a critically acclaimed film, opera, and school theater project of the same title. Sr. Helen Prejean currently campaigns through her organization Ministry Against the Death Penalty.

Jason Epstein served as the editorial director at Random House for forty years. During his time at Random House, Epstein worked with many notable authors, including Norman Mailer, Vladimir Nabokov, Sr. Helen Prejean, and Gore Vidal. Epstein’s editorial contributions significantly influenced Sr. Helen Prejean’s book *Dead Man Walking*, resulting in a reader-friendly narrative structure echoing Prejean’s voice and thoughts.

Elmo Patrick Sonnier and his brother Eddie Sonnier were convicted of the November 4, 1977, rape and murder of eighteen-year-old Loretta Ann Bourque and murder of sixteen-year-old David LeBlanc. Patrick received a death sentence, while Eddie received a life sentence. Sr. Helen Prejean wrote letters to Patrick Sonnier on death row at Angola State Prison, visited him in jail, and became his spiritual advisor. Pat Sonnier was executed by the state of Louisiana on April 5, 1984, at Angola State Prison.

Eddie Sonnier and his brother Patrick Sonnier were convicted of the November 4, 1977, rape and murder of eighteen-year-old Loretta Ann Bourque and murder of sixteen-year-old David LeBlanc. Eddie received a life sentence, while Patrick received a death sentence. Eddie eventually claimed that he was the one responsible for shooting the victims. He made this statement in court and in a letter to Louisiana Governor Edwin W. Edwards pleading for his brother’s life.
Robert Lee Willie and Joseph J. Vaccaro were convicted of the May 28, 1980, rape and murder of 18 year old Faith Hathaway in Washington Parish, Louisiana. Willie received a death sentence, while Vaccaro received a life sentence. Sr. Helen Prejean began visiting Willie at Angola State Prison in October 1984 and served as his spiritual advisor. Robert Lee Willie was executed by the state of Louisiana on December 28, 1984, at Angola State Prison.

Vernon and Elizabeth Harvey are the stepfather and mother of Faith Hathaway, who was raped and murdered on May 28, 1980. Robert Lee Willie and Joseph J. Vaccaro were convicted of the crimes against their daughter. Sr. Helen Prejean developed a relationship with the Harveys which led her to begin a support group for the families of murder victims.

Edwin W. Edwards was a Louisiana State senator, member of the U.S. House of Representatives, and four-term governor of the state of Louisiana. Thirteen Louisiana death row inmates were executed while Edwards served as the state’s governor. In 1984, Sr. Helen Prejean and others asked Governor Edwards to commute the sentences of Patrick Sonnier and Robert Lee Willie to life in prison. Edwards did not intervene in either case.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

All primary sources are from the Sr. Helen Prejean papers at Special Collections and Archives, DePaul University Library, Chicago, IL. Visit spca.depaul.edu/prejean to view and download.


Original item: Sr. Helen Prejean papers, box 29, folder 13


Original item: Sr. Helen Prejean papers, box 1, folder 7


Original item: Sr. Helen Prejean papers, box 1, folder 7


Original item: Sr. Helen Prejean papers, box 1, folder 9


Original item: Sr. Helen Prejean papers, box 83


Original item: Sr. Helen Prejean papers, box 1, folder 5

Original item: Sr. Helen Prejean papers, box 28, folder 11


Original item: Sr. Helen Prejean papers, box 2, folder 3


Original item: Sr. Helen Prejean papers, box 2, folder 5


Original item: Sr. Helen Prejean papers, box 83


Original item: Sr. Helen Prejean papers, box 2, folder 4


Original item: Sr. Helen Prejean papers, box 2, folder 4

Original item: Sr. Helen Prejean papers, box 3, folder 11


Original item: Sr. Helen Prejean papers, box 83


Original item: Sr. Helen Prejean papers, box 3, folder 8


Original item: Sr. Helen Prejean papers, box 3, folder 10


Original item: Sr. Helen Prejean papers, box 84


Original item: Sr. Helen Prejean papers, box 17, folder 4

Original item: Sr. Helen Prejean papers, box 3, folder 20


Original item: Sr. Helen Prejean papers, box 13, folder 5


Original item: Sr. Helen Prejean papers, box 29, folder 16


Original item: Sr. Helen Prejean papers, box 39, folder 6
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES
URLs active as of April 2017

About Sr. Helen:

Sr. Helen Prejean papers at DePaul University
Collection guide for Sr. Helen Prejean’s archives, donated to DePaul University Library Special Collections and Archives in 2010.
http://libguides.depaul.edu/ld.php?content_id=10135845

In Deeds and Words: Sr. Helen Prejean’s Ministry Against the Death Penalty
DePaul University Library Special Collections and Archives digital exhibit created in April 2013.
http://dpuspecialcollections.omeka.net/exhibits/show/prejean

Ministry Against the Death Penalty
Non-profit organization founded by The Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph in support of Sr. Helen Prejean’s ministry against the death penalty.
http://www.sisterhelen.org/

About the death penalty:

Death Penalty Information Center
National non-profit organization providing information, resources, and analysis regarding the death penalty.
http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/

Resources compiled by the Death Penalty information Center for teachers and students.
http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/educational-curricula-death-penalty
http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/student-resource-center

ProCon.org
Non-profit non-partisan organization providing professionally researched pro and con information regarding controversial issues including the death penalty.
http://deathpenalty.procon.org/

United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
United Nations office in charge of protecting and promoting human rights internationally, including the abolition of the death penalty.

Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996
Legislation, signed into law by President Bill Clinton, expanding the scope of the death penalty.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The original letters, photographs, and documents selected for the teaching kit are from the Sr. Helen Prejean papers. The digitization of the primary sources was completed by staff members in DePaul Library’s Digital Services Department with supervision by Kevin Endres. The WordPress site, spca.depaul.press/prejean was created by Wendall Sullivan, Digital Initiatives Librarian. The teaching kit’s content and organization was created by Morgen MacIntosh Hodgetts, Special Collections Instruction Librarian, Derek Potts, Archives Processing Assistant, Jamie Nelson, Head of Special Collections and Archives, David Bates, Director of Teaching with Primary Sources Program, and John Gieger, Tech Consultant for DePaul University’s College of Education, April 2017.
I HAVE NO DOUBT THAT WE WILL ONE DAY ABOLISH THE DEATH PENALTY IN AMERICA. IT WILL COME SOONER IF PEOPLE LIKE ME WHO KNOW THE TRUTH ABOUT EXECUTIONS DO OUR WORK WELL AND EDUCATE THE PUBLIC. IT WILL COME SLOWLY IF WE DO NOT. BECAUSE, FINALLY, I KNOW THAT IT IS NOT A QUESTION OF MALICE OR ILL WILL OR MEANNESS OF SPIRIT THAT PROMPTS OUR CITIZENS TO SUPPORT EXECUTIONS. IT IS, QUITE SIMPLY, THAT PEOPLE DO NOT KNOW THE TRUTH OF WHAT IS GOING ON.

HELEN PREJEAN, C.S.J.