

Original article appeared in
New Release, Spring 2010 issue



HAVING AN UNCLE ON DEATH ROW MADE ME AN ACTIVIST

De'Jaun Correia's uncle Troy Davis has spent 18 years on death row in the US for a crime he says he did not commit. This has turned 15-year-old De'Jaun into a human rights activist. He campaigns for Troy, talks at conferences and protests against the death penalty. In November De'Jaun came to London with his mother Martina to speak at Amnesty events and in schools.

HOW DID YOU GET INVOLVED IN THE CAMPAIGN?

I got involved through my mom – I've been a part of the campaign since I was four years old. As I got older I asked my mom questions about the case and started researching myself. I wanted to educate myself about my uncle's case so that I could be just like my mom. At first, when my mom was younger, nobody wanted to listen to her about Troy. They said she was biased because he was her brother. But after many years of speaking to people, and sometimes getting on people's nerves, she got their attention. Now I go round with her too. The most important part of our work is actually getting people to sit down and listen about the case. That way they get all the information.

HOW OFTEN DO YOU SEE TROY?

The family used to go and see him every week. But after my mom had me, they went to see him every other week. The prison is a three-and-a-half-hour drive from our home. We stay there for three hours and then have

a three-and-a-half-hour drive back. It's like a 12-hour day. After we see Troy, it's up to us to go back out and fight for him.

DOES TROY KNOW HOW MUCH SUPPORT HE HAS?

Oh yes, he knows. He gets lots of letters of support. His birthday was on 9 October. Usually the guards bring the mail to the prisoners, but Troy received so much that they took him to the mailroom and left him there for a couple of hours to open and read everything. He tries to reply to everybody in a reasonable amount of time. If some people don't get a letter back they might feel that he's not listening, but he has to go through a lot of mail.

IS TROY HOPEFUL?

He is hopeful because he has support from his family, he has support globally and he has support from God. Troy is like a mentor to other prisoners, particularly newcomers to the jail. It's kind of sad – he likes what he does but doesn't like where he is. I'll tell you a story my mom told me. There was a person whose last name was Burger. He and Troy were good friends, even though it's hard to make friends on death row. You never know when they will execute people so you don't want to get too close in a relationship. When Burger was executed all the guards came to Troy and asked if he wanted 'fries with his burger'. They thought

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DE'JAUN CORREIA



TROY DAVIS

Troy Davis has been on death row since 1991 for the murder of police officer Mark Allen MacPhail in Savannah, Georgia, USA, a crime he insists he did not commit. The authorities did not produce a murder weapon or any physical evidence linking him to the killing. Seven of the nine eye-witnesses against him have withdrawn or changed their testimonies. In 2008 he came within two hours of execution, but last year the Supreme Court, the highest court in the US, ruled that he should be given a new hearing in a Georgia court.

Last September, Troy was visited by an Amnesty delegation that included Richard Hughes, drummer in the rock band Keane. Richard has become passionately involved in Troy's fight for justice. 'It was genuinely inspiring to meet him,' he said, 'to hear how he's been battling to have vital evidence heard that could see him released an innocent man.'

Richard also heard about how prisoners try to cope with the tough conditions on death row: 'Troy hasn't walked on grass for 15 years. He said if a gap in the paving stones had a little bit of dirt and some grass grew, they would take it out and hold it and try and make it grow in their cells, protect it, try to feel what a blade of grass feels like.'



THE DEATH PENALTY IN THE USA

In the USA, the decision on whether to keep the death penalty is made at state level. There are 50 states in the USA. Thirty-five still have the death penalty, but some apply it more often than others. Texas has executed 449 people since 1976, but Kansas and New Hampshire have executed no-one at all.

Sometimes innocent people have been condemned to death. Since 1973 130 people have been released from death row on grounds of innocence.

of it as a joke. It's kind of harsh what they do to the people and how they treat people in the jail.

CAN THE PRESIDENT OVERTURN THE LAW?

Troy was convicted in a Georgia state court, so the national government has no control over what happens. It sounds ridiculous. Even if President Obama thought Troy's case was absolutely ridiculous he cannot intervene in the actions of a state court. Troy was convicted in a Georgia court, so it's only a Georgia court that can free him.

DO YOU THINK THE LEGAL SYSTEM IS CORRUPT?

Well it's a crazy system. The two lawyers who represented my uncle – when we asked them anything, they said: 'We will only answer your question when we receive the pay cheque'. My grandmother and mom had to get a second mortgage on the house just to get answers on the case. When we tried to get the witnesses in the case to stand their ground, they said they were scared of the prosecutors. We are

slowly trying to get them to come back, and stand up to this district attorney. We need to expose the system.

HAS YOUR EXPERIENCE AFFECTED YOUR TRUST IN THE GOVERNMENT?

It's not that I don't trust the government. It's just that if they could fix things and do the right thing I would trust them more. It's ridiculous that people go to jail just because of the colour of their skin.

DO YOU BELIEVE IN JUSTICE?

This experience has made me stronger and made me believe in fighting for the right thing. I was always a person who wanted the right things to happen at the right time. I learnt from my mom that even if you have a setback, you have to keep going until you get what you want. People have to listen sometime. My fight for justice is as big as I am. Injustice in one place is injustice everywhere, that's what my mom tells me.

■ *De'Jaun Correia spoke to Amnesty's Youth Advisory Group in London in November 2009.*

Amnesty International opposes the death penalty in all circumstances, whether a person is innocent or guilty. We believe capital punishment violates the right to life and the right not to be tortured or suffer cruel, inhuman or degrading punishment. If a mistake is made, it cannot be corrected. Studies also show that the death penalty does not deter crime.