

Biography of Juan Roberto Melendez-Colon

Juan Roberto Melendez-Colon spent seventeen years, eight months and one day on Florida's death row for a crime he did not commit. Upon his exoneration and release from death row on January 3, 2002, he became the 99th death row inmate in the country to be exonerated and released since 1973. There was no physical evidence ever linking Mr. Melendez to the crime and his conviction and death sentence hinged on the testimony of two questionable witnesses. Despite his innocence, Mr. Melendez's conviction and death sentence were upheld on appeal *three* times by the Florida Supreme Court. In September of 2000, sixteen years after Mr. Melendez was convicted and sentenced to death, a long-forgotten transcript of a taped confession by the real killer, was fortuitously discovered. Ultimately, it came to light that the real killer made statements to no less than sixteen individuals either directly confessing to the murder or stating that Mr. Melendez was not involved. In a seventy-two page opinion in which she overturned Mr. Melendez's conviction and death sentence and ordered a new trial, Judge Barbara Fleischer went to tremendous lengths to underscore the injustices that had been bestowed upon Mr. Melendez and to show that an innocent man was on death row. She chastised the prosecutor for withholding "crucial" evidence pertaining to the credibility of the State's two critical witnesses and she set forth in meticulous detail the "newly discovered evidence," including numerous confessions and incriminating statements made by the real killer to friends, law enforcement officers, investigators and attorneys that substantiated the defense theory that Mr. Melendez was innocent. Without admitting any wrongdoing, the State of Florida declined to pursue a new trial against Mr. Melendez because one of its key witnesses had recanted and the other had died.

Upon his release from death row, without bitterness, anger or hatred towards those responsible for wrongfully convicting and sentencing him to death, Mr. Melendez has traveled throughout the United States speaking to audiences about his story of supreme injustice. When he is not speaking throughout the country, he works at home in Puerto Rico in a plantain field where he counsels troubled youth who work alongside him. As a former migrant farm worker, Mr. Melendez's idol and inspiration was and continues to be Cesar Chavez.

Mr. Melendez has spoken at numerous conventions, conferences and symposiums, including the national LULAC (League of United Latin American Citizens) convention in San Antonio, July 2004, Capital Defense Seminar, Monterey, March 2004, Amnesty International national conferences, New York, 2004 and Atlanta, 2003 (keynote speaker), and NCADP (National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty) national conference in Chicago, October 2002 (keynote speaker).

Mr. Melendez is a board member of the *National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty* and the *Journey of Hope . . . From Violence to Healing*.

Presentations

Mr. Melendez is a uniquely dynamic and exceptional speaker who shares an inspirational personal story of human resilience, courage, faith, and hope. His legal case highlights the pervasive problems that exist in the death penalty system, such as its unreliability and its unfair and unequal application to people “of color” and the poor. His story of injustice is so powerful that it profoundly impacts people all across the political spectrum.

Schools

In New Mexico alone, Mr. Melendez has spoken to approximately four thousand school children. Within his presentations, Mr. Melendez incorporates a powerful anti-violence message in which he underscores the critical importance of making good choices and rejecting violence and vengeance. He also encourages children, as citizens in a democracy, to become involved as advocates to create a society that will ensure justice for all people. Although every child is captivated by his presentation, troubled youth connect particularly closely with him and Mr. Melendez speaks regularly at juvenile detention facilities.

Faith Venues

At churches, synagogues and other faith venues, Mr. Melendez shares his extraordinary “faith journey” as an innocent man on Florida’s death row. The buzz of excitement and enthusiasm following his faith presentations is always quite remarkable. Mr. Melendez contends that he was saved from execution by “miracles,” “by the grace of God.” His devoted mother was literally on her knees for seventeen years, eight months and one day, praying for a miracle that her son would be set free. It was her unwavering Christian faith and belief in her son’s innocence that provided Mr. Melendez with hope that one day he would prove his innocence and be released from death row.

Universities/Colleges

At law schools and in university or college classes, Mr. Melendez’s “brilliant” and “thought-provoking” presentations highlight the pervasive and endemic problems of the death penalty. One law professor has described Mr. Melendez as a “living testament to the injustice of capital punishment” and explained that his “talk is infinitely more effective than anything I could teach my students.” A communications and journalism professor stated that hearing his story was “an amazing experience that we will never forget” and that Mr. Melendez’s “story is one that needs to be heard by everyone.”

Please note that although Mr. Melendez is a native Spanish speaker, his English is excellent. Most of his presentations and media interviews are in English but he also presents and conducts media interviews in Spanish.

To arrange for Mr. Melendez to speak at your venue, please contact Ms. Judi Caruso at 505-362-1784 or judi@hotspare.com, director *Juan Melendez Voices United for Justice Project*.