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BLUE RAGE, BLACK REDEMPTION, AND THE DEATH PENALTY

by Kiilu Nyasha, <http://www.sfbayview.com/113005/bluerage113005.shtml>

FREE STANLEY 'TOOKIE' WILLIAMS

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FRONT PAGE

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MEASURE OF A MAN'S LIFE

Questions of redemption, atonement and clemency swirl as Stanley Tookie Williams' execution date approaches

AS A REDEEMER

Leslie Fulbright, Chronicle Staff Writer

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2005/12/04/MNGH0G2P9H1.DTL>

A .45-caliber bullet didn't lead Diego Garcia to give up the violent gang life he had known for years. Stanley Tookie Williams did.

Garcia, who grew up in the housing projects on Richmond's Easter Hill, joined a gang at age 9 and took part in drug deals, beatings and drive-by shootings before he was shot when he was 18. Months of recovery gave him plenty of time to think about making changes.

"I was completely confused. I didn't know whether I should choose the right path," said Garcia, now 30. "I read Tookie's books and it inspired me. I related to him. The books are different because it is the co-founder of the Crips giving you a message. Tookie caught my attention."

Williams is scheduled to be executed at San Quentin State Prison Dec. 13 for the shotgun murders of four people in the Los Angeles area in 1979. He maintains he is innocent, an assertion no court has agreed with, and now his lawyers are pinning their hopes on a clemency

hearing Thursday before Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.

His attorneys and the high-profile figures who have been drawn to Williams' cause -- including the Rev. Jesse Jackson, rapper Snoop Dogg and celebrities such as Jamie Foxx and Bianca Jagger -- say Williams is worth more alive than dead. He has co-authored 10 books from Death Row laying out the evils of gangs, many of them directed at children, spoken by phone at anti-violence summits, and lent his name to an Internet peace project that links disadvantaged youths around the world.

"He is such a well-known member of the Crips that he is held in high esteem," said Alfonso Valdez, an investigator with the Orange County district attorney's office and expert on California gangs. "I have spoken to kids who consider him a demigod, a very high-ranking gang member. That means they listen to him."

Garcia, who now works with underprivileged students in Richmond, says he is living proof of Williams' ability to persuade gang members that the criminal life is not the way to go.

"Stanley changed my life," he said.

Those opposed to clemency say Williams should not be promoted as a role model, that he is an unrepentant criminal who should be executed for his crimes.

"His work doesn't mitigate the fact that he killed four people and started a gang that is still killing, dealing drugs and committing other crimes," said Jane Alexander, co-founder of Citizens Against Homicide, a Marin County support group for the families of homicide victims. "We want the execution to go on as planned."

Crusade to change lives

Williams, 51, started his public crusade against violence in a hotel ballroom in 1993. He had already spent 12 years on Death Row after being convicted of murdering Albert Owens, a clerk at a Whittier (Los Angeles County) 7-Eleven store, in a February 1979 robbery, and the owners of a Los Angeles motel, Yen-I Yang and Tsai-Shai Yang, and their adult daughter, Yee-Chen Lin, during another robbery 12 days later.

Hundreds of gang members who had gathered in the Los Angeles ballroom for a peace summit called Hands Across Watts watched a videotape Williams had filmed in a San Quentin visiting room.

Williams admitted he had helped build the Crips, a vicious Los Angeles gang, and said he regretted having done so. He said he was going to spend the rest of his life trying to persuade other gang members to change.

"I told them I never thought I could change my life, that I thought I would be a Crip forever," Williams said last week during an interview at San Quentin. "But I developed common sense, wisdom and knowledge. I changed.

Tony Muhammad, a minister with the Nation of Islam, remembers that day.

"I saw tears rolling down those young people's eyes after they watched that video," he said. "It was deep. Many of us who are free can't affect the gang culture the way he does."

The gang members' reactions convinced many that Williams could help save lives, and his work

in the following years convinced more. Supporters say his renunciation of violence and the "Tookie Speaks Out" and "Life in Prison" books he wrote from his 4-by-9-foot cell are deterring youth from entering gangs and entitle him to mercy.

Early years in prison

Williams' first decade at San Quentin scarcely hinted at the reform he and his followers say he has undergone. He spent six years in solitary confinement for bad behavior that included fighting with inmates and threatening to assault staff.

Williams says he spent his time in solitary reading the dictionary, studying philosophy, psychology and black history. He found God in "the hole," and considers himself a member of many religions. His first series of books was published in 1996, and the following year the www.tookie.com Web site was launched. In 1998, "Life in Prison," intended for teenagers, was published, and the Internet Project for Street Peace started in 2000. Williams' autobiography and a movie about his life, "Redemption," starring Foxx, were both released in 2004.

His supporters say thousands of children have been rescued thanks to Williams' books. It's a tough point to prove, however, at least by looking at crime rates.

George Tita, an assistant professor of criminology at UC Irvine who has done extensive research on homicide rates in Watts and surrounding areas, says there are no numbers showing that killings declined as a result of the numerous gang peace summits held since the early 1990s.

"The gang peace summits have not had an impact on the levels of violence in Los Angeles, but that doesn't mean they don't have great value," Tita said. As for Williams, he said, youths "look at him as a role model, not for the old Tookie Williams but the new one. His books and message are important for the community, but there is no statistical evidence to show that they have changed murder rates."

His backers insist they've seen the proof in those who read Williams' books.

"I can tell you what it is like, but I've never been in a gang," said Jorja Leap, an adjunct professor at UCLA who has researched gang intervention for 20 years. "He is a role model for people who are thinking about leaving the gang life. He has credibility because he lived that life. The books are a building block in their survival."

Books reach children

The books are used in a number of classrooms around the country and elsewhere. In the Chicago public school district, 25 campuses with at-risk students have created a class using Williams' autobiography as the curriculum.

To get that program started, Williams talked via telephone with Chicago principals, answered questions and gave them advice for handling kids involved with gangs. Then, more than 250 seventh- and eighth-grade boys with life circumstances similar to Williams' were picked for the program. Its facilitators, described as motivated and encouraging, use lesson plans and activities based on Williams' writings.

Carole Ward Allen, a professor in Laney College's black studies department, said she uses Williams' autobiography "because I like the fact that he has made a change. My goal is to keep kids in education and on the straight track.

"I am working with kids from the hip-hop generation," Allen said. "Tookie has an impact because he spans 35 years of gang life."

Language of the street

Williams' "Tookie Speaks Out" series, aimed at elementary school children, uses street language and glossaries explaining words such as homeboy (friend or partner), mobbing (large numbers of kids pushing to get what they want) and enemy (someone who wants to hurt you).

Williams tells his young readers that the power that came with being in a gang ended up hurting him. He writes about how it feels to lose friends to gunfire, how he suffered from a gunshot wound to his leg, how guns don't prove you are tough. He talks about his first fight and the pressures that pushed him to join up with criminals.

"I grew up poor and wanted a lot of things that other kids had," Williams wrote. "Most of my homeboys were poor too. We would gang-bang to get what our parents couldn't afford to buy us. But now I know it's better to have less of the things you want than to get them by stealing, selling drugs or hurting others."

"Life in Prison," aimed at a high school audience, tells of the humiliation of being strip-searched in jail, the claustrophobia that comes with living in a cell and the violence of everyday prison life.

Jessie Muldoon, a teacher at Roosevelt Middle School in East Oakland, uses Williams' books, movie and Web site regularly for classroom discussions.

"The kids are now following the case on a day-to-day basis," she said. "They are interested because of the gang element. They are not necessarily in gangs, but know people who are."

"To know he has turned himself around from inside prison is not lost on them," Muldoon said. "They pass the books and newspaper articles around."

Writing coach

Williams has authored nine of his books with Barbara Becnel. The two met in January 1993 when she was writing a story about Los Angeles gangs for Essence magazine. She says that at the time she thought he was guilty -- she has since changed her mind -- but the 1993 peace summit convinced her that his message was worth sharing.

"I was watching those kids and how they were entranced by him, and a lightbulb went off in my head," Becnel said. "I knew he could save lives. I got over my moral dilemma that day. I had an obligation, for my son and my grandson and all the African American males in my family."

Williams formed the Crips in 1970 with his friend Raymond Washington. He admits being involved with drugs and fighting, but not to the killings that sent him to San Quentin. He says he never imagined the gang would grow to its current size, and says that once the Crips moved from fists to guns, the violence spiraled out of control.

"As a result of Williams' actions, this gang is now active throughout the United States, as well as other countries across the globe," the Los Angeles County district attorney wrote in asking Schwarzenegger to deny Williams' request for clemency. "This gang is responsible for the regular commission of crimes such as murder, rape, robbery and drug sales."

Valdez, the gang expert, said Williams was one of the original members of the Crips and recruited others to the gang. However, he said, not all Crips fall under the same umbrella.

"Stanley helped start it and then it snowballed," Valdez said. "African American gangs decided to use the blue color, but were independent. Crips have always been a conglomeration of different sets or cliques that fly the blue color."

Williams said in his prison interview that "blaming me for all the gang activity is like blaming all white people for slavery or racial profiling. It is absurd to hold one man responsible."

Execution draws near

As Williams' execution date approaches, supporters' efforts to save him are growing more frantic. The NAACP plans a tour of California in the days before the clemency hearing. There are scheduled showings of "Redemption" and planned rallies in front of the governor's office. A round-the-clock vigil at the San Quentin gates will start today.

At least some of that interest has been stirred by the five Nobel Peace Prize nominations Williams has garnered since 2000. The first nomination was the work of Mario Fehr, a member of the Swiss Parliament and critic of the death penalty who says his goal in part was to get people talking about the case.

Those who are unimpressed by Williams note that any professor of social science, history, philosophy, law or theology can make a nomination for the prize. There are about 150 names submitted each year.

The nominations, along with his Internet project, have earned Williams worldwide recognition. He says he gets 20 to 30 letters a day from supporters and children who have read his work.

"I can't respond to them all," he said. "So I deal with the ones who are in pain and need immediate help. It's part of my redemption."

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