

DEAD MAN WALKING

Dead Man Walking tells the story of Sister Helen Prejean, who establishes a special relationship with Matthew Poncelet, a prisoner on death row. Matthew Poncelet has been in prison six years, awaiting his execution by lethal injection for killing a teenage couple. He committed the crime in company with Carl Vitello, who received life imprisonment as a result of being able to afford a better lawyer.



Prejean in Cambridge, Mass. in Sept. 2000

The film consolidates two different people (Elmo Patrick Sonnier and Robert Lee Willie) whom Prejean counseled on death row into one character, as well as merging their crimes and their victims' families into one event. In 1981, she started working with convicted murderer Elmo Patrick Sonnier, who was sentenced to death by electrocution. Sonnier had received a sentence of death in April 1978 for the November 5, 1977 rape and murder of Loretta Ann Bourque, 18, and the murder of David LeBlanc, 17. He was executed in 1984. The account is based on the inmate Robert Lee Willie who, with his friend Joseph Jesse Vaccaro, raped and killed 18-year-old Faith Hathaway in May 1980, eight days later kidnapping a couple from a wooded lovers' lane, raping the 16-year-old girl, Debbie Morris, and then stabbing and shooting her boyfriend, 20-year-old Mark Brewster, leaving him tied to a tree paralyzed from the waist down. Willie was executed in 1984.

She has been the spiritual adviser to several convicted murderers in Louisiana, and accompanied them to their electrocutions. *St. Anthony Messenger* says "you could call her the Mother Teresa of Death Row."

After watching Elmo Patrick Sonnier executed in 1984, she said, "I couldn't watch someone being killed and walk away. Like a sacrament, the execution left an indelible mark on my soul." Prejean openly opposes the death penalty. "It's government imitating the very violence that it says we can't have in our society," she says.

"The pope says we should be unconditionally pro-life; against abortion, against euthanasia, against suicide and (that means also) against the death penalty."

Sister Helen, who served as chairwoman of the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty in the 1990s, is confident that abolition will come, even with a majority of Americans supporting the death penalty. "You've got to realize there was a time in this country when over 70% of people supported slavery. Who would have ever thought that we would change it?"

"Basically it's an act of despair," she says. "It's society saying we don't know what to do with some people--and when you don't know what to do with some people, it's O.K. to kill them."

Sister Helen Prejean video clips:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BB_-vwfCqsY&feature=related

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EjV_FiWUKYs

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DbOoR_9UPJI

In a 2-page response, explain the numerous people that Sister Helen Prejean speaks to in order to look into all sides of the death penalty issue and what she learns and takes away from each one of these conversations. Then, after all of these conversations and experiences, what is her view of the death penalty? What is her argument driving her point of view? Explain.