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Berkeley Law School Will Screen Death Penalty Film

By Dhyana Levey
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BERKELEY — After each execution Pastor Carroll Pickett experienced during 15 years as a Texas death house chaplain, he made an audio-recorded accounting of the event.

The 1989 execution of Carlos De Luna, charged with stabbing to death a single mother and gas station clerk, made a strong impression on Pickett. The case also intrigued Chicago Tribune reporters Steve Mills and Maurice Possley, who wrote a series of articles in 2006 that called into question De Luna's guilt.

The journalists' findings and Pickett's thoughts on the De Luna case inspired a documentary, "At the Death House Door," that will be screened Monday, Oct. 27 at UC Berkeley School of Law. Peter Gilbert and Steve James, who made "Hoop Dreams," directed the film. Gilbert, Mills and Possley will answer questions from the audience after the screening.

The genre of death row films is a voluminous one, including the acclaimed documentary "Deadline" and the widely released 1995 movie "Dead Man Walking."

"At the Death House Door" attempts to offer something different by looking at capital punishment's effects on ancillary figures, such as family members, lawyers, chap-

lains and journalists, said Elisabeth Semel, clinical professor of law and director of the Death Penalty Clinic at Berkeley. Although the film is centered on a Texas case, Semel said, the societal and legal problems it explores are universal.

"First and foremost, there's the reality that we have executed people wrongly convicted or wrongly sentenced to death," Semel said. "We can take it to mean that they are innocent, didn't receive a fair trial or their role in the crime was mischaracterized. California isn't immune to those questions."

Mills said he doesn't believe the filmmakers set out to make an anti-death penalty film; they wanted a human interest story.

Pickett, who served as chaplain for more than 95 executions — including the world's first lethal injection — believes there is a possibility De Luna was innocent. He started out supportive of capital punishment but, as the film progresses, a transformation begins and De Luna questions the reliability and fairness of the death penalty.

"I think it's a great opportunity to take a look at how the criminal justice system works — and sometimes doesn't work," Mills said in an interview.

For more information, go to journalism.berkeley.edu/events/details.php.

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