

## Sister Helen Prejean on Florida's death penalty

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File photo

Sister Helen Prejean, author of 'Dead Man Walking,' preaches against the death penalty.

It's been 20 years since Sister Helen Prejean wrote her landmark book, *Dead Man Walking*, and yet time and celebrity have not worn down the Catholic nun's resolve — she continues her crusade against capital punishment and does it the old fashioned way, travelling around the country sharing her experiences one lecture hall, church and civic group at a time.

Last week I spent some time with Sister Helen, whose book was made into an Oscar-winning movie. She is one of the nation's leading anti-death penalty advocates. Her persuasive and passionate message not only got me thinking about the death penalty but also about many other social issues that led me away from the Catholic Church long ago.

Most important, in the nun's approach, is a trait that Sister Helen has admittedly honed over the years: She listens to people,

including those who vehemently disagree with her, which makes her all the more engaging as a speaker.

I caught up with Sister Helen at Miami Dade College's North Campus where she gave several lectures over two days as part of an extraordinary seminar on the issue of human rights and the power of its portrayal through the prism of narrative, non fiction. The brainchild of Dr. Shed Boren, CEO of Sister Emmanuel Hospital; Malou Harrison, Interim MDC North Campus President, and Jaime Anzalotta, MDC Social Work professor, the seminar was structured in the least cumbersome, organic way. There were no barriers between Sister Helen and the students and faculty she chatted with. It was two days of fully interactive, no holds barred, sometimes uncomfortable discussions about brutal crime, biased judicial systems, and the roles and responsibilities individuals have in a free society.

Perhaps the earnest debate spawned from the reality that the campus is adjacent to 4.2 miles of arguably one of the most crime-ridden areas in the United States — Opa-Locka.

Students shared stories of violent personal experiences — stabbings, shootings, murders — the whole gamut. Sister Helen soaked it all in and empathized. She was moved by the heart-wrenching accounts.

“I like visiting Miami Dade North Campus, the students and faculty are real. They don’t pull any punches,” Sister Helen explained.

The robust debate provided indisputable facts and strong concepts to ponder. From my own informal poll among family and friends, the death penalty is not an issue that most of us half-heartedly, carelessly opine on. It is beyond thorny or controversial, it is an issue that goes to the fundamental question whether or not we, as a society, have the right to terminate a life.

Or as Sister Helen Prejean puts it: “Should an individual should be judged by the single worst act that he or she committed in their life?”

This past summer, Gov. Rick Scott signed the so called Timely Justice Act into law. The measure, which was passed by a significant margin in both the state House and Senate, will require Florida governors to sign death warrants 30 days after the Florida Supreme Court certifies that an inmate has exhausted his legal appeals. Tallahassee’s acceleration of the capital punishment process stands in the face of the wave of caution regarding the death penalty that is taking place nationally.

Over the last five years, five states, including Maryland this year, have abolished the death penalty. The main reason being that the use of modern technology (which includes DNA testing) in the revision of death row cases demonstrates that the system is far from failsafe. Ironically, Florida leads the way in death row exonerations, with 24 over the last decade.

“While the world seems to be gaining conscience about the gravity of the death penalty, Florida Governor Scott is greasing the tracks to make the process faster,” Sister Helen explained to Miami Dade College students. To which one student astutely responded, “Sister, thank you for the wake up call.”