

Sister of mentally ill prisoner facing August 17 execution in Texas: "A segment of society is applauding a man's death"

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Barring a highly unlikely intervention by the US Supreme Court, Larry Keith Robison will be executed by the state of Texas in Huntsville at 6pm Tuesday, August 17.

Robison is a diagnosed paranoid schizophrenic who has spent the last 16 years of his life on death row for murders committed while in a psychotic state. He had been repeatedly denied proper treatment and medication because he had no medical insurance and his family was unable to pay the exorbitant costs of private care.

Larry Robison's case is by no means an isolated one. It underscores an institutionalized practice in American society of criminalizing the mentally ill. A Department of Justice study reported last month that there are more than a quarter million mentally ill individuals in US prisons and jails today. Mental health experts estimate that a third of the nation's death row population are mentally ill.

Mentally ill individuals put to death this year alone have suffered from such illnesses as multiple-personality disorder, schizoid personality disorder, and post-traumatic stress syndrome as a result of the Vietnam War.

This reporter spoke recently to Robison's sister, Vickie Robison Barnett, about her brother's case. She told the WSWS that he was first diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic in 1978, but had been released from several facilities after being admitted for short periods of time and showing no signs of violence.

"He wasn't covered by insurance because he had no job. My mother called every hospital in Texas to try to find somebody that would take him, a place that they could afford to pay privately. But what they found was that every place that could take him as private patient would cost more money than they made. So they were not able to get treatment for him privately.

"Finally he was transferred to the VA [Veterans

Administration] hospital in Waco, Texas, where he was again kept for 30 days. He again showed no signs of violence, and yet he was still diagnosed. They told my mother that they were going to have to release him because they needed the bed, but that he was very ill, and he needed treatment."

At one point he had run away from the hospital because he thought they were going to poison him, but his mother finally convinced him to go back. Only a few weeks later they released him.

Vickie continued: "After he was gone they called my mother and said, 'Whoops, we forgot to get a release of medical records.' Well, it took six weeks to get the paperwork so that she could get his prescriptions filled. By that time he was already gone, he had run away. Mom started calling other hospitals, and nobody would take him." It was after this that Larry committed the murders which would eventually lead to his arrest and conviction.

"When Larry was at my house the night before this, he was at my house to kill me, although I didn't know this at the time. Now, he had no reason to kill me. He loves me and I love him. He said that a force greater than himself prevented him from pulling the gun out. He was acting strange, but I didn't know what was about to happen.

"They're trying to say right now that he was not diagnosed, and they're trying to call my mother a liar, that she didn't do any of these things that she said she did. We have a letter dated 20 years ago where she begged his lawyer that was handling a minor legal case against him to have him committed to the hospital. They left him in jail for six months one time because they couldn't get him into the hospital.

"He had two trials. His first attorneys didn't even try to get his medical records. These lawyers were assigned [public defenders] because he had no money. He was

convicted in the first trial, but was granted a new trial because of a technicality in the jury selection.

“At the second trial Mom had a lot more of the information and the medical records. They presented that to the judge. The judge deemed it all inadmissible, so the jury never even got to see it. They also told the families [of the victims] that if they found Larry insane he would be released back out on the streets, which was totally untrue. He would have been admitted to a hospital. So he was found guilty and sentenced to death.

“There were two cases while he was incarcerated [in a county facility] that he attempted suicide. The first time he slashed his wrists and his arms. They found him in a coma with blood all over the place. They rushed him to the hospital and he was treated with anti-psychotic drugs then. Of course, when he got out after that he took the pills and hid them until he had enough to take an overdose, and then he took an overdose and they again found him a coma and took him back to the hospital and revived him.

“This past June we finally found a doctor who would see him at no cost, who did an evaluation, and he reviewed all of his medical records and he confirms that Larry is still psychotic to this day. But he is not being currently treated. He treats himself through meditation and his religion that he has come to since he's been on death row.

“We presented these findings to the authorities and they did not even look at it. We presented to the court and the governor's office 30 copies of the stack of medical records, which were probably seven inches high. We started doing this about three weeks ago. But the pardon board didn't even meet, they submitted their votes by fax. They didn't even have time to read all of the material that we submitted.”

Included in this material was documentation of a family history of schizophrenia on both sides of Larry's family, including a younger sister who is currently undergoing treatment in a facility.

Vickie said that the family has never had any communication with the governor's office about her brother's case. She said that her family is aware of a number of others on death row facing similar situations. “I have received numerous accounts from families who are in the same situation. I have saved them on my e-mail, and I plan to try to help them when this is over. This is really traumatic for us right now.

“I feel like there's a cold attitude towards the mentally ill. They are looking for a way to get rid of the problem.

They put them in jail, they don't treat them. I am against the death penalty for anybody, but especially for anybody that has a well documented mental illness.”

As for her attitude towards Republican presidential hopeful and Texas Governor George W. Bush, she commented, “I think it's pretty horrendous that a person with those attitudes should try to run the nation. And there is a segment of this society that is cheering this on, and is applauding a man's death. And it's no different to us than having a family member dying of heart disease or cancer, because that's what's happening, and we all love him very much.

“They're going to try to do one more last thing. They're going to try to do a competency hearing on Monday. Larry's against it because he doesn't want to be viewed as mentally ill. It's up to the Supreme Court, and they have requested his medical records over the past few days, even though they declined the clemency case. If they find him incompetent, he would be automatically commuted, and he could be treated.

“But I will tell you this, too. When I put up my web site, I almost hesitated, because I was afraid we would get a rash of really negative responses. But that has not been the case. We have received nothing but positive response from people, who understand what we're trying to do. We're not trying to hurt the victims' families. We have extreme compassion for them, and we wish that they knew how we really feel. Larry has a lot of compassion for them, and is right now writing letters to the family members and well as to his own family.

“Many people are understanding and compassionate, they really are. Probably a good portion of the responses that we've gotten are from Texas, although we have received responses from France, Italy, Australia, all over the world, really.”



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