

Executions in Texas and Ohio

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Two men were executed this week in the United States. They met their deaths more than a thousand miles apart, but their stories bear striking similarities. Both suffered traumatic childhoods, committed heinous murders, and expressed remorse for their crimes. Both were denied clemency and put to death by lethal injection. One was black and one was white, but both came from the poorer sections of the working class.

Huntsville, Texas

Texas executed Christopher Young, 34, on Tuesday. He was convicted and sentenced to death for the shooting death of Hashmukh Patel during a failed robbery at Patel's convenience store in San Antonio in 2004. Before shooting Patel, Young sexually assaulted a woman in her apartment with her three children present, according to court documents.

Young was executed despite his rehabilitation in prison, which involved the mentoring of young men, and the call by Patel's son to spare his life.

Young's final statement in the execution chamber in Huntsville was: "I want to make sure the Patel family knows I love them like they love me. Make sure the kids in the world know I'm being executed and those kids I've been mentoring keep this fight going. I'm good, Warden."

According to an Associated Press report, as the lethal dose of pentobarbital began to take effect, Young twice used an obscenity to say he could taste the chemical and that it was burning. "I taste it in my throat," he said.

As Young began slipping into unconsciousness, he said something unintelligible and began taking shallow breaths, AP said. Twenty-five minutes after being injected with the lethal drug he was pronounced dead, at 6:38 p.m. local time.

On July 13, the Texas Board of Pardons and Parole

voted 6-1, with one abstention, to deny Young's clemency petition. Patel family members had asked the pardons board to commute Young's death sentence. The victim's son Mitesh Patel, who visited Young the day before his execution, said, "I really do believe Chris Young today is not the person he was 14 years ago."

Young's attorneys filed a civil rights suit in federal court seeking a stay of execution on the grounds that the pardon board's decision had been racially biased. Attorney David Dow said that in the six times this century that family members of a murder victim have asked the board to commute the death sentence of the person convicted of murdering their loved one, three of the prisoners were black, two were Hispanic and one was white. "Only in the case of the white guy did they vote to recommend commutation," Dow said.

On Tuesday, US District Judge Keith Ellison denied Young's request for a stay, but expressed concern about the constricted timeframe for judicial review. "Those engaging in race discrimination seldom announce their motivations," the judge said, and the timeframe made it "well-nigh impossible" for Young to prove his claims.

Later on Tuesday, the Fifth US Circuit Court of Appeals turned down an appeal of that ruling and Young's attorneys did not take the case to the US Supreme Court.

Young recently told AP from prison, "I didn't know about death row. It needs to be talked about. You've got a whole new generation. You've got to stop this, not just executions but the crimes. Nobody's talking to these kids. I can't bring Hash [Patel] back but I can do something to make sure there's no more Hashes."

As a child, Young was reportedly bright and excelled at chess, violin, cello and bass. He loved playing football and basketball and rapping with his brother. He said, however, that "all that stopped" and he joined the Bloods gang when he was about 8, after his father, with whom he was very close, was shot and killed in a robbery.

Young became withdrawn, according to a report in the *San Antonio Express-News*, and began spending more time with the gang. He began selling crack cocaine when

he was 13, and smoked marijuana and drank. He started missing school and dropped out after ninth grade. He never got the help and counseling that he so desperately needed.

Young said of Patel's shooting, "I was drunk. We knew the victim. The whole confrontation went wrong. I thought he was reaching for a gun and I shot."

For years, Mitesh Patel, 22 at the time of his father's murder, felt a deep hatred for Young and wanted to see him executed. However, his attitude began to change earlier this year when two filmmakers who were working on a documentary about Young came to see him. Through them, he learned that Young had three daughters and that he felt deep remorse for his crime and wanted to be a positive influence on children who were once like him.

Since then the younger Patel had become an advocate for Young, urging that he be granted clemency. After meeting with Young the day before his execution Patel said, "I feel sadness for his family. They're going to be walking down the same path my family has been on the last 14 years."

Young was the eighth person executed so far this year in Texas. Since the US Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in 1976, Texas has carried out 553 executions, far more than any other state.

Lucasville, Ohio

Robert Van Hook, 58, was executed at the Southern Ohio Correctional Facility in Lucasville on Wednesday morning. He was sentenced to death for the 1985 murder of David Self.

According to the Cincinnati *Enquirer*, witnesses were silent as Van Hook entered the execution chamber. Seven witnesses for Van Hook and three representing victim David Self were in attendance in an adjoining room.

The witnesses watched on a television screen as IVs were placed in Van Hook's arms. After they were in place, the black curtains separating the condemned inmate from the witness room were raised.

As he lay strapped to the lethal injection gurney in the execution chamber, Van Hook turned his head to the witness chamber and said while sobbing, "I'm very sorry for taking your brother from you. I'm no good. I hope you have some peace. One day may you be reunited with him and your mother as well."

He recited a Norse prayer used in a 1999 Antonio Banderas film and sang to himself before going silent at 10:30 a.m., according to the *Enquirer*. At 10:33, he gasped and wheezed briefly after the toxic chemicals began to be injected, and at 10:34 his chest stopped rising and falling.

Van Hook was pronounced dead at 10:44 a.m. local time. After about 20 minutes, a hearse parked outside the death chamber drove his body through the steel gates of the prison. Van Hook's sister, Trina Berends, stood with protesters outside the prison wearing a shirt reading: "No death penalty, no more executions."

"Bobby has always been sorry, very sorry for what he did," Berends said. "He made peace with God through the Roman Catholic Church." Ohioans to Stop Executions organized protests outside the prison in Lucasville and in Columbus and other Ohio cities.

Van Hook murdered David Self, 25, in February 1985. Self's nearly disemboweled body was found in his apartment by a neighbor. Van Hook and Self had met earlier at the Subway Bar, a downtown Cincinnati bar popular with gay men.

Van Hook pleaded not guilty by reason of insanity. A panel of three Hamilton County judges found him guilty and sentenced him to death. During the appeals process, his defense said "homosexual panic" may have prompted the killing.

In May, the Ohio Parole Board voted against clemency for Van Hook, and Gov. John Kasich rejected his plea for clemency without comment.

Allen Bohnert, one of Van Hook's attorneys, told the press that his client was "deeply remorseful" for killing Self but that he had suffered physical, mental and sexual abuse as a child. "He was used by those around him ... virtually from the cradle," Bohnert said. "He went untreated through his entire life."

"The State of Ohio should not be executing mentally ill people," Bohnert said. "It is not a proud day for Ohio." Van Hook was the first prisoner executed by the state of Ohio this year and the 56th since 1976.



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