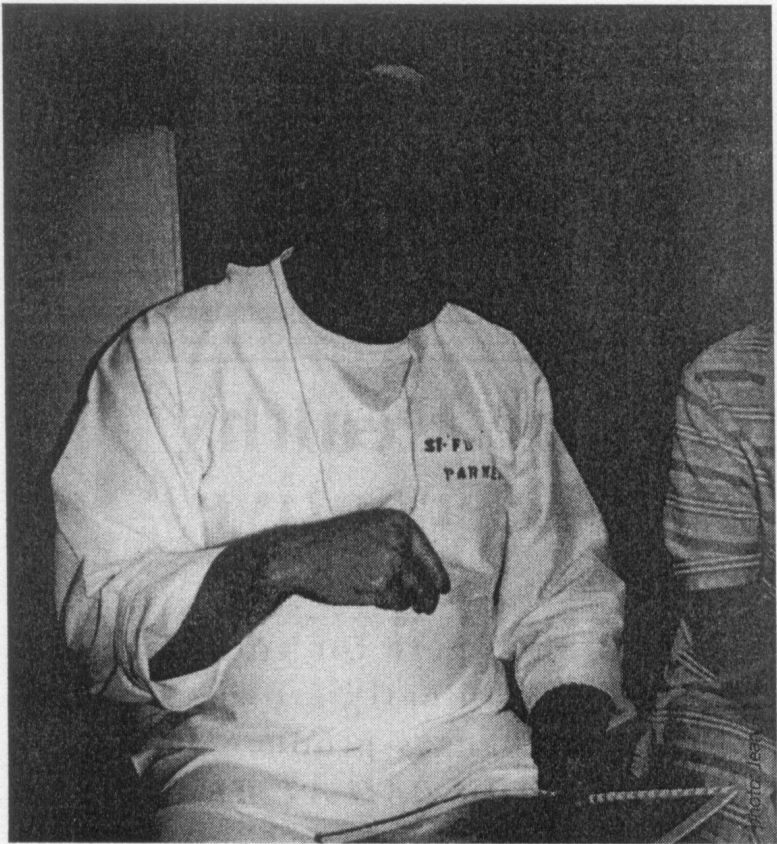


Death row Buddhist hopes for lighter sentence

Conversion of double murderer gets nationwide support from Buddhist organizations



Frank Parker, hoping for a life sentence, awaits a new governor

By Michael Hibblen

Every day at 4 A.M., inmate Si-Fu William Frankie Parker begins his day with a half hour of meditation. Early morning is the only time on death row quiet enough for the converted Buddhist to meditate.

Twelve years ago Parker committed a brutal and violent crime. He admits attacking the family of his ex-wife and holding police at bay at the Rogers, Arkansas, police station. While living on death row he discovered Buddhism, and has lived the life of a model prisoner.

Parker, 41, received his death sentence in 1984 for the slayings of his former in-laws. Twice juries convicted him on two counts of capital murder in the deaths of James and Sandra Warren. After several reprieves, his date of execution was set for Tuesday, September 17, at the death chamber of Cummins Prison. Death will be by lethal injection.

Members of the Warren family say Parker began terrorizing them after Pam Warren filed for divorce from Parker. During a hearing before the Post Prison Transfer Board Monday, May 6, at Tucker Prison, family members called for Parker's execution.

Parker's ex-wife Pam Warren Bratcher and her sister, Cindy Warren Campbell, said at the hearing that Parker harassed the family from May through November of 1984, slashing tires, spray-painting graffiti on their cars, and calling their employers in attempts to get them fired. Family members say that despite repeated complaints, police never arrested Parker for harassment.

This harassment culminated Nov. 5, 1984, when Parker appeared at the home of his ex-wife's parents. Campbell was having dinner with her parents and yelled a warning to her father. She sprayed Parker with mace and fled.

Bratcher was on the telephone with her mother at the time. She heard "popping sounds" before her mother abruptly stopped talking. A short time later, Parker broke down her apartment door and kidnapped her. He took her to the Rogers police station.

After she maced Parker, Campbell made her way to a neighbor's house and called the police. To her surprise, Parker answered the police telephone. He cursed her and lamented that she had escaped.

When Parker arrived at the police station, he shot and wounded Sergeant Ray Feven then held the police at bay for several hours. A shoot-out erupted wounding Parker and forcing him to give up, but not before he shot his ex-wife. Bratcher survived and recovered from her wounds. Bullet holes still scar the walls of the Rogers police station.

Parker stood trial for the murders of his ex-wife's parents and was convicted of capital murder. The Arkansas Supreme Court overturned the conviction on a capital felony murder charge after ruling that the Warrens were not killed in the course of committing a felony. A second jury once again found Parker guilty of murder and sentenced him to death.

Parker appealed that conviction, claiming he couldn't be tried twice on the same charges. U.S. District Judge Susan Webber Wright reversed Parker's death sentence last year, but left intact his convictions on

murder and other felony charges. Attorneys for both Parker and the prosecution appealed to the 8th Circuit Court of Appeals at St. Louis. Last August a three-judge panel reversed Wright's ruling and re-imposed the death sentence.

Parker was scheduled to die in May, but Gov. Jim Guy Tucker delayed the execution until the U.S. Supreme Court resolved the validity of a law effecting cases under appeal. The high court upheld the constitutionality of law in question, which allowed a randomly-picked panel of three judges from the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals in St. Louis to hear the case and render a decision that could not be appealed to the Supreme Court. The three judge panel ruled that Parker should be put to death for his crime.

After the Supreme Court ruling, the Arkansas Department of Corrections set Parker's execution for July 11. But Tucker decided a resigning governor should not order an execution and delayed the execution until Mike Huckabee's term.

The unique feature surrounding Parker is not his death row conversion, almost a cliché in many people's minds, but his miraculous transformation after embracing Buddhism. As he adapted the teachings to his lifestyle on death row, he began corresponding with the Ecumenical Buddhist Center in Little Rock. In 1992, he legally added Si-Fu to his name. Through the years, Parker has become a mentor for Buddhists across the nation, and now, many of his coreligionists oppose his execution.

Buddhist Jean Crume corresponds and visits Parker at Tucker Prison. "In all his letters, he uses every opportunity to emphasize how important every action of every day is in all ways," she said. "He says that only through Buddhism has he been able to find peace with himself. Christians call it forgiveness. I don't know if he would say he has forgiven himself, or that, despite committing this horrendous act, his life can still be of value. But that's what he's done. He's turned his life into one that benefits many, both inside and out of prison."

In a written interview with Crume in April, Parker described how he found Buddhism. "I discovered the Dharma in December of 1988 while in the hole [a form of isolation] at Tucker Prison. I was mad, mean, and very cruel and always giving everyone a hard time. The guards threw me in the hole and I yelled and cursed them, then demanded a Bible, the only book allowed in the hole. During the day they removed the mattress. I could do very little except read the Bible when I wasn't pacing the floor and hating everyone for doing this to me."

"One day the guard, thinking he was screwing me over, threw me a copy of the Dharma and said, 'Here's your goddamn holy book.' He laughed and slammed the door before I could throw it back at him. I screamed until I got tired, then sat down on the floor and looked at the heathen book."

"It was the greatest gift I ever received. About a year later I thanked him, with tears in my eyes, for his gift. Of course, he thought me quite insane. From that day on I've tried to live to reflect the Buddha within me."

In his death row cell, Parker keeps a shrine with a six inch brass Buddha, flowers, candles, and a photo of Lama Tharchin Rinpoche, who gave him the Refuge vows,

part of Buddhism. The prison allows Parker more liberal visitation than most other prisoners. He is one of only ten inmates in the whole prison allowed contact visitation.

Members of the Ecumenical Buddhist Society are attempting to get Parker's death sentence commuted to life without parole. The group organized a letter writing campaign to both Tucker and Huckabee. In one of the letters, group member Anna Cox asked Tucker for clemency, saying Parker had undergone an incredible transformation since being sentenced for his crime. Cox claimed Parker was "a model of the healing of an individual soul."

The Buddhists say that Parker has become a peaceful leader on death row. According to Crume, other prisoners often seek him for help in dealing with spiritual issues. "He's an example to all, inside and outside of prison, that life is only what you make of it. Commutation to life without parole would give other death row inmates a glimmer of hope that positive change can lead to a quality life, even within the prison walls."

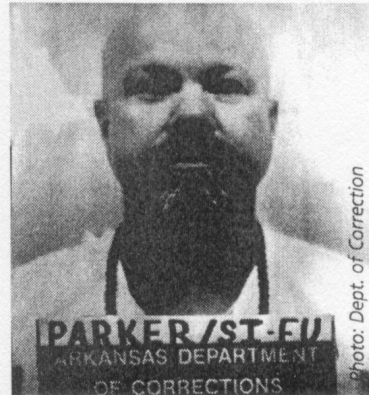
The Rev. Kevin Malone, a Zen priest from New Jersey who leads the national campaign to prevent Parker's execution, will serve as Parker's spiritual advisor on the night of his execution. Malone has sent out mailers and conducted an extensive telephone campaign to get more people involved in the fight to stop Parker's execution.

"We've been contacting Nobel laureates and notables in the legal community, doing our best to mobilize as many voices as possible. In a situation like this, communicating with a large number of people, particularly notables, is important."

Rev. Malone feels that Huckabee, once taking office, should personally visit Parker before allowing the execution to take place. "How can anyone execute another individual through inaction, and not see them face to face?"

Malone sees the toll on Parker of his on again, off again execution date. "It's torturous, like a slowed down version of Russian roulette. How do you approach your own murder? [The execution] is legal homicide, and homicide is murder."

In the meantime, Parker's lawyer continues his attempts to file a new appeal with federal courts, though he is not optimistic. Parker's fate seems to depend wholly on the grace of God, and the goodwill of the new governor.



A recent mug of Frank Parker, convicted in the double murder of his in-laws