



## A DISCUSSION & STUDY GUIDE for North Carolina Grade 9-12 students

### **Synopsis** (From Linda Booker, the filmmaker)

*Love Lived On Death Row* tells the story of the four Syriani siblings whose father was sentenced to die for the murder of their mother in 1990 and Meg Eggleston, who became their father's friend and spiritual advisor through letters to him in prison. Orphaned and estranged, the Syriani children lived with hate, anger and confusion as the man they could only refer to as 'Him Him' lived on North Carolina's death row. But in 2004 they collectively decided to visit him in prison, seeking answers so they could move on with their adult lives. What transpired that day was a miracle of forgiveness followed by a journey of healing, restoring family memories and then a battle for his clemency. *Love Lived on Death Row's* portrait of a family torn apart by tragedy and reunited by another impending tragedy is a powerful examination of not only the healing process, but also of the role capital punishment plays in serving justice.

# LOVE LIVED ON DEATH ROW

## A DISCUSSION & STUDY GUIDE

### OBJECTIVES:

The objective of LOVE LIVED ON DEATH ROW Discussion and Study Guide is to engage high school students in a critical conversation about the specific incidents outlined in the film while expanding to include larger discussions about the death penalty, morality, and issues of social conscience. After viewing Love Lived On Death Row, students will be also able to meet a broad variety of the competency goals outlined by the North Carolina Standard Course of Study for secondary Social Studies (grades 9-12 as per the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction website), including but not limited to:

- Analyzing the sources, purposes and functions of law, the changes that have occurred in law and the need for active and ongoing change.
- Identifying the state of North Carolina's general welfare and site examples of ways to make positive changes.
- Examining local and community issues and identifying ways to make positive contributions.
- Explaining how the political and legal systems provide a means to balance competing interests and resolving conflicts.
- Developing, defending, and evaluating positions on issues regarding the personal responsibilities of citizens in the American constitutional democracy.

And further:

- Engaging in critical dialogue that interrogates the legality and morality of the death penalty.
- Engaging in critical dialogue about restorative justice and offender/victim reconciliation

# Character Profiles

- **Elias Syriani:** In 1990, Elias Syriani, a 52-year old immigrant from Jordan was separated from his wife Teresa and under a restraining order. As Teresa arrived home with her youngest son in tow, Elias stabbed her multiple times with a screwdriver. She ultimately died from the wounds inflicted by the assault. Elias Syriani was sentenced to death for the crime. He was killed by lethal injection at Central Prison in Raleigh, NC in November of 2005.

- **Teresa Syriani:** Teresa Syriani was stabbed multiple times with a screwdriver by her husband, Elias Syriani and ultimately died from the wounds inflicted.



- **The Syriani Children**

- **Rose:** Oldest of the Syriani children, Rose informed her siblings of her mother's death at the hands of their father.

- **Sarah:** The second oldest of the Syriani children, Sarah bore the first grandchild of Theresa and Elias Syriani after Elias was executed.

- **John:** 10 years old when he witnessed his father stab his mother several times with a screwdriver, John was in the passenger seat of the car in which his mother was stabbed.



- **Janet:** Youngest of the Syriani daughters.

- **Meg Eggleston:** Befriended Elias Syriani in 2001 while a member of People of Faith Against the Death Penalty. Engaged in letter-exchanges and visits with Elias Syriani until his death was carried out. Was present for Elias Syriani's execution.



- **Henderson Hill:** Attorney for Elias Syriani who felt compelled to ensure the well-being of the Syriani children following the murder of their mother, Teresa by their father.

- **Russell Sizemore:** Attorney for the Syriani children and President of the Children's Law Center, Charlotte, NC 2005-2006. Was introduced to the Syriani case by Henderson Hill in 2004.



- **Deborah Weissman:** Professor of Law and Clinical Services at University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. Brought on to the Syriani case as an expert on domestic violence and appointed to the Governor's Commission on Domestic Violence by North Carolina Governor Mike Easley.



## Group Discussion Process

Before engaging the following preview questions, the facilitator or teacher should view *Love Lived on Death Row* and read through the entire discussion guide. Some of the content contained in both the film and discussion guide may invoke difficult memories of violence for any students who have experience with domestic violence, the prison system, incarcerated family members or friends, or who have lost family member or friends to a violent act. The following are considerations the facilitator or teacher may take to ensure a viewing environment that is considerate of the various possible backgrounds and experiences the viewing audience may bring to the classroom:

- As you preview the film, note the scenes that evoke an emotional reaction from you. These scenes may cause a similar response in the high school viewing audience.
- If you have time constraints, review the list of pre-viewing and post-viewing questions and choose five of each to which you may allot at least 20 minutes of discussion time. It is important to the discussion process that an adequate amount of time is allotted to each question you choose to engage.
- Establish ground rules for the discussion that create a safe environment for the entire viewing audience. Amongst these rules may be a condition that none of the ideas or opinions discussed in the classroom before and following the viewing of *Love Lived on Death Row* will be discussed outside of the classroom without the permission of the entire class. This condition may encourage a more trusting, honest, and open dialogue.
- Encourage high school viewers to keep an informal journal of the feelings that are invoked by the discussion and viewing of *Love Lived on Death Row*. For those who find it difficult to discuss their feelings, this may be helpful in them organizing their thoughts and negotiating their emotions.
- During discussions, arrange the classroom in a manner that ensures every participant is seen and heard. Arranging the chairs in a loose circle is one way to encourage this. Or encourage everyone to move down to the front of auditorium.
- Allow a signal by which a viewer may excuse him or herself from the classroom if he or she finds it necessary to do so. If such a situation occurs, allow the participant to re-enter the conversation in a way that promotes safety and an ease of transition.

# Suggested Preview Research

If time permits, allow students time in the library or on the Internet to research the following questions:

- Where does the United States rank relative to other countries around the world in terms of reports of domestic violence per year?
- Where does the United States rank relative to other countries around the world in terms of how many people are executed per year?
- How does North Carolina rank relative to other states in terms of how many cases of domestic violence are reported per year?
- How does North Carolina rank relative to other states in terms of how many people are executed per year?
- How do race, class, and immigrant status impact sentencing in domestic violence cases in the United States? In North Carolina?
- How do race, class, and immigrant status impact sentencing in death penalty cases in the United States? In North Carolina?
- What alternatives to the death penalty do other states and countries employ?

## Preview Questions

- Is physical violence ever okay between people in a relationship?
- What are alternatives to acting violently when you're angry?
- What are your views on the death penalty? Are you in favor or against it? Why?
- Is there any instance in which the death penalty should be rendered?
- When an act such as murder is committed, should victim's family members have any say about the fate of the accused?
- Is there a difference between "the law" and "justice?" If so, what is it?
- Are there times when the law and justice are in conflict with each other?
- What is restorative justice?

## Post Viewing Questions

- Immediately following the viewing of *Love Lived on Death Row*, create a list of your initial thoughts and reactions to the film and to the Syriani case.
- What is clemency? Do you agree with Governor Easley's decision to deny clemency in the Syriani case? Why or why not? (*clemency for Elias meant commuting his sentence to life in prison with no possibility of parole.*)
- In her interview, Deborah Weissman proposes the Syriani children are contributing to "the possibility of a better world [by taking] on the issue as they did." How did the Syriani children "take on the issue" and do you agree that are contributing to "the possibility of a better world?"
- Rose Syriani mentioned the possibility that her father "was depressed." How did the events of Elias Syriani's upbringing contribute to the stress he experienced in his adult life?
- What cultural norms and values did Elias and Teresa Syriani struggle with upon immigrating from Jordan to Chicago, Illinois then to Charlotte, North Carolina? How did these conflicts contribute to the stress placed upon their relationship?
- Before going to visit her father at Central Prison, Sarah Syriani Barbari says, "Up until that point we were still calling Him, Him." What is the significance of this? Why did the Syriani children find it difficult to say their father's name or call him "dad?"
- How did Meg Eggleston "change" Elias' life as John Syriani suggested? What do you think of the friendship they shared?
- How did Elias Syriani's apology to his children help them reconnect? Do you think he did enough to take responsibility for his actions?
- How was visiting their father "healing" for the Syriani children?
- What do you think about victims reconciling with or forgiving someone who committed a violent crime against them or hurt and killed a family member?
- Did you think Governor Easley was going to grant clemency for Elias Syriani? Were their clues that suggested clemency would be granted?
- How did the legal system succeed or fail the Syriani children? Elias Syriani? Teresa Syriani?
- Did *Love Lived on Death Row* alter your view of the death penalty in any way?

**NOTE:** The facilitator or teacher may also choose to revisit certain preview questions so that the viewing audience may reevaluate their pre and post viewing principles.