

I AM TROY DAVIS

by Scott Langley

In September 2008, I checked in at the media table outside the Georgia Diagnostic and Classification Prison in Jackson, Georgia to cover the scheduled execution of death row prisoner Troy Davis. As an activist guised as an independent photojournalist, I was seeking access to the prison grounds with my camera, which is normally not allowed except for news media. As the prison guard copied down information from my driver's license and press badge, he muttered something that I could not understand. Or maybe it was that I was just nervous and distracted. I said, "Sorry, what did you say?" And he repeated very quietly, almost under his breath, without looking up from the paperwork, "I just hope the truth comes out."

Fortunately, Troy's 2008 execution did not happen. The Supreme Court of the United States intervened a mere 90 minutes before the lethal drugs started flowing to say they wanted a lower court to hear the purported "truth."

Three years later, the truth was by all means "out." Troy Davis, who was convicted of the 1989 murder of police officer Mark MacPhail in Savannah, Georgia, has consistently maintained his innocence from the beginning. The truth we now know is that there was absolutely no physical evidence against him. And since his trial and conviction, all but two of the state's non-police witnesses have recanted or contradicted their testimony, citing pressure or coercion by police into testifying or signing false statements against Troy.

The fight to save Troy Davis went mainstream. Even supporters of the death penalty knew this one was wrong - that Troy Davis's case contained too much doubt. This country was at risk of carrying out an irreversible sentence against a possibly innocent man - something very few people were willing to accept.

Under a massive campaign led by Amnesty International, the world listened, and the world overwhelmingly responded. One-million people worldwide signed petitions calling on the State of Georgia to grant clemency to Troy Davis on the basis of his innocence. One-million people. Thousands organized, marched in the streets, rallied and protested. During global days of action, protests were held in front of U.S. embassies in France, Mali, Hong Kong, Peru, Germany and the UK. In Atlanta alone, over 4,000 marched one Friday in September. Prominent politicians and leaders, including former President Jimmy Carter, Rev. Al Sharpton, Pope Benedict XVI, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and former FBI Director and judge William S. Sessions called upon the courts to grant Davis a new trial or evidentiary hearing.

The truth was out: the world would not remain silent as Georgia prepared to kill a possibly innocent man. But there was resistance from a few. Georgia's courts and its Board of Pardons and Paroles refused to hear the truth. Unfortunately these were the people who needed to hear it more than anyone else. They had the very real power to save Troy's life. But ultimately the courts discounted the new evidence of innocence, and the Georgia Board denied clemency. Despite international consensus, Troy Davis was back in line for execution.

On September 21, 2011, almost three-years to the day of that near-execution in 2008, I found myself back at the media check-in table. Troy Davis's fourth execution date in four years had been scheduled.

Unlike other states, in Georgia the press are kept in a separate area from the protesters. Reasons probably vary, but the most obvious reason for the division is to give privacy to the prisoner's family. In this case, Troy's immediate family was in the crowd, having decided to not witness the execution themselves in the death chamber, but to stand with their supporters on the prison grounds, separated from the media by a single strand of yellow "police line" tape. Also, while news media are allowed cameras on the grounds, the protesters are not, so there is a clear segregation of the two groups.

I have attended many execution vigils before (I have spent three-fourths of my life in the execution-heavy south), always in different capacities: curious observer, solemn vigiler, angry protester, photographer, arrestee in civil disobedience actions, support network for the prisoner's family, media spokesperson, organizer, and other various roles.

If this execution was to go forward, I knew I wanted to be as close to Troy's family as possible. Their story and their relentless effort to save a family member's life moved the world into action. They put Troy on the map. It was one of Troy's sisters, Martina Correia, who once took a plain t-shirt and wrote on it with marker, "I AM TROY DAVIS" and starting wearing the shirt around her home town of Savannah. The statement was a testament to her solidarity with her own brother - a position very much in line with the philosophy that "no one is free with others are oppressed." Those four words on Martina's shirt became the rallying cry for a world movement to save a U.S. prisoner from execution. Little did Martina know that shirts, banners, posters and even billboards declaring "I AM TROY DAVIS" would be displayed across the world - in Asia, Europe, and here in Jackson, Georgia.

While I wanted to be close to Martina to offer my support and solidarity, I also wanted to capture this historic event in photographs. According to the prison rules, I could not do both. It was a difficult decision, but this time I decided to be the journalist, not the protestor. Not the friend to family of the condemned, but part of the press core. I felt it was important to the abolition movement to capture with my camera the final hours before Troy Davis's execution - to bring the images back for the world to see.

The execution was scheduled for 7:00 pm on that Wednesday. Crowds began descending on Jackson by mid-afternoon. The prison, despite vast open spaces on the rural property, limited the number of protesters allowed in the protest zone to around 60 people. Of course far more than 60 came to the prison that night. In fact, over 700 were there by nightfall. Once the maximum of 60 was reached, the rest were confined to lining the highway across the street from the prison, blocked from the prison grounds by an unbelievable show of force: riot squads, State Troopers, Corrections Officers, local police, the Sheriff's Department, and Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) teams.

The mood on the ground in the hours leading up to 7:00 pm were tense, yet still hopeful. But as the minute of death approached closer and closer, a somber silence began to permeate the crowds. People began hugging each other and weeping as the time arrived. A prayer circle formed around Troy's family. Prayers were being uttered. People were dropping to their knees.

And then, almost as if a fierce storm had touched down across the street, a tremendous roar of human voices erupted, and it quickly rippled its way into my immediate surroundings. People in the protest area began shrieking "there's a stay!" in utter disbelief and ecstatic joy. People were hugging, crying, jumping, laying face down in the grass, and shouting "praise Jesus!". I have never before witnessed such an intense transformation of pure sadness to pure joy. The emotion was nerve tingling, and, for probably the umpteenth time since I arrived in Georgia this week to photograph the events leading up to this moment, I could not take a photo because my eyes were filled with tears. Troy Davis was alive.

We believed that at last the truth was out. We believed that sanity had prevailed and the shift toward justice had begun. We believed that the one-million voices calling around the world had finally been heard.

At least this is what we believed had happened - what we *hoped* had happened. It turns out the Supreme Court of the United States had received a last minute appeal from Troy's attorneys, and had issued a temporary delay in the execution. But within three hours, had issued a one sentence rejection of the appeal and permitted the execution to go forward.

Before we knew the ultimate decision by the Supreme Court, those hours of waiting were surreal. The ecstatic joy dwindled rather rapidly once the reality that this interruption was not indeed a stay, but a delay, was understood. Cautious optimism took over the happiness.

But still, there was optimism. Troy's family visited with friends and supporters amidst the bright prison-yard lights and the television camera lighting. Children played. People prayed. The legal limbo caused time to stand still.

When the shock of joy erupted at 7:00 pm with the good news, I followed the lead of a few brave news photographers and shimmied under the yellow tape into the protest area to get powerful, emotional photos up close. But, as the news

photographers quietly snuck back into the media pen after a few minutes, I made the decision to stay with the protestors. This is where I wanted to be, and now here I was, with my camera in hand.

Since I was not allowed to be in this area with a camera, I was nervous, but amazingly, the guards did not notice (or they chose to ignore), the infiltration. I kept my camera hidden against my shoulder as best I could, and began discretely documenting the scene from the inside. I knew this was a critical and unique perspective that no other photographer would have.

Troy's sister Martina and I are friends through our common work in this anti-death penalty movement. She has welcomed me to photograph her and the family's struggle before. Tonight I knew I could freely take photos of them, without a sense of violating the privacy of the family. I was honored and humbled by Martina's trust and emboldened by the responsibility.

The hours of waiting were long, and uncomfortable, as we were in emotional limbo without knowledge of when there would be a definite announcement. Were we going home soon? Were we staying? Would we be back next tomorrow? Next week? I wondered what those on the inside of the prison were feeling. The guards. The warden. The MacPhail family. The attorneys. The executioners. Troy Davis himself. It was, I imagine, torturous, for everybody involved.

Shortly after 10:00 pm, it was announced that the Supreme Court had rejected the appeal, and the delay was lifted. The execution was to go forward. The news was met by a strengthening of the spirit of those gathered. It was solemnly quiet, but not with hopeless despair. You could almost feel a force holding everyone together. Maybe it was the Holy Spirit. Maybe it was the preacher's song. Maybe it was Troy's family, standing strong. Whoever or whatever it was, it was unquestionably there.

Just after 11:00 pm, I was with Laura Moye, the Death Penalty Abolition Campaign Director for Amnesty International USA. Martina brought a young woman over to us and introduced her to Laura. Martina told Laura that this college student, Monica, had driven, by herself, from California, to protest the execution. Martina told Monica to give her contact information to Laura to get involved in the work to end the death penalty. Laura handed Monica a notepad and pen, and Monica provided her information. It was an extraordinary scene, which I took a photo of. Martina, who could have been overwhelmed by the tragedy of the moment, knowing her brother could be executed at any time now, chose to still keep organizing, connecting activists for the cause.

All along we have said that this is not just about Troy Davis, it is about justice, about fairness, and about an end to state killing. Martina embodied that in this moment. With her brother at the end of his life, she was still unselfishly committed to making sure there were no more Troy Davises.

Immediately following this exchange, Benjamin Todd Jealous, the President of NAACP, called the crowd together to announce that word had come out of the prison that the execution was happening. All eyes quietly focused on the ground, or into the sky. Martina and the rest of Troy's family were in the center of the circle, surrounded at this moment by love and community. We stayed there, like that, until a chant of "I AM TROY DAVIS" grew from the inside, and resonated into the still of the night.

When it was all over, we walked out of the yellow-tape enclosed pen, past the media trucks, through the swaths of armed riot squads, and to a church parking lot across the street where our cars were parked. A prayer circle closed what was a nightmare that no one thought would actually happen.

Two days later, I finally brought myself to look at the photos I had taken that night. My emotions were still raw, and I didn't want to relive Troy's execution yet. But I felt a responsibility to get the photos out into the world, given my unprecedented access to the scene.

As I went through the images, I stopped on the photo of Martina bringing the college student over to the Amnesty International director to trade contact information. I looked at the time that the photo was taken. 11:08 pm. The exact minute that we now know that Troy Davis died on the gurney.

I broke down in tears. These were not tear of sadness, but tears of admiration and hope. In the photo Martina isn't looking at anyone around her, but is looking off toward the prison. Somehow deep inside, she must had known what had just happened. You can see it in her face. But even in the darkest moment of tragedy, the tireless work of Martina, all Troy's family, Amnesty International, NAACP and the countless worldwide supporters of human rights carried on. There was no giving up, even in that moment. The work to end the death penalty continued, right then and there.

The day before his execution, Troy told a supporter, "The struggle for justice doesn't end with me. This struggle is for all the Troy Davises who came before me and all the ones who will come after me. I'm in good spirits and I'm prayerful and at peace."

With Troy's plight and execution, we have seen an awakening and eyes have been opened. The effort to save the life of Troy Davis ended that night, but the campaign to end the death penalty begins anew. One media outlet referred to September 21st at "the beginning of the end of the death penalty in America."

After struggling for hours through my photos, I finally checked my email, and there, waiting for me, all sent within hours of the execution, were dozens of notes from people all around New York State, wanting to know how they could get involved.

"Tonight I have realized that I don't ever want to see another innocent man be executed," read one letter. "I realized that I am not doing enough."

Another wrote, "...the murdering of Troy Davis has re-sparked my motivation to end it. I have never really taken any action regarding this subject... but today, it is time to do something."

Many people never before concerned with the death penalty have been shocked, and are ready to take action. We now face a challenge to capture the sadness, the anger and the energy and direct it into the ongoing efforts of the abolition movement - a movement that is actually winning, despite nights like this one.

While we did not succeed in stopping the execution of Troy, a new movement for abolition was galvanized. New activists were motivated to join in the work. Seasoned activists were reenergized to take up the struggle again. Brown, black and white - this nation and this world came together for the cause of human rights. Because of the work of Troy's family, Amnesty International, the NAACP, and countless other groups, the world knows the name of Troy Davis, and the world will not forget.

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