French photojournalist discusses her exploration of capital punishment in the United States

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There are no rich people on death row.

That was one of the first things photojournalist Caroline Planque noticed in 2005 when she began visiting prisoners condemned to die by lethal injection in Texas.

A native of France, which abolished the death penalty in 1981, Planque was already an opponent of capital punishment when she arrived in Austin as a graduate student.

But Planque said she didn’t know precisely why she felt the way she about the fact that her adopted home was one of the world’s most frequent state sponsors of executions.

“I decided to find out,” Planque said before her visit on Monday to Utah State University, where she spoke as a part of the Morris Media & Society Lecture Series.

More than 1,430 people have been executed in the United States since the U.S. Supreme Court lifted a federal abolition in 1977. Texas has killed more than a third of those individuals.

Planque said she has known two of the executed men quite well, and visited them often at the prison in West Livingston, Texas, before they were killed.

She also came to recognize many of the other condemned men who she would see in the prison visitation center.

“All of them are gone now,” she said.

Planque’s lecture was part of a series, facilitated by Utah State’s Department of Journalism and Communication, and supported by an endowment from DeAnn Morris in honor of her late brother, former journalism professor John Morris. In deference to a man who has been described as “a chain-smoking, tough-talking, beer-drinking Westerner,” the department invites speakers who challenge convention.

Planque’s visit came shortly after the Utah Senate voted to abolish capital punishment. The House declined to vote on the bill before the annual legislative session ended in March, however, leaving the nine men on Utah’s death row still eligible for execution.

Over the years, Planque has interviewed and photographed parents, partners and siblings of death row inmates, as well as chaplains, pen pals, witnesses and wardens. Over time, she began seeing common themes.

The condemned, she said, were almost always poor. They were often victims of childhood abuse. They were frequently addicted to drugs at the time of their alleged crimes.

And they were often mentally ill. One man sentenced to die in Texas, she noted, has pulled out both of his eyes — and swallowed one of them — while awaiting his execution.

“They said he was faking mental illness to avoid being killed,” she said of Andre Thomas, who killed his estranged wife and her two children in 2004, later telling authorities he believed them to be possessed by demons.

Jackson Murphy, a journalism student whose father was a reporter who witnessed several executions, told Planque that he once found in his father’s things a hand-drawn picture of a man who was about to be executed.

“I sat and looked at this drawing,” he said. “It was so evocative, and I had emotions I never felt before.”

Murphy asked Planque how she has dealt with the toll of subjecting herself to this part of the American judicial system.

Planque acknowledged it can be emotionally taxing — and gave the students in the audience an opportunity to connect to those emotions by having them read the words of some of the people she has interviewed. In several instances, the students’ voices cracked when they took on the roles of those who are often forgotten in the system, like the siblings and parents of the condemned, the prison workers who are forced to carry out executions, the religious counselors who are often the last people to speak to men and women who are about to die, and the people who advocate for the rights of those sentenced to death.
One quote came from Dennis Longmire, who has served as a witness to executions in Texas.

Longmire once told Planque about the time he met the daughter of a man who was about to be executed. The teen-aged girl had asked him how long it would take for her father’s body to reach the morgue.

Why? Longmire asked.

“I want to make sure he is warm because I have never been able to feel the warmth of my father’s touch,” the girl replied. “I was in my mother’s womb when the trial took place and I have never been able to visit my father in any situation where I could touch him and he could touch me.”