

Proponent Testimony of Christy Sheppard
Senate Bill 162
October 21, 2015

Good morning Chairman Eklund, Vice Chairman Obhof, Ranking Member Thomas and members of the committee. My name is Christy Sheppard. I grew up in a small town called Ada, Oklahoma. Ada is a small town about the same size as Streetsboro, Ashland or Portsmouth, Ohio.

Ada is where my cousin, Debbie Carter, was brutally raped and murdered. I offer you testimony today from the perspective of a victims' family member whose accused killer had a history of serious mental illness.

Debbie was just 21 years old. She was beautiful, funny, quick-witted, and living on her own for the first time in her life. She had everything to look forward to in life, but on December 8, 1982, she was brutally raped and murdered. The killer or killers left behind a horrifying scene. Five years after her murder in the summer of 1987, two men went on trial, Dennis Fritz and Ron Williamson.

Ron Williamson was a local who had a promising career as a major league baseball player and had made it all way to playing a brief period with the Yankees. But soon his mental illness and self medicating lead Ron back home to Oklahoma and living with his mother. Ron had a long well-documented history of serious mental illness and had began to have some issues with the law.

Mr. Williamson lived a block from Debbie and I lived a block in the other direction. He had become the local "crazy," talking to himself in the streets and singing in convenience store parking lots. So the pieces started to fit together that he had to be involved with Debbie's murder.

While on trial Ron Williamson screamed at the jury, flipped over the defense table and was about as unruly and unsympathetic a man could be. Ron was so disruptive, he had to be removed from the court room and his trial proceeded without him.

Mr. Williamson was sentenced to death and spent the next 12 years on the row. Then in 1997 Ron was granted a new trial, but the first step was a competency hearing. I attended the hearing and this was the first time my professional and personal life would conflict. I am a mental health professional, I sat in the court room and watched this man who I had grown up fearing and hating, not be able to distinguish between reality and the voices that haunted him. I left the court room feeling so conflicted and sad. I then delivered to my aunt the news that there was no way this man could aid in his own defense.

Ron would never return to death row and some months later was exonerated by DNA evidence. A few years later my family would learn what all Ron had endured while on death row. His hair turned snow white and he pulled out his own teeth, he heard voices through his TV and would scream and yell for them to stop. He lost all touch with reality. Ron struggled everyday with medication compliance, finances, housing, and drinking after he was exonerated and developed cirrhosis of the live. He died at the age of 51 in a nursing home.

In our case the burden of guilt and shame will never go away. For feeling like we played a part in the wrongful conviction of an innocent man; for projecting all the tragedy of Debbie's murder on him; for taking him away from his family; for him spending twelve years on death row and completely going insane, for a crime he did not commit.

My family's experience with the murder of my cousin, the death penalty case against the man we all thought committed the crime, and his serious mental illness which compounded the tragedy, gives us a unique perspective. I strongly support Senate Bill 162 and am happy to answer any questions.