

recently banned by the present government of President Suharto. Two prisoners were Muslim activists convicted of rebellion in connection with a 1981 attack on a police station. Two more were put to death in 1987 for the murder of a young woman, 25 years after they were sentenced.

Amnesty claims that at least 30 Indonesian prisoners remain under sentence of death.

Internationally, Amnesty has recorded no fewer than 19,000 executions, in some 90 countries, since 1979. In the United States alone, 2,100 people currently await death row.

I reached Saturday's demonstration just a few minutes before its slated noon start. Cheerful, resolute Amnesty organizer and York student Orchid Mazurkiewicz stepped in front of me and, wordlessly, wrapped a black arm-band around my bicep, pressing a white carnation into my hand. Someone passed me a cardboard picket with a crossed-out noose on it.

"So much for objective journalism," I chuckled to myself, as the demonstration began. Pickets bobbed and banners flapped as we paraded around and around the flowerbeds in front of the Indonesian consulate.

The flow of demonstrators widened as newcomers arrived to swell the ranks. I was so full of questions I didn't know where to start. Was everybody here basking in the certainty of moral conviction? Surely there were some people here with something resembling doubt fluttering through their minds. Surely someone else here had their own Clifford Robert Olson to struggle with.

I met a guy named Jim, a 35-year-old Toronto man who was presently unemployed, by choice, so that he could have time to steep himself in social issues and activist events. I asked Jim if he had any recollections of the Olson trials, or if he had dealt with a similar moral dilemma to the extent that I had.

"I've never been really confronted with that," he admitted. "[The Olson trials] were just something I read about in the paper and made a moral judgement about."

Jim added that he'd grown up with the Judeo-Christian principle of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." His parents believed in capital punishment.

Coming to the conviction that the death penalty should be abolished "has been a gradual process for me," he said. For Jim, there was no overnight conversion, just some steady musing, mulling and hashing out of the matter.

We didn't say anything for a moment.

"Life is hard when you force yourself to think, isn't it?" I said, breaking the silence.

"Yeah," he smiled ruefully, "but you have to keep challenging yourself. You can't be complacent."

About five minutes later I was talking about picket messages with York Amnesty member Audrey Wineberg. 'CRUEL! INHUMANE! ARBITRARY!' screamed one sign.

"Look at that one," said Wineberg, pointing at CAPITAL PUNISHMENT: WHAT IF YOU MAKE A MISTAKE? "I made that one," she grinned. For effect, the "S" in "PUNISHMENT" was backwards.

In the United States, as Wineberg pointed out, there have been 23 documented cases in which an innocent person was executed.

"Why compound killing with more killing?" she asked. "It doesn't solve anything. It just ends another life."

I approached Steve Birnie, another York student. By now I was getting pretty good at balancing journalism and activism; I had even mastered the skill of

scribbling in my notebook and toting my picket at the same time. I just kind of tucked the picket under one arm, held my notebook in one hand, and wielded my pen with the other.

Plumbing enthusiastically for a vivid and emotional response, I blurted out a question: "Is this [demonstration] working? Does it feel right?"

"Of course it does," Birnie answered, with an expression suggesting the answer was somewhat obvious. "We're protecting human lives."

I picked up a pamphlet called *The Death Penalty Is Not The Answer*, an Amnesty International publication. In the handout, the human rights organization attempts to establish a foundation of fact supporting the abolition of the death penalty.

"Some people say the death penalty would decrease the number of murders in Canada," the pamphlet states, "The facts are . . . Virtually every study of the death penalty undertaken in Canada, the U.S.A. and Great Britain has shown that the death penalty does not reduce the number of murders and other violent crimes more effectively than other punishments."

"In 1975, the year before abolition of the death penalty in Canada, there were 701 homicides in Canada. In 1984, eight years after abolition, there were 668 homicides. The murder rate in Canada (number of homicides per 100,000 population) was 3.09 in 1975 and 2.66 in 1984."

I was thinking about these statistics as we marched from the Indonesian consulate to Nathan Phillips Square, where the main rally was taking place. Halfway there, I noticed a street-person in an old green jacket standing on the sidewalk checking out our signs.

"End the death penalty," he muttered derisively. "Hey! What if some guy came around and killed your mother?"

"Killing him won't bring her back," answered York student Shirley Li.

"Hmm . . . Good point," he said.

We spilled into Nathan Phillips Square. Between 1 and 2 p.m., more Amnesty groups arrived from similar mini-protests at 18 other Metro-area embassies of nations still practising capital punishment. From one direction came the banner-waving members of Amnesty's Barrie chapter. From another came the Owen Sound group.

Emcee Dave Broadfoot grabbed the microphone and introduced the long line of celebrities filing on stage behind him. Alongside York professor Ramsay Cook stood author Pierre Berton, actor Bruno Gerussi and about a dozen more friends of Amnesty. The celebrities were handed petitions to sign, which were later passed among the demonstrators.

I approached the controversial and perceptive *Lexicon* writer Mike Lee. Lee, I knew, was a guy who thought about things. I shared with him my ambivalent feelings towards the death penalty. I told him how I felt about Clifford Robert Olson.

"In all honesty, I'm just as outraged by that too," he said. "Personally, I have had experiences similar to that, because some of the girls I know have been sexually assaulted, some by people in their families. So I understand what it's like to want to see people who have committed horrible crimes put to death."

"But my grandfather was put to death during the Korean War. He was put to death in North Korea for collaborating with the South Koreans. So I'm worried about any government that has the right to kill. But I do support putting people like Clifford Olson in prison for the rest of their lives."

York student James Jarvinen was also worried about governments having the right to kill.

"It's a matter of power," he said. "Everything comes down to power, and one way a government can maintain power is by killing those who oppose their policies."

"I used to believe that if someone killed someone else they had no respect for life," Jarvinen explained. "Therefore, their own life is worth nothing . . . [But now I see that] people are being executed by other people exercising power for their own purposes."

"The system of death sentencing is like a lottery determined by countless random factors," states Amnesty's pamphlet, "such as the attitudes of police and prosecutors, the skill of court-appointed defence counsel, and the prejudices of judges and juries . . . Throughout the world the death penalty is usually applied in a discriminatory way against minorities and the poor."

American Delbert Tibbs is from a minority group, being black. By his own description, he was poor and "living the life of a vagrant" in 1974, when he was sentenced to hang for a murder/rape he didn't commit.

In a special on-stage interview at the rally, Tibbs told Berton that a young Floridian witness had supposedly identified him on the evidence of three Polaroid snapshots. He was tried by an all-white jury and sentenced to be executed. Only after a Supreme Court appeal and an eight-year battle by his Defence Committee was the error realized and Tibbs released.

Of course, he still carries around the image of his 5 x 7 foot death cell. "It's easy to describe in physical terms," he explained, "but not so easy to describe in terms of the mental effect it had on me."

Towards the end of the rally, the unflappable Orchid Mazurkiewicz sat on a concrete bench and tried to smack some warmth into her hands. She was impressed with the rally, but even more delighted that the demonstration back at the Indonesian consulate managed to draw between 70 and 100 people.

"I was very happy with the turnout at the consulate," she said, "especially because we were really uncertain of whether the weather would affect the turnout. Everything went really well . . . Everyone was really into it." Speaking of commitment, Mazurkiewicz explained why she was involved with the rally.

"I have a belief in the fundamental human right to life, and no one has the right to decide that someone else should die," she said, "No system should work on the principle of revenge."

Mazurkiewicz's convictions are echoed in Amnesty's pamphlet, in which the death penalty is placed in a historical context.

"Our Members of Parliament have a duty to lead," it states, "rather than follow, public opinion on this issue. Just as public opinion was educated to turn away from slavery and torture, so too must it learn that the death penalty is not an answer to violence, terror and crime."

This debate, like every controversial issue, has two sides. But there appears to be no clearly defined, organized and vocal opposition that calls for abolition of the death penalty. Supporters do not form alliances. They could be your parents, your grandparents, your neighbour, the person who delivers your milk. But they aren't coming together to counter-demonstrate at gatherings such as Saturday's rally at Nathan Phillips Square.

Furthermore, according to Amnesty, at least one country a year in the past decade has written the death penalty off its constitution. Perhaps we are all witnesses to the last days of The Executioner.