

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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### **Speaking with Longmeadow High School Students**

"I am from the Amnesty International Club at the high school," said the voice on the telephone. It was Kate Michael, a Longmeadow student. She invited me to talk at a club meeting. Topic: The Death Penalty - we scheduled a date. Knowing that the students were likely to hold a view different from mine, I assembled some data, developed an outline, and last Thursday drove to the school for the meeting.

Amnesty International Club members Ethan Katsh and Katie Brookmeier greeted me at the main door of the high school and escorted me through the halls to the meeting. I met the 20 students and their advisor John Fitzgerald, and I delivered my remarks. Maria Trombly was there to snap photos and take notes.

I mentioned that the Massachusetts House routinely defeats death penalty legislation narrowly, while the Senate has endorsed it. I talked of conservative Republicans who oppose it, including the sister of Joey Fournier, a boy who was killed by Willie Horton. I also talked of the legislator who changed his mind to support the death penalty only after his town's police chief was gunned down by a housebreaker. When it came time for the question period it became clear that, while the legislature might have a variety of responses to the death penalty, this particular audience was of one mind. While my sources said it is a deterrent, theirs showed the opposite. When I cited Charles Manson, they talked about Sacco and Vanzetti.

We had a lively discussion about the death penalty with our battling statistics and opposite points of view. I don't think any minds were changed, but I learned a few things and developed a respect for the thoughtfulness of these students of history. Although I was referring only to the Massachusetts death penalty, a student asked me to comment on the Rosenbergs. When I erroneously asserted that they were executed for constitutional reasons, I was corrected with the information that they were sentenced under a World War I law. When asked about Sacco and Vanzetti, I responded that the death penalty would not have been sought under today's standard. I raised the issue of murders committed in prison by convicted killers; they countered that murder rates are no different in non-death penalty states. I agreed with them that mental illness should be considered a mitigating factor, but not with extending that logic to define any murderer as mentally ill by definition.

We eventually agreed to disagree. I left with an information sheet from Amnesty International, which I have studied. I left the club members with information that may provide them with understanding of the logic that has led me to a decision different from theirs. And I left with respect for the students who had organized our encounter and spent an hour of their free time to engage me in debate of an issue that concerns them deeply.