

I N T H E S H A D

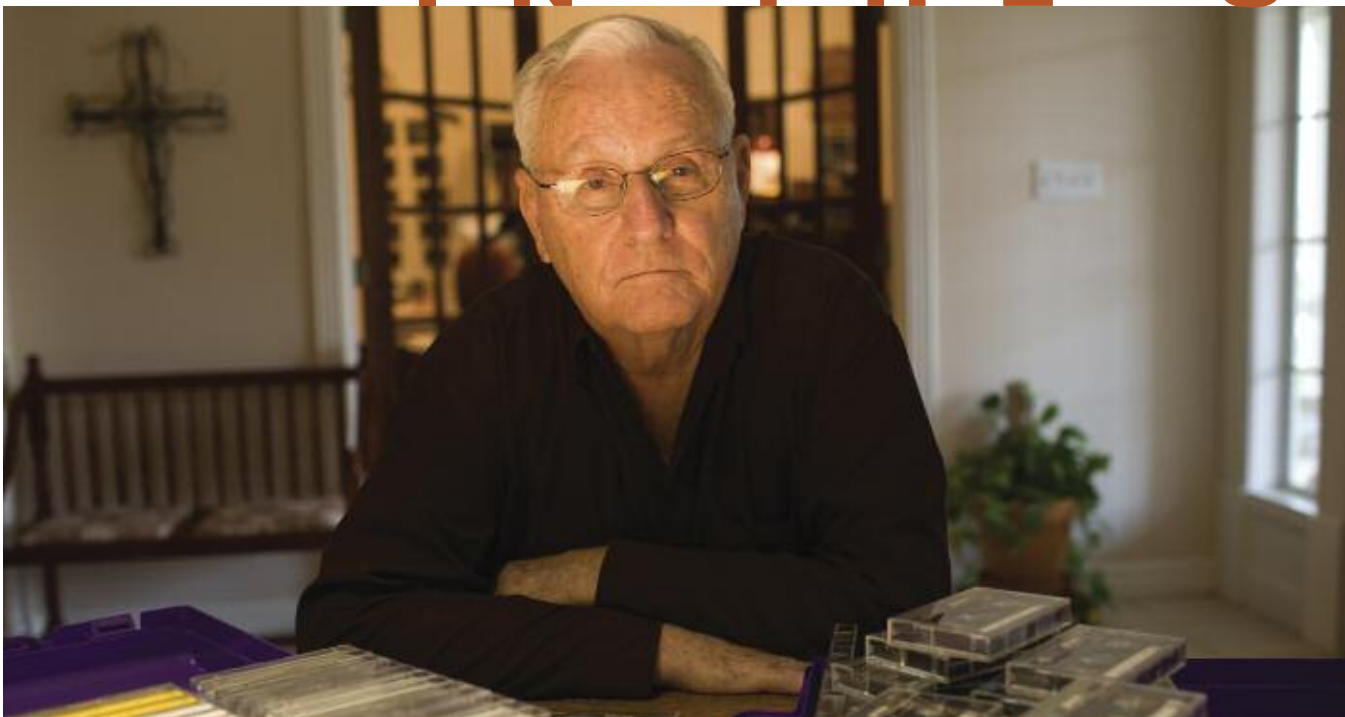


PHOTO BY KEVIN HORAN/IFC

Carroll Pickett recorded tapes about each of 95 inmates who were executed while he was Death House chaplain.

by Dara McCoy

What would it be like to watch 95 people be executed? What kind of solace can be provided to them in their final hours? What if those responsibilities were part of doing a job? These are the questions addressed in *At the Death House Door*, an Independent Film Channel (IFC) documentary on the life of **Carroll Pickett** '54 and his 15 years as chaplain at the Texas State Penitentiary in Huntsville, Texas. From 1982 to 1995, Pickett walked "through the valley of the shadow of death" with 95 prisoners sentenced to death by lethal injection. They weren't his valleys, but serving as the guide for those walks was terrifying enough.

The documentary premiered on IFC May 29 and was described as "a quiet powerhouse that leaves you thinking about the central issues and character long after the lights have gone up," by a *Dallas Morning News* writer. Pickett allowed camera crews into his living room and relived his experiences as Death House chaplain. He also opened his collection of cassette recordings, in

which he had bared his soul to the recorder after each execution.

"It was difficult," said Pickett of opening the tapes to the production crew. "I had done the tapes for me alone, and they were put away for good." He said the producers took the time to listen to the tapes and asked questions about memories he had suppressed long ago. "Several times, it really hurt to hear the things I had been through and to recall those men who I was with all day and night," he said.

The documentary chronicles Pickett's life after graduating from Austin College. He attended Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary where he was told by one professor in 1957, "I am convinced that your ministry is destined to focus on the dying, lending comfort to those faced with death and those who are losing loved ones." His professor's words became very real in 1974 when several prisoners took hostages at "The Walls" unit of the Huntsville State Prison in an 11-day standoff, the longest in United States history.

O W O F D E A T H

At the time, Pickett was the minister of the Presbyterian Church in Huntsville. Jim Estelle, one of his church members and the director of prisons, asked Pickett to come and minister to the families of the prison employees taken hostages. Then, Pickett was told that two hostages were faithful members of his own congregation. The prisoners allowed the hostages to call their families. During one call, the women from Pickett's church told him their wishes for their funeral services.

On August 3, 1974, the hostage crisis ended violently on the front ramp of the prison during an escape attempt. Two leaders of the crisis lay dead, and two of the 11 hostages were murdered by the prisoners. Both were Pickett's church members. That day Pickett said he would never return to the prison.

GOING BACK

Five years later, Pickett did go back to the Huntsville prison, taking a job as the prison chaplain in an attempt to save a marriage strained by the time-consuming work of pastoring a church. "When I went to work there, I didn't breathe walking up that ramp," Pickett said of his first day. "I got to the place right there at that corner where Judy and Yvonne were shot, and went to the library and there were still bullet holes. You could still see the blood stains."

When Pickett first began as chaplain, six people attended service in the prison's chapel, but he went to work gathering a new congregation of thieves, murderers, and other criminals. He started a choir that attracted several talented inmates, one of whom had been a backup singer for Don Ho and another who was a former Texas Supreme Court justice.


In 1982, Pickett once again faced death in his ministry. The Huntsville prison was scheduled to administer the first execution by lethal injection in the United States. "Nowhere in my job description did it say anything about executions," Pickett said in the film. Yet, the prison director assigned Pickett to minister to the condemned inmates, transferred from Death Row to the Huntsville death chamber on the day of execution. He stayed with the condemned prisoners during their final 18

hours and was at their side when the lethal injection was administered. "It is hard to tell anybody, even the meanest person, that it's time to go," Pickett said.

Pickett would fill this role 95 times. He even faced the personal conflict of ministering to Ignacio Cuevas, the lone surviving inmate from the 1974 hostage crisis that resulted in the deaths of his church members. At the time of Cuevas' execution, Pickett approved of capital punishment and felt disgust that even in Cuevas' final hours he never mentioned his role in the 1974 hostage crisis. "I wanted him to bring it up," Pickett said. "He talked about murdering, slashing, and killing all these other people, but he didn't bring it up. The whole idea of justice and fairness was not in his system."

The execution of another prisoner, Carlos DeLuna, changed Pickett's stance on capital punishment. In their time together, he became convinced DeLuna was innocent. Despite his reservations about capital punishment, Pickett continued to minister in his role as Death House chaplain. "I believe that the 'ministry of presence' is so important for anyone who is about to die. ... No one should die without a friend," said Pickett.

The story of DeLuna's possible innocence interested two *Chicago Tribune* reporters in 2005. They contacted Pickett in February 2006 and were involved in the IFC documentary filming as well. The documentary gave Pickett an opportunity to speak out against the death penalty for the first time since he retired from the prison in 1995. "I have given 275 radio, TV, phone, and personal interviews and traveled over 26,000 miles to promote the film and speak after each showing," Pickett said. He has spoken to the Texas Democratic Caucus, to church congregations, and on Capitol Hill to the Judiciary Committee of the House of Representatives.

Pickett's experiences in the Death House remain with him. "I have been there 95 times and most people will never see what it is like," Pickett said of a practice he now sees as unfair and immoral. "I want people, through this film, to feel something and do something about it." 

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At the Death House Door: Film Trailer and Information