

Helping at-risk youth make better choices

DARRYL STALLWORTH would like nothing better than for his extracurricular activities to cause him to go out of business so he can write his first book.

Stallworth has sojourned from the Alameda County District Attorney's Office where he was a proponent of capital punishment to private practice as a criminal defense attorney who opposes the death penalty. Along the way he has become an advocate and activist helping young people make positive choices so that they might avoid utilizing Stallworth's services later.



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It is indeed an unusual journey because in Stallworth's own words, "If anyone told me 10 years ago I would have left the DA's office to become a criminal defense attorney and be an opponent of the death penalty I would have said, 'I

can't see that!'"

As is the case with most of us, Stallworth could see clearer in retrospect than he could in the moment. For Stallworth, it required him trying a capital punishment case to truly ascertain where he stood.

In 2005, Stallworth took his first capital punishment case; it was Demarcus Ralls, who as 21 at the time and one of six individuals who self-identified as the "Nut Cases." They engaged in a crime spree that terrorized Oakland over a six-week period in late 2002 and early 2003 mainly for thrills.

In a tape-recorded interview with police after he was arrested in January 2003, Ralls stated that what Nut Case members do is to "kill people" and that they killed "just to be doing stuff."

Ralls was convicted on three counts of first-degree murder, one count of second-degree murder, two counts of attempted murder, 17 counts of robbery, one count of kidnapping and one count of shooting into an inhabited dwelling.

Advocating for Ralls to receive the death penalty seemed to be a no-brainer. But once the case reached the penalty phase, it began what Stallworth described as, "a journey that opened my eyes about a number of different things."

"Why we do what we do?" was the question that tormented Stallworth. That particular question was not discussed at length in the District Attorney's Office nor was it explored in any detail during the rigors of law school, but it had become the unavoidable question for Stallworth.

"I saw in him (Ralls) a cycle that I recognized, young men and women manifesting their anger and violence based on having lived through similar life experience," Stallworth said. As in the case of Ralls, that life experience began when he was born in jail to a drug-addicted mother.

Another piece to Stallworth's transformation included what he felt was the futility of suggesting to families of victims that seeking the death penalty would somehow bring them closure.

According to Stallworth, there are lots of services that victims' families need, but he questions whether sitting in a courtroom repeatedly listening to what is often gruesome details is among them.

In addition to coming to the conclusion that the death penalty does not bring closure, Stallworth also believes it is natural for victims' families to advocate for the maximum punishment available.

"If the punishment were life in prison that's what they would want, if it were 25 years, that's what they would want, but in California it's the death penalty so that's what they want," he said.

Moreover, it became clear to Stallworth, given that most death penalty defendants are represented by public defenders, taxpayer dollars are inordinately skewed in favor of the district attorney's office to prosecute.

But Stallworth's disillusionment with the death penalty did not end with him going into private practice and publicly advocating against its implementation.

Stallworth has taken it upon himself to speak with young people born into conditions similar to Ralls' about making good life choices. He conducts crime prevention workshops for elementary, middle school, high school students and even college students.

Walking young people through various scenarios, Stallworth instructs them on how to avoid potential life-altering choices.

"I want them to make good choices so they won't be sitting in my office later in need of representation," he said.

It is a false choice to measure Stallworth's success by whether his extracurricular activities will cause him to go out of business allowing him to write his first book. He already has the makings of an inspiring best-seller.

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