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Death penalty perpetuates vicious cycle of violence

By Darryl Stallworth

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As a deputy district attorney in Alameda County, I once argued to put a young man to death. But I won't do it again.

In October 2002, Demarcus Ralls and his seven co-defendants embarked on a three-month journey of terror. By the time all eight defendants were arrested in early 2003, seven people had been killed, a dozen people shot, and more than 30 had been robbed and assaulted.

When my boss asked me whether I would take what would be a career-making case and argue for Ralls' execution, it took me less than a minute to decide that I would proudly accept the challenge.

It was the first time in my life I had been asked to seriously think about the death penalty.

While interviewing jurors, I eventually got to the only question that really mattered: "Can you return a verdict that would one day require the state of California to execute a human being?"

I believe many of the prospective jurors had listened to news reports about gruesome killings and assumed the killers should be put to death. But once it was apparent that they might play more than a spectator's role - that they would be the ones to decide whether this young man should live or die - they grew much more hesitant. So did I.

The trial brought out more than just grizzly details about the killings. Ralls' violent and abusive

childhood emerged. What crystallized for me during the trial was something I had slowly been realizing over my career as a prosecutor: I was witnessing a cycle of violence.

The violence Ralls had inflicted closely resembled the violence he had experienced as a child. Ralls was born while his mother was in jail. His role model was his older brother, one of the cruelest killers I had ever heard about.

The jury found Ralls guilty. It came time for me to stand up and make my argument for death. But this case that once seemed so straightforward now seemed very complex. I was no longer certain what would be accomplished by executing Demarcus Ralls.

The jury condemned Ralls to permanent imprisonment. Though I had lost, I knew justice had been served.

I realized I could no longer argue for the death of another human being no matter what atrocious things he or she may have done. I now understand that the death penalty is an ineffective, cruel and simplistic response to the complex problem of violent crime.

Our limited resources could be better spent on programs that focus on stopping violence before it starts, such as preventing child abuse and drug addiction - programs that will prevent another child from becoming the next Demarcus Ralls.

Last week, the California Commission on the Fair Administration of Justice, before which I testified, released the first exhaustive review of California's death penalty system. The report highlights the many expensive reforms needed for the state's death penalty and encourages Californians to consider whether it's really worth the price.

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I hope more will realize, as I have, that the state will be a better and safer place when we replace the death penalty with permanent imprisonment.

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