

## Title:

Death Penalty Is Preferable to Life Imprisonment

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## Summary:

Frederick Anthony Romano remembers the night. More than 15 years later, he remembers it as if it happened within the last week.

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Viewpoint

Frederick Anthony Romano remembers the night. More than 15 years later, he remembers it as if it happened within the last week.

It was Sunday night, Nov. 1, 1987. Seventeen-year-old Romano had gone to bed. His mother, Betty Romano, was in the house with him and his father, Frederick Joseph Romano. Soon the father received a call from his son-in-law Keith Garvin, a Navy petty officer who had returned to his base in Oceana, [Virginia]. Garvin had called his wife, Dawn Garvin, to let her know he had arrived back safely. But there was no answer.

After two calls to his daughter's house, Frederick J. Romano headed to the newlywed couple's White Marsh apartment. He found his daughter beaten, tortured, mutilated and dead.

Frederick A. Romano remembers his mother's panic-filled voice as she talked to his father, of himself grabbing the phone only to hear his father tell him that his older sister had been hurt.

"But he knew she was dead," Frederick A. Romano said.... Yes, Frederick A. Romano-who prefers to be called just "Fred"-remembers it all. He remembers the man who murdered his sister and two other women-Patricia Antoinette Hirt and Lori Elizabeth Ward-and how he has waited for 15 years for one Steven Howard

Oken to, in the younger Romano's words, "meet his maker."

#### The Pain of Victims' Relatives

"It's caused a lot of emotional problems for me and my mom and dad," Fred said. "They're on so many drugs to keep themselves calm, it's unbelievable."

That is a suffering death penalty opponents can't or won't understand. The pain of homicide victims' relatives never ends. It chips away at their souls and psyches year after depressing year. So what's the appropriate punishment for that?

Death penalty opponents would have us believe that squirreling Oken away in a cell-where Frederick A. and Frederick J. Romano, Betty Romano and Keith Garvin would be among the taxpayers footing the bill for his housing and meals-is punishment enough. If the correctional system offered any college courses, the Romanos and Garvin would pay part of the cost if Oken wanted to take them. Dawn Garvin never got to finish her education at Harford Community College.

#### Justice but No Closure

Capital punishment foes figure that's justice. Here's what death penalty advocates feel is justice. Execute Oken the week of March 17, [2003], as a Baltimore County judge ordered.... After Oken is dead, death penalty advocates can then defy death penalty opponents to show us why and in what ways Oken's execution was not justice.

That's what it's about for Fred Romano. He doesn't buy into the closure argument some death penalty advocates make. (It's just as well. Death penalty opponents, ever noble with grief not their own, dismiss the notion of closure, too.)

"It won't bring closure," Fred Romano said. "Dawn will never be back. I'm not looking for closure. That's a bad misconception on the part of some people. I want Oken to die for the murder of Dawn, Patricia Hurt and Lori Ward."

#### Not About Revenge

This isn't even about revenge, another rallying cry of the anti-capital punishment crowd, who chide death penalty advocates for seeking vengeance.

"It's justice," Fred Romano said. "It's not revenge."

His wife, Vicki Romano, agreed, then elaborated.

"Revenge would be going out and killing one of [the murderer's] family members," Vicki Romano said. "The death penalty isn't revenge. It's the law."

Fred Romano believes the man who's supposed to uphold that law, Maryland Attorney General J. Joseph Curran, has inserted himself squarely in the path of Oken's execution. [Early in 2003], Curran called for abolishing Maryland's death penalty....

Fred Romano called Curran after the announcement, to give the attorney general a piece of his mind. Curran, to his credit, called Fred Romano back and heard him out.

Curran, Fred Romano said, asked him if he had a problem with a sentence of life without parole as opposed to the death penalty. His response was what you might expect from a guy who organized the Maryland Coalition for State Executions [in 2002] and who's had the group's Web site ([www.mc4se.org](http://www.mc4se.org)) up for [several] months.

"My problem with it is that 10 years from now some other idiot will come along and say life without parole is too harsh," Fred Romano said. "Then they'll pass a bill granting them parole and then we'll have a bunch of murderers walking the streets."

In Maryland's bleeding-heart liberal legislature, that's exactly what would happen.