



MINISTRY
AGAINST THE
DEATH
PENALTY

USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO SAVE LIVES AND CHANGE HEARTS AND MINDS

By Rose Vines

Communications and Social Media Director, MADP

FROM THE ROAD TO THE INTERNET

Storytelling has always been central to the Ministry Against the Death Penalty's, from the moment Sister Helen Prejean realized that what she had witnessed in Angola's death chamber in 1984, when she watched the state of Louisiana execute Patrick Sonnier and Robert Lee Willie, would remain secret and unchallenged unless she told the American public about it.

Storytelling engages people at a deeply personal level and creates a connection which, once made, opens people up to exploring an issue in an entirely new way. Where facts and statistics and logic alone prove unpersuasive, once integrated into a personal story they become compelling.

Sister Helen has shared her story through talks, books, a film, a play and an opera. In the past 12 years, she has taken her story online, first via a website and blog and, more recently, through social media including Facebook and Twitter.

Facebook is beautifully suited to storytelling because its forte is community building through sharing. Twitter serves a different storytelling purpose: its immediacy lets you bring people into the center of an evolving story and it lets you intensify and personalize the conversation.

The building of a social media community has been a long, slow process. Effective social media requires regular, active engagement and to do that you need to allocate resources to the task. For years, MADP did social media on the cheap, with one staff member spending a fraction of her time on it, with little spent on the development of audio, video and other content, and with little integration with the rest of MADP's activities.

In the past few years, MADP has ramped up its social media efforts: we now have a two-person team devoting a significant portion of their time to creating content, posting regularly, monitoring effectiveness, and developing a strategic social media plan.

HOW MADP USES SOCIAL MEDIA

MADP has a huge advantage over many social justice non-profits because it is built around the work of Sister Helen Prejean. She is widely known and respected and so her voice carries weight. We use social media to amplify Sister Helen's voice and to build a community of people who are interested both in learning from her and in ending the death penalty.

Facebook is a natural space for connecting with people who have common interests, sharing news, insights, small stories, videos, calls to action and inviting responses through comments. We use it to build Sister Helen's community over the long haul.

Twitter's 140-character limit makes it useful for speedy responses to an evolving situation. We use it to focus the spotlight on specific executions, court cases or rapidly developing events; to respond quickly to public statements by officials; and to encourage exchanges of thought on current issues.

We also use Facebook and Twitter together, publishing shorter versions of Facebook posts to twitter, expanding on issues raised on Twitter in longer Facebook posts. And, when we want in-depth analysis or storytelling – something neither Facebook nor Twitter is good at – we use our newsletter and website (sisterhelen.org) and link to that longer content from tweets and posts.

THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS

Perhaps the biggest hurdle to developing our social media presence was persuading MADP staff that it was a worthwhile investment of our time. That's because MADP's work was rooted in traditional storytelling and most of our staff were from the pre-social media generation. They didn't realize that social media is how most people these days get their news, share their views, spread the word, and network.

It took two critical campaigns 18 months apart to turn the whole team into social media converts. Those campaigns were the push to save the life of Richard Glossip in Oklahoma and the effort to stop Arkansas's Governor Hutchinson from executing eight men within the space of 10 days in April 2017. During these campaigns, MADP's social media team used a strategic campaign to put a global spotlight on the actions of the state officials. Unlike the hidden executions of Patrick Sonnier and Robert Lee Willie many years ago in Angola Prison that Sister Helen witnessed, our social media efforts ensured that these present-day executions would face intense public scrutiny.

CONTROLLING THE CONVERSATION

The campaigns in Oklahoma and Arkansas involved:

- regular posts on Facebook, including video appeals from Sister Helen;
- increasingly frequent tweets;
- development of templates and language for people to use in letter writing, emails and phone calls;
- strategic thinking about the language to be used, including the use of hashtags;
- coordination with other groups and individuals, including MoveOn, the ACLU, national and state-based anti-death penalty groups, Susan Sarandon, Sir Richard Branson, and Vatican officials;
- direct responses to tweets made by governors, attorneys general and corrections officials;
- interacting with the media, both through tweets and through follow-up conversations.

In both campaigns, due to our intensive use of social media, Sister Helen's "voice" became dominant, allowing us to control the conversation. This is critical, because usually the governor has a bully pulpit, plus far more resources than those opposing the executions. By using an effective social media strategy, Helen's posts and tweets were shared and retweeted so frequently that they gained both national and international attention. Richard's life was saved and so, too, were the lives of four of the men lined up for execution in Arkansas. There were, of course, many others involved in these campaigns, including teams of lawyers, but it is undisputed that the driving engine of the two campaigns was Helen's voice amplified by MADP's social media efforts.

HOW INVESTMENT IN SOCIAL MEDIA PAYS OFF

MADP hired the second member of its social media team towards the end of 2014. The timing was fortuitous, because it was during 2015 that Richard Glossip faced multiple execution dates, from February through September. The campaign to save Richard's life was our first dedicated use of social media.

In April 2015, Sister Helen's Twitter following numbered 9,300 and her Facebook likes were 25,504. During September/October 2015, at the height of the Richard Glossip campaign, we received 3.84 million Twitter impressions and our Facebook reach was 3.16 million.

The Richard Glossip campaign boosted Sister Helen's Twitter and Facebook numbers considerably and from then until April 2017, when we launched our Arkansas campaign, the Twitter following grew 288% to 36,100 and the Facebook likes grew 158% to 65,702.

That expanded social media community meant that our Arkansas campaign had a significantly larger audience. For the Arkansas campaign, we focused on using Twitter and in April 2017 we received 11.2 million Twitter impressions, and other users mentioned Sister Helen in their tweets 12,300 times. Approximately 4 million Facebook users were reached during the same period. All in all, MADP reached approximately 15 million people during the Arkansas campaign.

Because of Twitter's proven effectiveness during campaigns such as these, we have made our Twitter community a priority. By August 2017, Sister Helen had 51,000 followers (an increase of over 41% in four months). We put that increased following to use when Missouri threatened to execute Marcellus Williams. Marcellus' lawyers had compelling DNA evidence, unavailable during his trial, that demonstrated his innocence. The Missouri Supreme Court had chosen to ignore this evidence and allow his execution to go ahead, but a strong social media campaign, in which Sister Helen's voice played a major role, forced the Missouri governor to call off the execution and appoint a special panel to look into the new evidence.

The effort required to conduct a successful campaign via Twitter is huge. Not only is it hard to distill complex social issues down to 140 characters, it's also important to stay on top of an event that changes hour by hour. During our Arkansas campaign in April 2017, we tweeted or retweeted 868 times and every single one of those tweets and retweets was carefully considered before we published it.

By developing a strong social media presence, we have brought many more people into the conversation and inspired thousands more to act. More importantly, we have saved lives.

DEVELOPING ORGANIZATIONAL RESILIENCE

Social media has had a huge impact on MADP's reach. Not only has it been the driver for successful campaigns in Oklahoma, Arkansas and elsewhere, it has also allowed us to create a "virtual Sister Helen".

As much as possible, when we post and tweet we do so in Sister Helen's "voice", adopting Sister Helen's compassionate tone while challenging those who push for executions. Our social media team talks with Helen regularly about current events and transforms those conversations into tweets and posts. (If you ask Sister Helen for a tweet, she'll say "A tweet? I know that's gotta be short," and she'll then proceed to provide around 500 words!) The result is that even when Sister Helen is sequestered away writing, she maintains a very strong public presence. And because social media can go viral, we can reach people in every state and around the globe. Without social media, Sister Helen's voice would be in danger of disappearing at those times when she is writing or is, for some other reason, unable to be directly engaging the public.

For decades, Sister Helen has been the most influential voice raised against the death penalty in the USA. Now, her Facebook community and tweet stream are the go-to places for online death penalty

campaigns. Other anti-death-penalty organizations repost and retweet MADP's content on a daily basis, and media here and abroad track what we're saying. During the Arkansas campaign, reporters told us that "We're all following Sister Helen's tweets on this." Just one example of this was that The Guardian requested an interview with Helen because of her tweets (see the resulting article, included in an appendix to this report).

As well as enabling MADP to have a consistent and persistent voice in the conversation about the death penalty, our social media work has made our entire organization more resilient. MADP is, essentially, an organization built around one person; if Sister Helen isn't around, our work disappears. In the past, if Sister Helen had an extended illness or a writing sabbatical it would effectively put a halt to our work; now, the work continues at all times through social media.

WHERE NEXT?

In April 2017, the bipartisan Oklahoma Death Penalty Commission released its report. The Commission unanimously recommended that Oklahoma maintain a moratorium on its death penalty. Within hours of the report's release, the Oklahoma attorney general said he intended to ignore the Commission's 46 recommendations and to proceed with executions as soon as the state developed a new execution protocol.

MADP decided to create a social media campaign to educate the public on those 46 recommendations, so that people are ready and eager to act should Oklahoma recommence executions. We created a special Oklahoma Action Team (OkAT, and it's not just for Oklahoma), with a dedicated space on sisterhelen.org (sisterhelen.org/okdp) and its own newsletter.

OkAT members represent a core of our most active and faithful followers and communicating directly with them in this manner is already creating new opportunities for us. For example, we asked OkAT members if they would like to write to death row inmates and almost 200 said yes, providing an extraordinary pool of correspondents. The personal relationships developed through such correspondence is likely to further strengthen the resolve and activism of this group.

We are also working with the Fair Punishment Project to disseminate information about over two dozen executions Ohio has in its pipeline, after a three-year period without executions in the state. In this collaboration, in the weeks prior to a scheduled execution the Fair Punishment Project provides MADP with a summary of each case. We then take that summary and turn it into tweets and Facebook posts. Over and over again, we have found that public scrutiny as an execution approaches plays a vital role in averting the execution. Even when the execution proceeds, the increased public knowledge of the biases, deficiencies and injustices involved in so many of these cases helps to strengthen general opposition to the death penalty.

We have also begun to use Facebook Live. During the Arkansas campaign, Sister Helen held her first Facebook Live session, which proved to be very successful. We intend to make these more frequent.

Just as important as our campaigns are our day-to-day efforts to expand and educate Sister Helen's social media community. The size and commitment of the community has a direct impact on each targeted campaign, while each campaign promotes the growth of the community.

We have plans to increase our presence on Instagram and we are considering adding Snapchat to our social media toolset. Both these apps attract significantly younger audiences that we are eager to reach. Instagram lets users share captioned images. Snapchat allows people to share images, graphics and 10-second videos that disappear once viewed. Because of their image-based nature, both platforms offer challenges for us. One possible use for Instagram, apart from publishing execution alerts as we do now, is to publicize the forthcoming documentary "Sister" by sharing stills from the film.

HOW OTHERS CAN USE WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

Not every organization has a Sister Helen, so how does MADP's social media experience apply to others?

Some of the key things we've learned that will work in any organization:

- To change hearts and minds, you must tell stories. Connect personally. Wrap your rational arguments and incontrovertible facts inside human stories.
- Be committed. If you're not prepared to tweet and/or post regularly, then social media isn't for you. You are building a community of people to support your cause, and if you neglect that community, not only will you not be successful, but you will also be conveying the message that all you care about is "likes" and nothing more.
- Be strategic. Avoid scattergun posts that dilute your message or overwhelm your followers. Focus on specific events or campaigns that underscore core issues and invite a sympathetic response (for example, innocence, botched executions, prosecutorial misconduct), or that educate your community.
- Get your whole organization on board. Social media should be woven through your entire organizational strategy.
- Clarify your goals for each social media platform and tailor your content to match.
- Provide value. Your social media communications should be useful, trustworthy and engaging.
- Engage in conversations. Don't simply tweet or post and then go silent. Reply to people, highlight/retweet helpful contributions, respond to differing viewpoints respectfully.
- Always tell the truth and be prepared to back up what you say.
- Listen before responding.
- Take the high ground, but don't back down.
- Use opponents' tweets, particularly those of public officials, against them. Tackle opposing misinformation head on with well-researched answers. (Note: This doesn't apply when dealing

with victims' family members who are pro-death penalty. In that case, what you should be doing is listening.)

- Be strategic when developing hashtags. They're a powerful tool when used well. The best hashtags are specific, pithy and intriguing.
- Work with allies – NGOs, lawyers, politicians, and so on – to reinforce one another's message and share information. If you can find a "voice" like Sister Helen, cultivate that relationship and amplify one another's posts.

APPENDIXES

APPENDIX A: A CAMPAIGN EXAMPLE: COORDINATED TWEETING IN RESPONSE TO A GOVERNOR

During the campaign to save Richard Glossip, Oklahoma Governor Mary Fallin's communications director, Alex Weintz, issued a series of tweets about why Richard deserved to die. We took those tweets, analyzed and researched them, and created long-form answers that we could use in Facebook posts and our newsletter. We then distilled those responses down to 140-character tweets. We teamed up with Susan Sarandon, who was an integral part of our campaign, to tweet and retweet those responses between us. Thus, we combined Susan's sizeable Twitter following with Helen's.

These are the tweets...

Alex Weintz: I am going to tweet out some thoughts about the Richard Glossip death penalty case since we are getting asked about it a lot

Helen's response: @SusanSarandon and I will respond to your thoughts on #RichardGlossip to correct some errors & add missing info.

Alex Weintz: 1. The gov does not have the ability to grant clemency to Glossip. The limit of her legal ability to intervene is to grant a 60 day stay

Susan's response: We aren't asking for clemency. We want a stay/reprieve while attorneys gather new evidence of Richard's innocence.

Alex Weintz: 2. The gov can only grant clemency 2 inmates who have been recommended clemency by the Pardon and Parole board

Helen's response: The Gov has ignored P&P Board votes supporting clemency. She can't ignore votes against clemency? System is stacked.

Alex Weintz: 3. Glossip's request was unanimously denied by the 5 person P and P board

Susan's response: P&P Board is made up of former police officers & prosecutors. OK lawyers call it "stacked" and "prosecution heavy."

Alex Weintz: 4. But doesn't the gov control the P and P board? No, the board is an independent entity on which the gov has 3 appointees

Helen's response: The current P&P Board with Gov. Fallin's appointees has swung against pardons and clemency. A notable decline.

Alex Weintz: 5. To say Glossip has had his day in court is an understatement. He has been pursuing the same arguments publicly and in court for 20 years

Susan's response: No jurors ever saw Justin Sneed's videotaped confession. Courts ruled this extreme error on part of Glossip's attys.

Alex Weintz: 6. He was convicted of murder in court twice and sentenced to death twice by two juries (24 total jurors unanimous in their verdict)

Helen's response: Over 150 people have been exonerated from death row. All were convicted by juries. Yet all were completely innocent.

Alex Weintz: 7. He then lost appeals in the Western District Court, 10th Circuit Court, and the US Supreme Court. And then turned down by P and P board

Susan's response: The same 150+ death row exonerees also had sentences upheld by many courts. They were innocent. Courts make mistakes

Alex Weintz: 8. For the gov to grant Glossip clemency would be to unilaterally overturn the judgments of dozens of jurors and multiple courts

Helen's response: The jury system doesn't guarantee a correct verdict - especially with ineffective lawyers involved. Errors are made.

Alex Weintz: 9. If Glossip's attys did have any legitimately exculpatory evidence they could present that 2state or federal court and stop the execution

Susan's response: Glossip's attorneys are working pro bono to follow up many leads. A reprieve would provide time to gather evidence.

Alex Weintz: 10. bottom line: Glossip's execution is going forward because he is a) guilty and b) has exhausted his legal options

Helen's response: Glossip's execution need not go ahead if Gov. Fallin grants him a stay. She risks executing an innocent man.

Alex Weintz: final thought: there are multiple victims here, none of them Glossip. A man beaten to death, wife without a husband, five kids with no dad

Susan's response: What about an innocent man who's spent 17 years on death row awaiting execution for a crime he didn't commit?

Helen: Any person with ANY lead about the murder of Barry Van Treese that could help #RichardGlossip's case, PLEASE contact don@dnightlaw.com.

Susan: @AlexWeintz The Gov. should grant a reprieve so Glossip can present evidence of innocence. Executing an innocent man can never be reversed.

APPENDIX B: COMPARISON OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

Facebook v. Twitter		
	Facebook	Twitter
Useful for...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Building community Developing relationships Engaging in on-going conversations Prompting a variety of actions including phone calls, email campaigns, letter writing, gatherings Sharing information that requires some nuance Sharing images and video 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hot-button issues Breaking news Running commentary Real-time responses Direct action Direct engagement with officials Becoming the authoritative, quoted voice on a topic Working collaboratively with activist organizations and individuals Controlling the conversation Getting the notice of the media Rapidly expanding the audience for a specific event
Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Older Casual Shared interest Social connections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Younger Activist Shared interest
Effective posting frequency	One post every day or two	1-4 tweets an hour
Active “lifetime” of a post or tweet	1-3 days	1-3 hours (98% of engagement with a tweet happens within the first hour)

APPENDIX C: A BRIEF SOCIAL MEDIA GLOSSARY

Engagement: Social media engagement encompasses several different types of actions on social media, from commenting on Facebook posts to participating in Twitter chats. At its simplest, social media engagement is any interaction you have with other users.

Engagement rate: Engagement rate is the percentage of people who saw your social media post and actively engaged with it (clicked the link, expanded the image attached, replied, liked, favorited, shared, retweeted, etc).

Facebook Fans: The people who like your Facebook Page.

Facebook Reach: The number of unique people who have seen content from your Facebook Page. Facebook provides two different reach metrics: total reach and post reach. Total reach is the number of unique people who have seen any content associated with your Facebook Page during the last seven days. This includes people who view your Page posts, people who visit your Page after searching for it, and people who see ads that are associated with your Page.

Post reach is the number of unique people who have seen a particular Facebook post in their News Feed.

Follower: A Twitter user who has subscribed to your Twitter account so they can receive your Tweets in their Home feed.


Hashtag: A word or phrase preceded by the “#” sign. #hashtags are a simple way to mark the topic of social media messages and make them discoverable to people with shared interests. On most social networks, clicking a hashtag will reveal all the public and recently published messages that also contain that hashtag.

Impressions: The total number of times your content is viewed (including multiple views from the same user).

Reach: The potential size of audience any given message could reach. It does not mean that that entire audience will see your social media post, but rather tells you the maximum number of people your post could potentially reach.

Retweet: A Tweet that is re-shared to the followers of another user’s Twitter account.

Arkansas executions bring Sister Helen Prejean's death penalty fight to the fore

 [www.theguardian.com /us-news/2017/apr/21/arkansas-executions-sister-helen-prejean-death-penalty-advocacy](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/apr/21/arkansas-executions-sister-helen-prejean-death-penalty-advocacy)

Ed Pilkington in New York

'I do what I do out of compassion for the American public who do not reflect deeply on the death penalty,' Sister Helen Prejean says.

Prejean's work opposing capital punishment was captured in her book and film *Dead Man Walking*, and now she's speaking out against a spate of planned killings

Sister Helen Prejean, the Louisiana nun who through the movie of her book, *Dead Man Walking*, became the face of the American anti-death penalty movement, has a message for Asa Hutchinson, the Republican governor of Arkansas who this

month attempted to carry out an unprecedented killing spree of eight executions in 11 days.

"Governor, be a statesman and a real moral leader of the people," she said. "Do what is morally right. As a state official, you should not be involved in the deliberate killing of human beings."

On Thursday night, Hutchinson had his way: Ledell Lee, 51, a convicted murderer, was executed through lethal injection just four minutes before midnight, when his death warrant ran out.

By the twisted logic of US capital punishment, the killing went "smoothly", lasting 12 minutes and with no visible signs of Lee's distress. But it came with a heavy price.

Opprobrium has rained down on Hutchinson and his state from across the country and around the world. An inordinate amount of court time has been expended on a flurry of last-minute lawsuits that have temporarily spared the lives of four of the eight condemned men. Three more face the gurney next week.

At least the one positive element to emerge from a grim business has been to bring Prejean's advocacy back to the fore. Her Twitter feed has been on fire all week, with excoriating criticism of



both Hutchinson and Arkansas' attorney general, Leslie Rutledge.

"Why do we kill people to show that killing people is wrong?" she asked them both in one memorable message.

As a nun who built her ministry in New Orleans, Prejean has had a singularly intimate relationship with the death penalty. Living and working in the deep south, she has no doubt that America's cult of killing is a fundamentally southern phenomenon with its roots in slavery.

"The real practitioners of death have always been the 10 southern states that practiced slavery, Arkansas among them," she said.

Prejean thinks the key to understanding and opposing US capital punishment is to understand the microculture from which it comes as well as its essential geographic unfairness. Studies have shown that just 2% of counties across America are responsible for generating most executions.

At a recent performance of the opera version of *Dead Man Walking* in Washington, Prejean got talking about that inequality with Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the progressive-leaning member of the US supreme court. The two have a lot in common: they are both older women (Prejean is 77, Ginsburg 84) with formidable appeal among young Americans. The nun is a force on social media, with 30,000 Twitter followers; the justice is branded on T-shirts as "Notorious RBG".

They also share a loathing for capital punishment. As they talked, Ginsburg revealed to Prejean her vision of how one day the practice might be abolished by her own court, on constitutional grounds.

"She said to me the more we see the lack of use of the death penalty in most states, the clearer it becomes that it's just happening in concentrated pockets in isolated areas of the US," Prejean said. "That's going to be the manner that allows us to look at the constitutionality issue."

The other aspect that makes Prejean, a Catholic nun, an exceptional commentator on the death penalty in America is religion, and the invocation of the Bible to justify the cold, premeditated taking of life such as that of Ledell Lee on Thursday night.

"You look at the patterns," she said. "The Bible belt and the death belt are the same belt."

She went on: "It's blatant. Religion is used to shore the death penalty up, so that officials can quote divine authority for what they are doing. That way religion becomes an eye for an eye and killing in God's name. And boy! When you claim that, you become impervious.

"Compassion is completely lost as we are doing this for God."

'It's a secret ritual'

Prejean's work on capital punishment, as captured in her book and by Susan Sarandon playing her in the film, famously evolved from her role as spiritual adviser to a death row inmate, Elmo Patrick Sonnier, in Louisiana. In 1984, with the nun as his witness, he was put in the electric chair.

Prejean recalls stumbling out of the death chamber after it was over. “I came out into the darkness, it was one o’clock in the morning, I threw up, and that’s when I realized that people are never going to get close to this – it’s a secret ritual. But I had been a witness, so let me get out there and take the people close.”



Since then she has proven herself a master storyteller. Book, film, play, opera. And now social media. In addition to her powerful messaging on Twitter, this week she did her first session on Facebook Live.

Prejean has learnt to embrace both the horror of the execution process and the suffering of the families of victims of shocking and brutal murders. She points to New Jersey, where the relatives of 62 murder victims testified before the state legislature that they wanted the death penalty abolished, arguing that far from giving them closure, it locked them into decades of legal agony.

“Politicians use this the most to legitimize what they are doing,” she said. ““We are doing this for the victims’ families,’ they say. You hear that all the time in Arkansas. But that’s specious, it’s bogus; the death penalty harms families.”

She sees her role as partly that of teacher to a nation woefully uneducated about its own justice system.

“I do what I do out of compassion for the American public who do not reflect deeply on the death penalty,” she said. “I have found in these 30 years getting out there that people are not wedded to the death penalty at all, they have just never thought about it.”

The Louisiana nun will keep firing up her white-hot censure of Arkansas next week, when two more inmates are set to die on Monday and a third on Thursday. After that she will continue to act as spiritual adviser to Richard Glossip, a death row inmate in Oklahoma who has been served three last meals and now awaits a fourth.

How does she cope with the trauma of so much looming death? It’s simple, she said.

“What do you do with your grief, what do you do when you find out that things are so wrong and people are being executed who are poor and have no redress?

“You take that outrage, you take that sorrow and sadness, and you work for justice, so that other human beings don’t have to experience the same thing.”

Social media and the case for Marcellus Williams

How social media came together to campaign against the execution of Marcellus Williams.

(Source: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/08/social-media-case-marcellus-williams-170823115423456.html>)

Anti-death penalty campaigners in the [United States](#) on Tuesday hailed Missouri Governor Eric Greitens' decision to stay the execution of Marcellus Williams, a man convicted in 2001 of the murder of Lisha Gayle.

Despite new DNA evidence that Williams' lawyers argue supports his claim to innocence, Missouri courts decided to continue with the execution.

But in his statement, Greitens said he would appoint a Board of Inquiry to examine the new evidence and recommend whether he should commute Williams' sentence.

"To carry out the death penalty, the people of Missouri must have confidence in the judgment of guilt," Greitens said, just four hours before Williams was scheduled to be put to death.

Before the governor's statement, more than 200,000 people had signed a petition asking for the governor's intervention.

At the same time, an energetic social media campaign helped bring the case to the attention of the wider public - and for some, this played a key part in Greitens' decision.

"The attention this got was really important," Ken Gipson, Williams' lawyer, told Al Jazeera. "The decision showed that when people speak, politicians want to listen."

Staci Pratt, executive director of human rights organisation Missourians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty, agreed.

"The voices of the people definitely mattered. Over 200,000 people have signed the petition, calls have been ringing, and his [Greitens'] voicemail box was often full."

One of the most influential figures in the campaign was Sister Helen Prejean, who has been advocating for the abolishment of the death penalty for decades.

Prejean rose to fame after she wrote *Dead Man Walking*, a book-turned-Academy Award-winning film that describes her experiences while fighting against the death penalty.

Prejean took to Twitter last week after Missouri courts refused to look at the new DNA evidence that might prove Williams' innocence.



[Sister Helen Prejean](#)

[✓@helenprejean](#)

DNA says Marcellus Williams didn't kill Felicia Gayle, but the Missouri Supreme Court wants to let his execution go ahead anyway. Thread:

[3:15 PM - Aug 16, 2017](#)

After Prejean's tweet, the story gained traction, leading to further media attention.

On Tuesday night, Prejean took again to Twitter to thank everyone who used social media to bring Williams' story to the attention of many people.

Acknowledging the power of Twitter in such cases, she said: "It took me a while to embrace social media, but it's been a very positive force in our work to stop executions and end capital punishment."

[22 Aug](#)



[Sister Helen Prejean](#)

[✓@helenprejean](#)

I am grateful for all of you, my friends here on Twitter. My ministry against the death penalty began way before social media existed.



[Sister Helen Prejean](#)

[✓@helenprejean](#)

It took me a while to embrace social media, but it's been a very positive force in our work to stop executions and end capital punishment.

[9:59 PM - Aug 22, 2017](#)

Others also argued that it was mostly the massive campaign on social media that led to Greitens' decision.

Andrew Stroehlein, media director for Human Rights Watch Europe, also acknowledged the role of social media in Greitens' decision to name a Board of Inquiry, saying it was Twitter that helped save Williams' life:

[22 Aug](#)



[Andrew Stroehlein](#)

[✓@astroehlein](#)

[Replying to @astroehlein](#)

Thank you to everyone who phoned the governor! [#MarcellusWilliams](#) [https://twitter.com/AP/status/900066587516039168 ...](https://twitter.com/AP/status/900066587516039168)



[Andrew Stroehlein](#)

[✓@astroehlein](#)

For those who missed it: Apparently Twitter helped save a life last night...

[2:29 AM - Aug 23, 2017](#)



[Tariq Nasheed](#)

[✓@tariqnasheed](#)

Social media literally saved the life of [#marcelluswilliams](#)They were planning on executing an innocent man

[2:40 PM - Aug 22, 2017](#) · [Pico Rivera, CA](#)

After the postponement, civil rights activist Shaun King, who tweeted several times about Williams in the lead-up to the planned execution, advocated for the abolishment of the death penalty, saying it is mostly poor people who cannot afford expensive lawyers who end up on death row.



[Shaun King](#)

[✓@ShaunKing](#)

Do this.

[1:20 PM - Aug 22, 2017](#)

[Twitter Ads info and privacy](#)



[Shaun King](#)

✓ [@ShaunKing](#)

Abolish the death penalty.

At least call it what it truly is: A penalty for poor people who can't afford designer legal defense teams.

[1:35 PM - Aug 22, 2017](#)

Others thanked Greitens for deciding to appoint a Board of Inquiry to look at the case, with many saying the governor had "made the right decision", as Orange is the New Black actress Danielle Brooks put it.



[Leonard Pitts, Jr.](#)

✓ [@LeonardPittsJr1](#)

Really, really good news. Nice to see a politician with a spine. [https://twitter.com/AP/status/900066587516039168 ...](https://twitter.com/AP/status/900066587516039168)

[4:07 PM - Aug 22, 2017](#)



[Danielle Brooks](#)

✓ [@thedanieb](#)

Yes!! [@EricGreitens](#) you did the right thing today!!! [#MarcellusWilliams](#) [http://www.kansascity.com/news/politics-government/article168664307.html ...](http://www.kansascity.com/news/politics-government/article168664307.html)

[2:20 PM - Aug 22, 2017](#)

In a statement, Missouri State Senator Jamilah Nasheed said she was "extremely grateful that Governor Greitens stayed the execution" but that the state of Missouri "owes it to both Williams and murder victim Lisha Gayle to find the answers that have eluded them for so many years".

My statement on today's stay of [#MarcellusWilliams pic.twitter.com/I4jAvn86sF](https://twitter.com/I4jAvn86sF)

Statement from Sen. Jamilah Nasheed on stay of execution for Marcellus Williams

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. – The following is a statement from **Senator Jamilah Nasheed** regarding Gov. Eric Greitens' stay of execution for Marcellus Williams:

"I am extremely grateful that Gov. Greitens has stayed the execution of Marcellus Williams in light of the additional questions raised by new DNA evidence," said **Senator Jamilah Nasheed**. "The State of Missouri owes it to the families of Lisha Gayle and Marcellus Williams to finally find the answers that have eluded them for so many years, and I appreciate the governor appointing a Board of Inquiry to further investigate this tragic loss of life."

###

A Board of Inquiry consisting of five former Missouri judges will now look at Williams' case again, including the new DNA evidence.



MINISTRY
AGAINST THE
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