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A drive to halt executions

Falsely convicted Darryl Hunt speaks in Charlotte as part of moratorium campaign

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Darryl Hunt, who spent 18 years behind bars for a crime he didn't commit, is telling his story in support of a statewide movement that calls for a two-year halt on executions and a study of a judicial system critics say is flawed.

Hunt brought his message to Charlotte Saturday morning and urged members of the community to contact legislators and ask them to support the moratorium, which lawmakers could take up after they convene May 10.

The N.C. House will decide whether to consider the two-year moratorium. The Senate has already approved the move. Backers of the moratorium couldn't find enough support in the House to merit a vote last year.

"I'm just one of thousands of people that have been unjustly incarcerated," Hunt told a group of about 20 people who gathered at First United Methodist Church uptown.

Hunt and other speakers at the event, co-sponsored by the Charlotte Coalition for a Moratorium Now, used his case and the case of Alan Gell as examples of the system's flaws.

Gell was set free in February after being acquitted of a murder for which he spent years on death row. More than a year ago, a judge ordered a retrial, saying prosecutors had withheld important evidence.

Hunt, now 39, was released from prison last winter after being sentenced to life for the 1984 murder of a Winston-Salem woman. Another man confessed after DNA evidence linked him to the crime. Hunt was pardoned by Gov. Mike Easley last month.

Hunt told the audience about his experiences while in prison and his fear of being hurt or killed while serving his time. Hunt, who is Muslim, said he relied on his faith in God and the knowledge of his innocence to get him through each day. He said he thinks everyday people often assume the system is perfect although he knows of misconduct by prosecutors and judges.

North Carolina's Senate last year called for a two-year moratorium on executions and a study of the justice system including whether defendants get competent lawyers. The study also could examine whether defendants should get full access to prosecutors' investigative files.

Supporters of the moratorium point to withholding of evidence, potential racial and socioeconomic bias, and a desire to get a conviction at all costs as some of the system's flaws.

Prosecutors and death penalty supporters often note the multiple levels of judicial review allowed by state and federal courts. Some also argue that the final outcome of cases like Gell's and Hunt's indicates that the system is working.

Joe Cheshire, a Raleigh-based attorney who represented Gell, also spoke in support of the moratorium Saturday. He said law enforcement officers and lawyers need better training and more resources so they can gather better evidence that will result in fairer trials.

Hunt, who said he doesn't harbor bitterness or anger after his dealings with the system, said he is committed to drawing attention to the system's flaws. He has traveled to several N.C. cities telling his story and trying to educate people about the moratorium.

"It's wrong to execute people when we know we have a justice system that needs to be fixed," Hunt said after the speech.

Gwendolyn Medley moved to Charlotte three years ago from Winston-Salem and brought her four grandchildren to hear Hunt speak. She said she will share the information she learned at the forum with groups such as the Red Cross and Salvation Army where she volunteers. Medley said she supports the moratorium because she thinks having a fair judicial system is essential.

"We're living in a society where the system prevails," Medley said.

State Rep. Pete Cunningham, D-Mecklenburg, supports the moratorium, but acknowledges that it could be difficult to get support for it in the House.

"We've been wrestling with this problem for years," Cunningham said. "It's an unfair situation. Once you take a life, you can't give it back."

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