

Nation's oldest death row survivor visits S.A.

By Gilbert Garcia

October 13, 2013

We all tend to whine from time to time about our daily disappointments, but it's impossible to spend a few minutes in the presence of the Rev. Moreese Bickham without banishing self-pity from your brain.

Bickham, 96, is a soft-spoken African American man from rural Louisiana. He spent more than 37 years in the Louisiana State Penitentiary on a questionable rap, 14 of them in a six-by-eight-foot cell only a few yards away from the electric chair that awaited him.

When he was finally released in 1996, at the age of 78, this is what Bickham had to say about his eternity behind bars: "It was a glorious experience."

That's the same message Bickham carried into San Antonio last week when he came to town at the invitation of Joan Cheever, a local attorney, writer, and advocate for criminal-justice reform, who devoted a chapter of her 2006 book, "Back from the Dead," to Bickham's tortured odyssey.

Cheever had spent nine years representing a Texas Death Row inmate named Walter Williams and the experience motivated her to write the book, which tells the stories of several members of "the class of '72," the 589 death row inmates spared execution during the four-year window (1972-76) when the death penalty was banned in the United States. The central question at the heart of her book is this one: "Could convicted killers be rehabilitated?"

Bickham, the oldest living survivor of death row, visited the Crosspoint transitional facility on the East Side Thursday morning, where he spoke to former prisoners and witnessed the dedication of the Bickham-Cheever Restoration Garden, whose crops will be donated to East Side food pantries.

Later in the day, he addressed UTSA students in a Public Policy class taught by Dr. Kevin Downey, CEO of Crosspoint.

Dressed in a smart black suit, with a stars-and-stripes tie, Bickham stood in front of the class with the support of a walker and, in his thick, bayou accent, described his life as one enriched — even saved — by his prison experience, not destroyed by it.

"You all are looking at a fellow that God blessed," said Bickham, who described his pre-incarceration lifestyle as wild and fast. "When I look around, I've got more friends now than I did when I was 16."

On the night of July 12, 1958, Bickham and his girlfriend, Florence Spencer, were hanging out at Buck's Bar in his hometown of Mandeville, La. The couple got into a fight, and Spencer hit him over the head with a bottle. Two police deputies drove her home, but not before one of the deputies threatened to kill Bickham, in an account later told by Bickham and supported by Spencer.

Bickham walked to his uncle's house to get a gun, and shortly after he arrived at his home, the

deputies drove up in an unmarked car whose trunk reportedly contained Ku Klux Klan robes. He says he put his hands up, but they shot him in the chest. According to Bickham, they were preparing to fire at him again when he loaded the shells into his gun and fatally shot both of them.

The all-white jury found him guilty of murder and sentenced him to death.

After the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed the death penalty in 1972, Bickham joined the penitentiary population and established himself as a model prisoner: diligently tending the garden, earning his GED, getting certified as an auto mechanic, and becoming an ordained minister.

He also survived three heart attacks and slept with a J.C. Penney catalog strapped to his chest for protection.

He currently lives alone in Oakland, Calif., and regularly keeps in touch with Cheever, who says she has “never heard any bitterness or any negativity” from him.

At one point during Thursday's UTSA class, Downey asked Bickham what his biggest re-entry challenge had been in 1996.

He recalled being puzzled when someone handed him a tiny cordless phone so he could call his daughter, Vivian, in California. And he was startled during his first trip to a convenience store when the cashier informed him that a bottle of root beer no longer sold for a nickel.

But he didn't complain too much. That's just not his nature.

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