

Visit from the US

Thanks to the commitment of the human rights activist, Sophia Berger, on October 17th, 2018 a speech related to the nonprofit organization Advancing Real Change, Inc. was given at the Heiliggeist church in Bern/Switzerland. The nameable speaker – Prof. Elizabeth Vartkessian – founder of the organization in question, focussed on various topics and aspects of her work among which the prevention of unjust death sentences in the legal system of the US.

„*Even in the darkest places people have hope*“ this quote of Prof. Vartkessian also reflects the motivation to do her challenging job.

Based upon the experience, during the investigation of crimes, often times the personal life stories of defendants are not taken into account. Prof. Vartkessian is aiming to change the aforesaid circumstance. As a mitigation specialist she is searching for facts connected with the life story of individuals accused of capital crimes. Independently from the charge, she analyzes the information at hand associating it with the case. More precisely for the duration of 1-2 years 100-200 persons - namely the defendant, family members (going back 3 generations) friends and neighbors, are interviewed and subsequently records consisting of thousands of pages are established. The meticulously collected data allow the court to reach a fair verdict. Overall, in respect of the US jurisdiction, it is an important asset for more humanity.

Death penalty in the US – facts and figures

« *If one of our fellow citizens can be executed with so much doubt surrounding his guilt, then the death penalty system in our country is unjust and outdated* » former US president Jimmy Carter on the occasion of the execution of Troy Davis - September 21st, 2011.

30 out of 50 states are still using the death penalty. Upon its reinstatement 1976 over 1500 men and women were executed. The death penalty is arbitrary – capital punishment is more frequently imposed on the poor, blacks and hispanics. At the same time juvenile offenders, mentally retarded and mentally ill were executed.

Prior to their execution death row inmates are spending numerous years in solitary confinement. As a consequence, due to the pressure, death row prisoners frequently renounce to their right to appeal so as to speed up their execution. Executions are carried out by lethal injection. The (sad) execution record is held by Texas (37%).

Even though this harsh punishment has no impact on the number of crimes, the US continue to impose and apply the death penalty. The error ratio is comparatively high: as reportedly stated up till now 198 cases of wrongfully convicted were to be acquitted.

Lifespark

In the subjected context the human rights organization Lifespark, founded 25 years ago, introduces itself. The name – *Lifespark* – is self-explanatory and stands for committed humanitarian work related to death row prisoners. The organization consists of a multicultural mix of people of all ages and different religions. They all pursue the same goal: to open up a window to the world corresponding with a number of incarcerated persons and hence to give them back their human dignity.
www.lifespark.com.