



Scharlette Holdman

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December 11, 1946–July 12, 2017

Scharlette Holdman, anthropologist and pioneering opponent of the death penalty, died on July 12, 2017. She was born on December 11, 1946, in Memphis, Tennessee. During the 1960s she became an activist registering black voters in the South, but her opposition to the death penalty became the focus of her activism and life's work.

Holdman was drawn to anthropology, earning her BA at Memphis State University, MA at University of Oregon, and a PhD from the University of Hawaii. Her work grew out of the 1976 Supreme Court *Gregg v. Georgia* decision that reestablished the death penalty in the United States. The Supreme Court's direction that courts must consider "compassionate or mitigating factors stemming from the diverse frailties of humankind," became a signpost for four decades of her tireless work.

Holdman coined the term "death penalty mitigation specialist" to describe her work. Her career revolutionized the field of death penalty defense and the practices she developed became the basis of the American Bar Association's new guidelines for death penalty defense cases.

Among her list of clients were some of the most notorious killers of the last 50 years: Unabomber Ted Kaczynski, Olympic Park bomber Eric Rudolph, Boston Marathon bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, and al-Qaeda mastermind Khalid Shaikh Mohammed. Yet, her work and commitment to justice are perhaps best measured in the thousands of hours she devoted to less infamous inmates facing death sentences.

Holdman, was a colorful character: a chain smoker with little patience for nonsense, a fondness for plain speaking, and a dogged commitment to fighting the state's effort to kill. She spent years running the Florida Clearinghouse on Criminal Justice and devoted long hours on a shoestring budget to fighting the implementation of state executions—sometimes achieving a reduction to life

sentences or stays of execution. She later worked for the California Appellate Project and at the Center for Capital Assistance in New Orleans. Her anthropological training informed her interdisciplinary approach to coordinating death penalty interventions.

Her death penalty mitigation work was intensely and ethnographically biographical. Her in-depth interviews and long hours spent with people on death row brought a rich ethnographic dimension to her efforts to capture mitigating elements influencing the lives of those facing possible death sentences. As the *New York Times* noted in their obituary for Holdman (July 22, 2017), "she immersed herself in the biographies of each defendant, examining family histories that went back several generations and unearthing painful memories of trauma and abuse as she helped their lawyers argue for life sentences."

While Scharlette Holdman's name might be unknown to many anthropologists, her relentless devotion to trying to save the lives of some of the most reviled individuals in our society was a testament to the anthropologically informed value in which she held all human life. It was her anthropological background that informed her ability to ethnographically untangle the social forces contributing to some of humanity's darkest acts. (*David H. Price*)

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