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Rensselaer High debaters consider death penalty

By Danielle Sanzone, The Troy Record

ALBANY — As part of WAMC's ongoing Student Town Meetings, several Rensselaer High School seniors participated in a debate Wednesday regarding whether the U.S. should abolish the death penalty in favor of sentences of life in prison without parole.

The debate was heated as the students and guest speakers discussed their opinions and statistics about each side of the death penalty and its relation to U.S. citizens and the international community.

When discussing why people even commit heinous crimes like murder, guest speaker state Conservative Party Executive Director Shaun Marie Levine said it was due to a total disrespect for all life.

"What many issues come down to — abortion, the death penalty, euthanasia — is the fact that some people have no respect for life," she said.

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Camille Johnson, 17, countered, "But, in regards to the death penalty, that is making one life more important than another. You are punishing murder with more murder."

Levine responded, "But we are making society safer and protecting other innocent lives."

According to a nationwide census, about 69 percent of Americans favor the death penalty but that number drops to about 50 percent when the survey participants are given the option of life imprisonment without parole instead of the death penalty. Studies have also shown that it costs more money to have someone on death row indefinitely than to have someone spend life in jail.

Valerie Chorwat, 17, said, "I truly believe that the person should just rot in jail for what they did. If they receive the death penalty, it will be a much easier punishment than spending the rest of their lives thinking about what they have done."

Zach Brady, 17, added, "The problem is, however, that prisoners have too many freedoms in jail. They can walk around and even get into fights while they are incarcerated. I think it would be a better punishment if they were only able to sit in their cell so they could really think about the crime they committed."

Guest speaker, Executive Director of New Yorkers Against the Death Penalty David Kaczynski, whose brother, Ted, is better known as the Unabomber, mentioned the plight of Jeffrey Deskovic, who was wrongly convicted of murder and sexual assault at the age of 16. After about 16 years in jail, he was released following a long appeals process and new evidence proving he was innocent.

“I think something that everyone here can agree with is that no one wants to see an innocent person executed,” Kaczynski continued. “Unfortunately, our justice system cannot guarantee 100 percent accuracy with convictions. In recent years, 12 murder convictions have been overturned in New York alone.”

This is the fifth program in which Rensselaer High School students have taken part in WAMC’s Youth Media Project, officials said. It was moderated by WAMC producer David Guistina.

“I thought this would be a positive thing for the kids,” said High School Government Teacher Kelly Connor. “I wanted to get them involved, instead of just sitting in the classroom.”

The discussion was taped to broadcast on WAMC’s afternoon program The Speaker’s Corner in March.

Tim Ryan, 18, said, “An eye for an eye. Depending on the situation, these criminals can really destroy families and ruin peoples’ lives.”

Other issues brought up included the state spending \$200 million on the death penalty in the past ten years even though no one has been executed, the need to enhance criminal databases to increase chances of catching the actual culprit in criminal cases, and how the rest of the world sees the U.S. since many countries do not utilize the death penalty.

The ten high school participants chose the topic last month as part of their Participation in Government class. The local youths spent four weeks researching the topic and deciding their point of view on the issue.