



**Most Reverend Robert W. Finn**  
**Bishop**  
**Diocese of Kansas City ~ St. Joseph**

**Letter of Support Requesting Clemency for Dennis Skillicorn**

August 12, 2008

Honorable Matt Blunt  
Governor  
Missouri State Capitol  
Rm. 216  
Jefferson City, MO 65101

Dear Governor Blunt:

On August 27, 2008, the state of Missouri is scheduled to carry out the execution of Dennis Skillicorn for the murder of Richard Drummond in 1994.

We, the undersigned civic and religious leaders, request that clemency be granted to Mr. Skillicorn and that his execution not be carried out by the state. We further request that the governor inform us when this letter is referred to the Board of Probation and Parole pursuant to Section 217.800, RSMo.

The death of Richard Drummond was a tragic waste of life. Our thoughts and prayers are with his family at this difficult time. Sadly, no punishment will restore him to his family. Some may argue that society needs the death penalty to protect life. We strongly believe, however, that society can adequately protect human life without the taking of another human life.

Mr. Skillicorn deeply regrets his participation in the events that lead to the death of Mr. Drummond and his past criminal behavior. An examination of Mr. Skillicorn's case reveals significant reasons why it is appropriate to grant him mercy:

Since his arrest in 1994, Mr. Skillicorn has dedicated his life to God and has been a special mentor for youth. He has made a special effort to help youth avoid the mistakes he has made. Mr. Skillicorn has compiled a book, "Today's Choices Affect Tomorrow's Dreams". It consists of first-hand accounts by death row inmates about the consequences of their poor decisions. The book is distributed for free to juvenile centers around the country. Because of the book's popularity, he has been asked to compile a second book, which he is doing. This book is aimed at teaching young offenders skills to avoid returning to a criminal lifestyle and to lead a productive life after release. Mr. Skillicorn speaks to college student groups on a regular basis to give them insights into the death penalty and prison life.

Mr. Skillicorn has been involved in numerous restorative justice efforts in prison. Since 2003 Mr. Skillicorn has been editor of *Compassion*, a newsletter written by death row prisoners

across the country that focuses on developing healing between capital punishment offenders and murder victims' families. Proceeds from the sale of its subscriptions and donations are used to award college scholarships to family members of murdered victims. To date \$34,000 in scholarships have been awarded to family members of murder victims around the country.

Mr. Skillicorn has shown leadership in positive prison programs. He is a full-time worker for the Set Free Ministry that reaches thousand of inmates in Missouri and Illinois annually. He is a founding member of award-winning 4-H L.I.F.E. (Living Interactive Family Education), a family-strengthening program that includes a 4-H club at the Potosi Correctional Center for the whole family, along with parenting classes for incarcerated fathers, brothers, etc. He is a leader in the prison's Christian community and is a founding member of the Christian Men's Council at the Potosi Correctional Center. He served as a facilitator of Full Circle, a comprehensive life skills program that teaches accountability and changes criminal thinking to inmates who will be paroled. He is the founder of the Charity Carnival—in its second year—that raises money inside the prison for charitable organizations.

Mr. Skillicorn has strived to improve the prison environment and has been a valued presence in Potosi. Mr. Skillicorn is a positive role model for other prisoners. His behavior and demeanor in prison earned him a cell in the prison's honor dorm, where he has lived nearly his entire prison stay. He has been a volunteer and is current chairman of the prison hospice program, where he cares for terminally ill patients. He was instrumental in getting visiting room improvements for children and families. He has coordinated efforts to reinstate marriage seminars and marriage support for incarcerated men and their wives at the prison. Mr. Skillicorn has actively worked to build bridges between the Protestant, Catholic, Muslim, Islamic and Native American religious groups at the prison.

Mr. Skillicorn's many achievements in prison are in stark contrast to his troubled youth. Mr. Skillicorn's mother died from cancer when he was only nine years old. Mr. Skillicorn's father raised him from that point with some assistance from his older sisters. His father had difficulty in working through the loss and resorted to alcohol abuse. Mr. Skillicorn lacked the proper guidance and support he needed and turned to drugs and alcohol as a teen. By all accounts, Mr. Skillicorn had a submissive personality, which contributed to his criminal involvement with stronger, more aggressive co-defendants.

Mr. Skillicorn has never denied his involvement in the robbery and kidnapping of Mr. Drummond, but he did not commit the murder. No one disputes that Mr. Drummond was taken in the woods and shot by co-defendant Allen Nicklasson.

Mr. Nicklasson has consistently taken full responsibility for the murder and the decision to kill Mr. Drummond. He also has steadfastly maintained that Mr. Skillicorn thought Mr. Nicklasson intended to tie up the victim so they could escape with his car before he could walk to a phone and call police. This position is substantiated in Mr. Nicklasson's statement to law enforcement officers after his arrest, in a post-conviction deposition from an FBI agent and in letters and a statement from Mr. Nicklasson to Mr. Skillicorn and his attorneys.

Had the jury heard this testimony, they may not have held Mr. Skillicorn to the same level of accountability as Mr. Nicklasson. The death of Mr. Drummond was part of a cross-country spree resulting in the murder of a couple in Arizona. Again Mr. Nicklasson has taken full responsibility for these murders, indicating Mr. Skillicorn was not involved. In Arizona Mr. Nicklasson had threatened Mr. Skillicorn with a gun to prevent him from

leaving. Mr. Skillicorn received a life sentence for his role in the Arizona murders.

Many people in society view death row inmates only in the terms of the crimes they have committed. But none of us would want to be judged solely on the worst acts committed in our lives. Mr. Skillicorn has turned his life around, becoming a model of rehabilitation and service to others. He has tried to make amends for his past by restorative justice efforts with murder victim family members. He is a model prisoner who is a positive influence on other inmates and the prison environment. He is a valued mentor for youth trying to prevent them from making the mistakes he made. Dennis Skillicorn is not the same person who was arrested fourteen years ago. He is no longer a threat to public safety. His execution would be senseless. Society and public safety would be better served if he were allowed to continue his worthwhile ministries in prison.

Beyond the aspects of this particular case, as civic and religious leaders, we are concerned that the use of the death penalty promotes revenge as a principle of justice. The death penalty simply promotes vengeance as a means of resolving social problems. It appears that the very violence that frightens us so much is making us proponents of violence.

A stay of all executions would allow us to find more effective ways to promote justice and accountability in our society. Considering this state has the current option of life without parole, there are other methods that could be employed that would promote "real justice" for victims and our society.

Violence only begets more violence. We believe that it is in the interest of the common good of the people of our state that the cycle of violence be broken. The common good of the people of Missouri would be better served by the commutation of the death sentence.

For the above stated reasons, we request that you commute the death sentence of Dennis Skillicorn to life without parole, or in the alternative, grant a stay of execution and appoint a board of inquiry to investigate the claims raised in this correspondence.

Respectfully submitted,

Reverend Mr. Lawrence A. Weber  
Executive Director and General Counsel  
Missouri Catholic Conference

**On behalf of**

Most Reverend John Gaydos  
Bishop of the Diocese of Jefferson City

Most Reverend Robert Finn  
Bishop of the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph

Most Reverend James V. Johnston  
Bishop of the Diocese of Springfield-Cape Girardeau

Most Reverend Robert Hermann  
Archdiocesan Administrator of the Archdiocese of St. Louis

Bishop Gerald Mansholt  
Bishop Central States Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Rt. Rev. George Wayne Smith  
Episcopal Diocese of Missouri

Reverend Carolyn Schrock  
Church of the Brethren, Missouri and Arkansas

Jim Hill  
Executive Director, Baptist General Convention of Missouri

Dominican Sisters  
Sparkhill, New York

St. Louis Religious Society of Friends (Quaker)

Institute for Peace and Justice

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