

News

DEREK MARTIN H9515616A

Artist reveals human face of US death row



by **DAVID WHITE**

david.white@sussexnewspapers.co.uk

AN ARTIST from Partridge Green is bringing audiences face-to-face with the death penalty and different human perspectives of death row in a new thought-provoking exhibition.

Claire Phillips, 45, of High Street, has opened The Human Face of Death Row exhibition at Worthing Museum and Art Gallery.

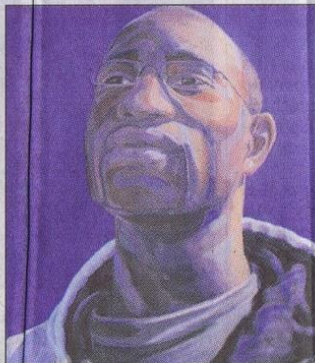
In 2007 Claire received a grant of £5,000 from the Arts Council and spent 11 days travelling across America visiting maximum security prisons.

She met and interviewed 13 people including death row inmates, exonerated inmates, families of victims and inmates, an executioner, legislator and a jury foreman.

She said: "The exhibition is about different people who have faced death row from different angles, different perspectives, so some of them have been on death row and then been found innocent, some have been on death row and are still there.

"Another one is an executioner who has had the job of executing someone who he believed was innocent.

"One is the foreperson of a jury who passed the death penalty on somebody and then later found out



Two of Claire Phillips' portraits.

evidence that wasn't presented at all and then fought for his release and finally got him out.

"I met the mother of a child who was kidnapped and murdered who felt that she didn't want the death penalty for the murderer. She didn't want the last thing done in her daughter's name to be the death penalty so she now campaigns against it."

Claire says her inspiration for the project came in three or four years ago when she met a young man called Ryan Matthews through charity Reprieve. It uses the law to enforce the human rights of prisoners.

In 2004, seven years after Ryan's arrest for murder and after five years on death row, all charges were dropped.

Reprieve brought Ryan and his mother Pauline to England to talk

about their experiences.

"His mother really touched me in how helpless they felt, how desperate they were. They had no money, no education, couldn't afford lawyers and she knew her son was innocent but couldn't prove it.

"Reprieve were able to give him free legal representation and prove with DNA that it wasn't him. It really touched me this poor mother and her desperation so I then thought 'Well how can I help raise awareness, how can I tell these stories'."

Ryan and his mother are in one of Claire's paintings at the exhibition.

It was quite harrowing going into some of the death row prisons and with so much information and so many stories when she came back she didn't know where to start, Claire said.

"How do you put all that into a painting? It was just so much so I think it took me probably a couple of months to just get my head around everything I'd heard and figure how I wanted to tell those stories.

"So I came up with the idea that I wouldn't refer to the prisons, I wouldn't refer to the death penalty, I just wanted to show these people as humans to get a connection between someone coming along and looking at a painting and a connection between them and the person that's experienced what they've gone through.

"So really just a way of telling the story so all the paintings are just straightforward portraits of people I met."

It had been a tremendous experience and she had met the most remarkable people, she added.

The Human Face of Death Row runs until March 20 and all profits from the paintings will go to Reprieve.

The exhibition had previously been shown at The Otter Gallery at Chichester University, The Capitol in Horsham and The Lewis Elton Gallery at the University of Surrey.

Claire graduated with first class honours in fine art painting from Northbrook College in 2004. She is a member of the Association of Sussex Artists.

For more information about her work visit www.clairephillips.com

Further information about the work of Reprieve can be found at www.reprieve.org.uk



Partridge Green artist Claire Phillips.