

Interview Transcript

Bill Wiseman - *Legislator for introduction of lethal injection*



Bill: I was a first term freshman legislator when the results of the case called *Furman v. Georgia* trickled down on all the states and our death penalty laws were all abolished as unconstitutional. I was in a quandary because I'd never...I mean capital punishment is a...I think there are reasons to kill people sometimes perhaps but capital punishment is a cold act, I mean, just doesn't make any sense to me. And it really didn't then but I was... (inaudible)... about it, I...I loved this job. And, so, I didn't know what to do. I knew better but I wanted this job, I didn't wanna piss everybody off, get kicked out of office when I'd just gotten in. I'd worked so hard to get there. So I voted for it. I mean, I knew we were doing this stupid thing, and I knew it was a sort of a bone-headed, really the worst of us that was this vindictive kind of..., I think there were a lot of racism behind it too. And, I made a...passionate speech against it, sat down and hit the green button. I mean I told them I didn't want to vote, but I said, 'I'm gonna vote for this thing, 'cause I'm afraid not to, but I know this is a bad idea'. And I did feel terrible about this.

We had an electric chair that hadn't been used in years so it was an old sparky that had to be fixed. Someone offered an amendment – David Riggs offered an amendment that said... come up with a more humane form of execution. Then I got in touch with some medical people and tried to figure out if there were a decent way to do it. I got...I called my doctor, went to see him, and asked him...told him what I wanted to try and do. And I said, 'vets can put dogs down and it's, you know, it's no big deal. I mean it's... I've seen it done, why can't we... but I...I don't know how to do this'. And he said, 'well that makes sense'. And he took it to the board and they said, 'no absolutely not. We can't get involved in this at all'. So I thought about literally calling a vet, and then Jay Chapman called me up and he was the state medical examiner, and he'd heard I was trying to figure out how to do this. He came over and we sat down in my office and wrote it out - he dictated. And it was one of those ideas that the timing, I guess, was just right and it... everybody said, 'yeah, well, that makes sense'. And we passed it.

My idea was to have a method which didn't hurt. And so these people in, I think, Florida and Tennessee, I mean they were, they were screwing up, they were not getting enough barbiturate in so they weren't out, they weren't knocking them out first. What happens is this – when you give a dog or a human being the sodium thiopental they go to sleep. And when you shoot them with the potassium chloride they snap like a jack knife, I mean, it's just...wrenching, wrenching.

Mike: The bodies move?

Bill: Oh yeah! Now they don't know what they're doing, it's involuntary muscles and they're seizing and contracting, 'cause they're fighting off the drug. It's like someone reaching in and stopping your heart, that's literally what it's doing! But, people found this very upsetting, so someone came up with the idea of using a derivative of curare, and it

paralyses the skeletal muscles, and so the idea is that, you knock 'em out, then you paralyse the skeletal muscles so they can't really move, they're rigid and.... Then you hit 'em with the shot of potassium chloride so (clicks fingers)...it will happen but they won't react and everybody will think – well, that's alright, there's nothing to that. The problem happens, if you don't give them enough barbiturate they're gonna feel the pain of the potassium chloride, but they can't let you know that they feel the pain. And that's terrifying, I mean, and that happened!