2012

Founders' Day Convocation (2012 Program)

Illinois Wesleyan University

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We stand in a position of incalculable responsibility to the great wave of population overspreading the valley of the Mississippi. Destiny seems to point out this valley as the depository of the great heart of the nation. From this center, mighty pulsations, for good or evil, must in the future flow, which shall not only affect the fortune of the republic, but reach in their influence other and distant nations of the earth.

Founders of Illinois Wesleyan

Peter Cartwright
C. W. Lewis
J. C. Finley
John S. Barger
James Leaton
John Van Cleve
James F. Jaquess
William J. Rutledge
C. M. Holliday
W. D. R. Trotter
W. H. Allin
W. C. Hobbs
John E. McClun
John Magoun
Thomas Magee
William Wallace
Charles P. Merriman
James Miller
William H. Holmes
Linus Graves
Thomas P. Rogers
John W. Ewing
Lewis Bunn
E. Thomas
Isaac Funk
James Allin
D. Trimmer
Kersey H. Fell
Silas Watters
Reuben Andrus
Sister Helen Prejean

Author of the Pulitzer Prize-Nominated Book
“Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States”

Member and Former Chair of the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty

A catalyst for national dialogue on the death penalty, Sister Helen Prejean is an internationally known activist and educator on the subject, giving talks about her ministry around the world. Nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize twice in 1998 and 1999, she has helped to shape the Catholic Church’s newly vigorous opposition to state executions.

In 1957, Sister Prejean joined the Sisters of St. Joseph of Medaile, now known as the Congregation of St. Joseph. She received a bachelor’s degree in English and education from St. Mary’s Dominican in Louisiana in 1962 and a master’s degree in religious education from St. Paul’s University in Ottawa, Canada in 1973.

Sister Prejean’s prison ministry began in 1981. After becoming a spiritual advisor for Patrick Sonnier, convicted for murder and sentenced to the electric chair of Louisiana’s Angola State Prison, Sister Prejean’s eyes were opened to the Louisiana execution process. The experience inspired her best-selling book, Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States. Remaining number one on The New York Times Best Seller list for 31 weeks, the book received a nomination for a 1993 Pulitzer Prize and made the 1994 American Library Associates Notable Book List. The book’s success led to the production of the 1995 film Dead Man Walking starring Susan Sarandon and Sean Penn. The book is also the basis for librettist Terrance McNally and composer Jake Heggie’s opera, premiered by the San Francisco Opera in October of 2000.

The subject of numerous media stories around the world, Sister Prejean has been featured in The New York Times Magazine, Vogue, and The Chicago Tribune, among others. She has made guest appearances on television shows such as 60 Minutes, ABC World News Tonight and the BBC’s Everyman.

Since beginning her ministry, Sister Prejean has witnessed six executions in the state of Louisiana and continues to educate the public about the death penalty. The founder of “Survive,” a victim’s advocacy group in New Orleans, she continues to counsel inmates on death row, as well as families of murder victims. An ardent advocate for an end to the death penalty, she is the Honorary Chairperson of The Moratorium Campaign, a group gathering signatures for a worldwide moratorium on the death penalty.

In her time as a spiritual advisor, she believes that some of those executed were not guilty. This realization serves as the basis for her second book, The Death of Innocents: An Eyewitness Account of Wrongful Executions, which was released in December of 2004. Sister Prejean is currently working on a third book, River of Fire: My Spiritual Journey.