

Summer 2006

Saint

Michael's

College Magazine

Fire & Rescue  
at Home

ST. MICHAEL'S  
FIRE DEPT.

[www.smcvt.edu](http://www.smcvt.edu)



# GOOD FOR SOMETHING

## Rachel Lawler '07 advocates for eliminating the death penalty

**B**e not simply good. Be good for something."

Henry David Thoreau's challenging words appear in Rachel Lawler's e-mail on messages she sends out in her committed personal campaign against capital punishment.

To the junior from Connecticut, activism for social justice is a good-for-something response to Thoreau's challenge, and a satisfying way to live the College's service-oriented mission.

Lawler said she always had strong convictions about the death penalty, but decided to do something about it last year after convicted killer Michael Ross of Connecticut became the first person in New England to be executed in 45 years.

"Although the work I do today may not yield immediate changes tomorrow, what's important is that change is possible and even the smallest advances forward pave the way for full abolition in the future," Lawler said. "Educating even one person about why the death penalty is wrong is just as important to me as educating many."

Lawler is chair of Saint Michael's Peace and Justice Club, a member of Vermonters Against the Death Penalty, and State Death Penalty Abolition Coordinator for Vermont's chapter of Amnesty International USA.

Last summer, she lived for three months at Dismas House, a Burlington transition residence for former Vermont prisoners reintegrating into society. This summer, Lawler is living in Washington, DC, interning for the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty and volunteering in Amnesty International's Program to Abolish the Death Penalty.

Rev. Michael Cronogue, SSE, has been a strong supporter of Lawler's activism through his Peace and Justice curriculum at the College. The priest spoke with admiration of his student's accomplish-

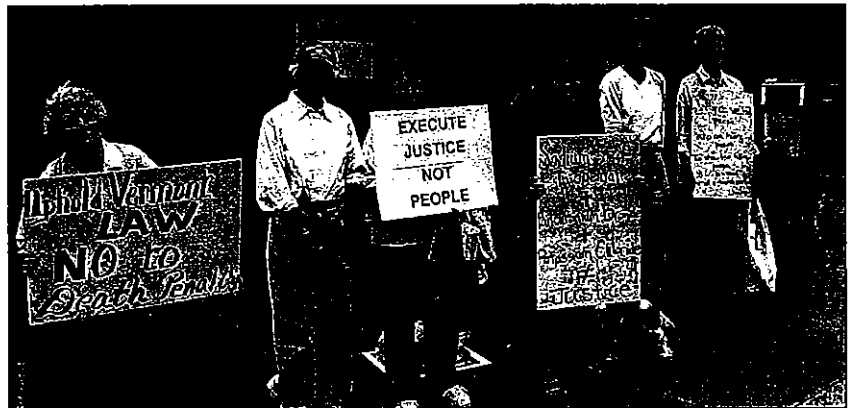
ments and determined spirit.

"Rachel embodies the best of the mission of Saint Michael's College to respect and uphold the dignity of all human persons," said Fr. Cronogue, whose unique program and personal encouragement attracted Lawler to the College in the first place.

Lawler said she has been deeply moved by meeting the families of murder victims. Despite their grievous losses, many crusade to abolish capital punishment and advocate for death-row inmates.

"Not only did I attend the entire trial, but I also organized events in the community. Since then I have spoken at numerous panels and press conferences," she said. "And to think that at one time I was scared of public speaking! As one of my philosophy professors said, my involvement with the cause has changed me and made me a better person."

Lawler said she would like to become a lawyer specializing in criminal law and public defense. "My involvement with the death penalty has afforded me a peek into our justice system," she said. "After



Rachel Lawler '07, third from right, went from fear of public speaking to being a voice for change.

"To hear these family members talk is always fascinating and I am consistently amazed by their capacity for forgiveness," she said. "Fellow abolitionists are always an inspiration to me."

Lawler said when she first looked at Saint Michael's, Rev. Cronogue was just developing a Peace and Justice minor and sent her an outline for the program. "I ended up at Saint Michael's after reading about [the program] and then meeting with Father Mike when I came to visit the school," she said.

Michael Ross's execution last year became the catalyst for Lawler's involvement with Vermont's U.S. v. Fell, a federal capital case that was argued in Burlington.

learning that 95 percent of death-row inmates are indigent and must rely on overworked, underpaid and sometimes undedicated counsel, I felt very strongly about the need to work in public defense. Just because someone can't afford to pay millions of dollars for an attorney doesn't mean that they shouldn't receive passionate and committed representation."

Fr. Cronogue said Lawler came to Saint Michael's "with a passion for justice," evident in her work as a high school student for Amnesty International, but that spark has really ignited in college: "Rachel is a passionate advocate for justice and a tireless voice for those on death row."

—M. T.