

Killing Time – director's statement

Jaap van Hoewijk

"It's hard to watch a person die."

When producer Eric Velthuis asked me to consider doing a documentary on a day of execution in Huntsville, Texas, I was immediately interested. Having made a film about witnesses to a Californian execution some 20 years ago, Eric's request enabled me to make the 'negative', complement, of my earlier film. About the events which lead up to an execution.

When we travelled to Texas, to see what was actually going on in the streets of Huntsville during a day of execution, I was blown by the fact that there was nothing going on. It seemed to be another day in boring Huntsville: business as usual.

One tiny detail caught my eye, and stayed in my mind ever since: the yellow caution-tape, which is used to block off the street before an execution, had been used many times. After the execution a prison guard rolled up the tape and put the messy bundle alongside the road. For it would be needed the next week. Economics could not be the motivation for this thriftiness. It just seemed a habit: don't throw out what you might need tomorrow.

I have tried to make this film as non-sensational as possible. No music, no audio cross-fades, even the titles don't have any fades. Nothing to amplify or support the image. It's a nasty film about an ugly world.

Killing Time is not advocating nor protesting against the death penalty. It's a study into the futility of the taking of a life: a murder and a State-sanctioned taking of a life.

This film portrays two deaths: the death of Elroy Chester and the death of his victim, Willy Ryman, a fireman who was murdered by Elroy Chester. Mr. Ryman had come to check upon his two nieces, who were home alone. When he entered the house he was fatally shot by Elroy Chester. But Willy Ryman was not the only victim in the house. Police established he had sexually assaulted and raped the two young girls. He was sentenced to death.

We had gained the trust of an entire family, whose loved one would be executed within three weeks. The Chester family gave us unlimited access to their lives, to their thoughts, worries and their pain. We are grateful for their trust, their hospitality and for having us around in maybe the most difficult moments in their lives.

Just after the execution we were allowed to interview Erin DeLeon, who was sexually assaulted by Mr. Chester. She gave us an incredibly honest account of what it means to not only see your beloved uncle die in your arms, but also what it means to watch his killer die by lethal injection, some 15 years later.