# INTO THE VALLEY OF DEATH

TEXAS IS THE US CAPITAL OF THE DEATH SENTENCE, WHERE HUNDREDS AWAIT EXECUTION IN SOLITARY CONFINEMENT. FOR MORE THAN A DECADE, ONE FORMER TESCO CHECKOUT WORKER FROM NORTHAMPTON HAS BEEN OFFERING FRIENDSHIP AND SOLACE TO THE CONDEMNED. ALEX HANNAFORD MEETS HER.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ENDA BOWE

Even if you know the Polunsky Unit is about to make its first appearance behind a thicket of pine, it still stops you in your tracks – so stark and imposing are the concrete and razor wire and lookout towers in this sleepy, rural corner of east Texas. And don't be fooled by the horses grazing lazily in a field in front of the prison, or the corrections officers sporting hokey western hats. This is about as bleak as it gets: Polunsky is home to the state's death-row wing.

The sun has been up a few hours on an unseasonably warm November morning in Livingston. Primarily a logging town, it has housed Texas's death row population (which currently stands at 241 men – the six women are at a different prison) since 1999, although on the day of an execution the condemned are driven 40 miles west, to a separate prison in Huntsville where they are given a lethal injection.

This morning, the car park at Polunsky is full, but there's a solitary figure waiting outside the security gates: a woman in her late 60s wearing a red cardigan, a streak of pink fringe in her short blonde hair. Ann Stevens' accent sets her apart from the other visitors to the prison; the guards all know the Englishwoman who has been coming to Polunsky twice a year for the past decade.

Stevens, from Northampton, once worked on a Tesco checkout. She now runs a death-row ministry. Twice a year she relies on donations to pay for flights to the US, where she visits men and women awaiting the death penalty around the country. She focuses most of her efforts, though, on Texas, which has carried out more executions – since capital punishment was reinstated in 1976 after a moratorium – than any other state in the nation: 545 compared to Virginia in second place with 113. Like Sister Helen Prejean, the nun played by Susan Sarandon in the movie *Dead Man Walking*, Stevens is the religious conscience of the condemned, consoling them as they face the ultimate penalty. She has even watched some take their last breath as the wheels of Texas justice grind to a halt. It's a different world from the quiet terraced street in the Midlands that she calls home.

Inside the small security hut in front of the prison, a corrections officer asks us to place our keys, watches and jewellery on a conveyer before we pass through a metal detector. A sign on the air-lock door reads: NO HOSTAGES WILL EXIT HERE.

Once you've swapped your ID for a Texas Department of Criminal Justice lanyard, you walk along a path beyond the razor wire and into the prison. The visitation room consists of numerous booths where inmates can talk to family and friends via a telephone, from behind bulletproof glass. Ivan Cantu, the 44-year-old prisoner Stevens has come to see, is led, handcuffed, behind the row of booths by three officers. Once the door to his pod is locked, he sits on a chair and pushes his cuffed hands through a slot in the door so a guard can remove them.

It's busy today – a Monday. To the right of us sits a man in a black Salvation Army T-shirt, a Bible on the ledge in front of him; to the left, a woman from the Netherlands who has come to visit her boyfriend. Elsewhere there are women from a local prison radio show, the mother and sister of an inmate who has an execution date in a few days, and lawyers visiting their clients.

Cantu, a small-framed man with thick, swept-back black hair, smiles as Stevens sits opposite him and places the phone to her ear. 'Hello, love,' she says. 'How have you been?' There are vending machines in the corner, and visitors are allowed to buy food and drinks for inmates. Cantu jokingly asks for a lobster sandwich: the choice is cheese or turkey slices, a cold fried-chicken sandwich, chocolate bars, soft drinks or a tub of salad with thousand island dressing. Most inmates crave visitors – and the chance to taste something other than prison food.

The state holds that Cantu killed his cousin, James Mosqueda, and his cousin's fiancée, Amy Kitchen, at their Dallas home in November 2000, because his relative failed to pay a drug debt. According to testimony from Cantu's then-girlfriend, he arrived home the night of the murder with blood on his jeans and in his hair, before the pair drove to Mosqueda and Kitchen's house so he could search for drugs and money. That's when she said she saw the victims' bodies through the doorway to their bedroom. Police later claimed they discovered the bloody jeans, ammunition and a key to the victims' house in Cantu's apartment. Sentenced to death a year later, he's been on death row for 16 years. He was given an execution date in 2011 but it was withdrawn for legal reasons.

**Below** The Polunsky Unit in Texas, which houses the state's death-row prisoners; Ann Stevens at home in Northampton – the portrait behind her was painted by an inmate

**'What Ann does for these men is nothing short of a blessing. She gives them hope'**

Although the jeans in Cantu's apartment were found to have the victims' blood on them, Cantu has always maintained his innocence. He says the evidence was planted and that phone records show someone else made a call from his apartment on the night after the murder, while he and his girlfriend were in Arkansas, and that this shows someone else had access to his apartment. He thinks Mosqueda and Kitchen were killed by rival drug dealers out to frame him and that his former girlfriend was either scared or bribed into helping them. Subsequent courts have disagreed about this.

Cantu's wife, Tammy, who first got to know him as a pen pal, married him by proxy in 2007 while he was incarcerated and has never been able to touch him, told me they've just been given permission to do DNA testing on all the evidence and should have the results early next year. It's Cantu's last chance.

I asked Tammy what Stevens' care means to inmates like Cantu. 'What Ann does for these men is nothing short of a blessing,' she said. 'She gives them hope, and is a ray of sunshine in the lives of the men that the justice system has thrown away. Some of them have no one, and her ministry allows them to feel God, love and friendship.'

PREVIOUS PAGE: GETTY IMAGES. THIS PAGE: AP

Unless they volunteer the information, Stevens doesn't ask what crimes the men and women she visits have committed. She tells me she made that mistake once. A friend who also visits prison inmates asked her if she could send $20 to a particular man on death row. Stevens found out he had beheaded his two children. 'I really struggled,' she said. 'I didn't want to send him the money, but I always told myself whatever they'd done they're paying the ultimate price.' She sent him the money, but now she doesn't look up their crimes. 'I'd rather not sit there and think: "This is a monster." Most people wouldn't normally love these people because of what they've done, but God doesn't do it like that. And because I'm there as an envoy of God, giving some sort of comfort, I'm not going to judge them.'

Cantu asks Stevens to read Psalm 139 from her Bible. She pulls her chair closer to the glass and thumbs the pages. 'I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made…' she reads. Cantu, elbows on his ledge, shuts his eyes. 'Test me and know my anxious thoughts/See if there is any offensive way in me/ and lead me in the way everlasting,' she continues.

Cantu tells me he wasn't a Christian when Stevens first visited him. He had a lot of questions back then. But slowly, perhaps because of the comfort it offered him, alone in his cell 23 hours a day, he began to find faith. Earlier, Stevens told me she ministered to another inmate who didn't want to know about God. 'Then he had an execution date – after 23 years on death row,' she said. 'And he told me that after all the years I'd talked to him, drip, drip, dripping stories from the Bible, he swears he heard a voice say, "I'm not finished with you yet." He looked around and there was no one there. And then they took him off death row. He believes it happened because he found the Lord, and he's been faithful ever since.'


**Below** Ann Stevens with prisoner Ivan Cantu, who has been on death row since 2001; vending-machine food that visitors can buy for inmates

**Stevens doesn't look up their crimes. 'I'd rather not sit there and think: "This is a monster"'**

I first met Stevens last summer at her small, terraced house in Semilong, Northampton. She never envisaged becoming involved with her church, let alone one day running a death-row ministry. She had a child at 16, after which she was disowned by some of her family (she and her son are estranged). She got a job at the checkout of her local branch of Tesco, then worked in residential care for Mencap. She was married for 27 years, but at the age of 48 she left her husband and became more involved with her local church. But it was a documentary, *Fourteen Days in May*, that would change her life. First broadcast by the BBC in 1987, the film follows Mississippi inmate Edward Earl Johnson in the two weeks leading up to his execution. After seeing that, Stevens contacted LifeLines, a charity that organises pen pals for death-row prisoners in the States.

Stevens' cosy sitting room smells of cleaning products. A cuckoo clock ticks in the hallway, and there's a Bible open on a small stand in front of her dresser. She shows me a portrait by an inmate, which hangs on the wall opposite her sofa. Under the window is a wooden letter rack full of mail from prisoners. There came a time when writing to them wasn't enough. Stevens wanted to do more, and some of her pen pals had begun asking when she was going to see them.

'My first visit to Polunsky was so surreal,' she tells me across the dining table in her front room. 'I'd never been in a prison before and the way the guards were looking at me, I felt judged, I suppose. I was visiting Duane Buck, my first penfriend, who was known on the row as "Brother Buck" because of his conversion to Christianity. He'd obviously told some of the other inmates I was coming because as I approached his pod in the meeting room some of them were banging on the glass: "Are you a Christian, ma'am?" "Will you visit me, ma'am?" Just seeing them sitting there behind glass – they looked so desperate. And they had nothing. They couldn't even go to church.'

When death row in Texas was moved from the Ellis Unit in Huntsville to Polunsky 18 years ago, inmate privileges like watching TV and regular church services were stopped. 'When I went to see Brother Buck that day, I saw the need,' she says. 'I felt the animosity, the tension in that prison. Back then the guards would tell me to sit down, look straight ahead, don't talk to anyone else. I couldn't even respond to the inmates banging on the glass.'

More and more, Stevens felt compelled to write or talk to inmates about her faith, and in 2013 she was ordained as a minister and awarded a certificate by a church in Texas. This meant she'd be given greater flexibility when visiting inmates, but it would also enshrine her visits in meaning and purpose. She started spending her time in England raising money so she could take two lengthy trips a year to Texas. She gave talks at churches and at the WI, she cut people's hair. 'If I gave a talk for £40, that's one night at the hotel in Livingston,' she said. Friends would donate. One person gave her £500 from an insurance payout. Cash came through her letterbox in anonymous envelopes. 'That would drive me crazy because I wanted to say thank you,' she adds.

She began to get letters addressed to 'Sister Ann'. At Louisiana State Penitentiary, which houses that state's death row, she met Sister Helen Prejean. 'She kissed me on the cheek and said, "Anyone who works in Texas is a friend of mine."'

During her visits with inmates, Stevens buys them something from the vending machine, asks about their well-being, and talks to them about God. But, she said, she is never pushy. 'I don't want to sit there preaching at them. I just want to show there is somebody out there who gives a damn about them; who prays for them.' And she doesn't mind if they don't share her faith. 'They eat, shower and die when they're told. They need choices, and if they choose not to believe in Jesus, that's up to them. I don't want to put that on them – particularly as for some I'm their only visitor.'

One inmate always asks her to buy him a packet of crisps and herself a bag of cashew nuts when she visits. They eat them and drink a can of soda at the same time and have what Stevens calls a mock communion. Another, who has been on death row for 30 years, tells her he doesn't believe in God. 'He's never done anything for him so he doesn't see why he should,' Stevens says. 'But at that last minute he might accept God. Or he might never

**Right** A letter to Stevens from one of the inmates she visits

accept God. The only thing I can do is to show them I care about them, and God cares about them. There's an old song that goes: "You're the only Jesus some will ever see." I take that responsibility very seriously.'

This winter, Stevens tells me, she will be visiting 17 inmates – some more than once. The number of people she visits has increased over the years. 'Of course I lose people, but I gain people as well. I've probably visited more than 100 people.'

Some inmates confess that they've attempted to take their own lives. 'Those visits are amazingly difficult,' she says. 'But I never break down in front of the officers. And when I walk out I always wave towards the death-row wing of the prison because I know some of them stand on their beds and look out over the prison yard. I can't see them but they can see me.'

Stevens had previously told me over the phone that this could be her last trip to the US. She's been visiting American prisons for more than a decade and running her ministry for the past four. But she turns 70 next year. 'Flights and insurance are expensive,' she said. 'I have diabetes, arthritis. It's difficult.'

But she seems to have had a change of heart. 'I've been asked to give a talk at the WI in June so I think I'll be carrying on with it a little longer. I've always said when I can't raise the money that's the end of the road for me, but I don't feel like it is yet.'

The darkest, most difficult part of her work comes at the end. Stevens has now witnessed two executions. The first was in 2012, that of Keith Thurmond, convicted of killing his estranged wife and her boyfriend after losing custody of his son. 'Keith was very mentally vulnerable: he was a bit of a Walter Mitty – believed he was a helicopter pilot and the FBI had set him up. I was introduced to him via LifeLines and then started visiting him seven years before he was executed. He had faith, and he was always 100 per cent determined he hadn't killed his wife. He always asked if I'd be there for his execution but he believed he was going to get a stay. I visited him every day that week leading up to the end. I remember he kept laughing, quite maniacally. Even on the last day he was the same: laughing, joking, eating everything he could lay his hands on. But he asked me to keep his property if they executed him.'

Before officers drove Thurmond to Huntsville for the execution, he had one final visit with Stevens. She said her stomach was churning. 'I'd rehearsed this speech, but when he looked at me with this red, pitted, bloated face I just said, "Keith, go kick some ass." I don't know where that came from but he thought it was hilarious. Even the guard said, "Miss Ann!"'

At the prison in Huntsville, Stevens was told to remove her shoes to go through security before being searched. 'I remember my foot made a sweat mark on the floor and I apologised. I was a nervous wreck.'

It was hot, she says, but she couldn't drink anything. Outside, it was raining and she remembers walking up a set of metal stairs at the prison and hearing the noise of the rain on the steps. She was led into a small room and told to stand facing the execution chamber. 'They pulled back the curtain – I was only a few feet from Keith, who was behind glass, strapped to a hospital

**'You're not prepared to see a man who is fit and healthy die before your eyes'**

bed. It made me feel claustrophobic, panicked. I wanted him to be able to lift his hands. I saw a tear roll down his face. I managed to give him a thumbs up and smiled. What else do you do?'

She says the warden stood behind Thurmond and a prison chaplain held his ankle. 'We all just stood there, rooted to the spot. No one moved. You're not prepared to see a man who, apart from the effect prison had on him, was fit and healthy, die before your eyes. I thought: how does this change anything for anybody? Then they pronounced him dead and I went outside and it was still raining.'

Later, in the prison chapel, she was able to hug Thurmond for the first time. He was covered with a maroon throw. She had dreams of that day for a while afterwards – as though a camera was zooming in on Thurmond's hands, bandaged to the gurney. At his funeral the next day in the prison cemetery, she laid white roses on his coffin. 'He had said that they would somehow make him pure and help him get into heaven,' she says.

Stevens adds that it wasn't long ago that the Texas Department of Criminal Justice would just engrave the inmate's number on their gravestone. Now it's their name and date of death. 'No date of birth, so you have no idea how old they were,' she says. 'It's a very sad place.'

After the execution, an officer gave Stevens two bags filled with Thurmond's belongings: clothes, a Bible, some crisps and snacks he assumed he'd be eating later that day if the execution didn't go ahead. 'There were even his face flannels – one of them still wet,' she said. 'For some reason that just broke me.'

The next day Stevens returned to the Polunsky Unit to visit another inmate, Beunka Adams, who had also been given an execution date – the next one she would have to witness. Adams called Stevens the 'Butterfly Lady' because he thought she was elegant. She still has some drawings he made her, coloured in with food dye made from assorted chocolate M&Ms.

Stevens walks to the corner of her living room and picks up a small trinket box in the shape of a butterfly from between two candles on a TV stand. 'Some of Beunka's ashes are in here,' she says. 'He wanted me to have them. The rest are with his mum.'

At the Polunsky Unit, Ivan Cantu is talking to Stevens about other inmates; those who rarely have visitors, never get letters and who almost never leave their cells. He's concerned about their mental health. He tries to urge them to take the one hour of recreation offered each day. He'll take recreation at the same time, albeit in a separate yard, he tells them, so they can talk between the wire mesh that separates them. He asks Stevens if she'll help; if she'll start writing to them or pay them a visit.

Later, Stevens will tell me that Cantu is always preoccupied with the welfare of his fellow prisoners, and that, despite living in solitary confinement for 17 years, he's still upbeat and interested in the world. He looks forward to his visits. 'It gives him a reason to get up in the morning,' she says. 'And he always turns up in clean prison whites, with his hair combed and face shaved. Most of the inmates try to make an effort. When they stop doing that it means they've lost the will to live.'

Later, Cantu will write to me to tell me that Ann's positivity is contagious; that the happier she is during her visits with the condemned, the happier they become. 'It blows me away that a single, retired woman on a very limited budget is willing to travel across the Atlantic for people considered unworthy of society – to bring hope and dignity to us,' he'll say. 'It's kind of a saintly move, don't you think?'

The corrections officer who has been sitting by the door the entire time gets up and walks down the row of chairs. Stevens' two hours are up. Cantu shifts in his seat and his eyes well up. 'Will you pray for me before you go?' he says. 'Of course,' Stevens replies. She stands and places a hand on the glass. Cantu puts his palm up to hers and they close their eyes. ◆