

ANDRE LATALLADE

Walk the Line

Ex-con takes steps to save death-row inmates, reform prisons

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After spending eight years of his life locked up, Andre Latallade still lives like a prisoner. He feels paranoid in social situations. Too much sunlight makes him edgy. His home in Newark is a cell-like basement apartment with no windows, no carpet and no kitchen. But two months ago, Latallade, 43, began a 1,700-mile walk to protest the death penalty. Next week, he vows, he'll be in Texas.

"When I was in prison, everyone forgot about me," says Latallade, a rapper whose stage name is Capital X. "I want to show inmates on death row that I won't forget about them." The walk began on March 31 in Trenton -- where, in December, New Jersey became the first state in four decades to abolish the death penalty -- and will finish in Huntsville, Texas, the state with the most executions.

Of more than 3,000 prisoners on death row, Texas executed 27 last year, more than 60 percent of the national total.

"I'm not always up on all the statistics," admits Latallade, whose beat-up Air Jordans have lasted throughout the walk. "But I know what's immoral."

Latallade (he pronounces it La-tah-LAH-day) turned his life around six years ago, after doing time on drug and aggravated assault charges. Since, he has built a name for himself as an activist for prisoners' rights, affiliated with national and international groups that are fighting capital punishment.

For Latallade, death row is the last stop in a system that brutalizes inmates and makes rehabilitation nearly impossible. Even if they manage to break the cycle of crime and punishment, it leaves mental and physical scars that never heal, he says.

"You committed a crime, you get removed from society and you pay your debt," says Latallade. "But these are environments that just make people worse, and society pays for that. My purpose is to speak for human beings that are being treated like non-human beings."



Events in Texas

When he arrives in Texas, the state Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty will hold rallies, vigils and other events to publicize Latallade's message, including a protest outside the governor's mansion in Houston.

His "Walk for Life" has received support from Amnesty International and other abolitionist groups in the U.S. and Europe, including Senza Voce ("Voice of the Voiceless"), an Italian group that is co-planning the events in Texas.

"What he's doing is quite a feat," says Bill Pelke, co-founder of Journey of Hope, a national group that helps murder victims' families fight capital punishment. "It shows that people can change and do good things. I think he reaches an audience that isn't always reached by the movement."

Pelke, of Alaska, fought a well-publicized battle to get his grandmother's killer off death row in 1986. He joined Latallade for part of his walk near Washington, D.C.

Death penalty advocates, however, have questioned the credibility of ex-cons turned crusaders, like Latallade.

"The way they represent harsh conditions can be much distorted," says Robert Blecker, a professor at New York Law School who favors capital punishment and had never heard of Latallade.

According to Blecker, inmates awaiting execution receive some of the best treatment in the prison system, no matter how heinous their crimes.

"Even a lot of death row inmates support the death penalty, for others if not for themselves," he says. "I've seen guys on death row in Tennessee saying, 'It's a joke, this other inmate is out their playing basketball and he killed three kids.'"

Latallade's walk -- he hopes to complete 35 miles a day over 54 days -- comes at a time when a record number of Americans are in prison. According to a study released by the Pew Center on the United States in February, more than one in 100 adults is now incarcerated, the highest number in U.S. history and a figure that tops every other nation in the world.

Rikers Island blues

It's a process Latallade calls "prisonization." For him, it began when he was sent to Rikers Island after being arrested on a drug charge at 17, three years after he dropped out of school. "That was the first time I saw a prisoner get killed. I hadn't even made up my bunk yet. These guys were arguing over the phone, one just started shanking the hell out of the other," he says.

Latallade witnessed scores of stabbings, beat-downs and rapes in jails and prisons in New York and New Jersey, he says.

The subtlest slight -- or perceived slight -- could trigger an attack, from failing to return a borrowed cigarette to holding eye contact for too long, a sign of disrespect. Guards also beat inmates, he claims.

For protection, Latallade, whose parents are Puerto Rican, joined the Latin Kings gang. "I stayed with the Latinos. I had to," he says. "You had to find a group, and the groups were all segregated."

He learned why prison gangs inspire such loyalty. "You have guys telling you you're a king when you're used to people telling you you're nothing," contends Latallade, who says he is no longer an active member of the gang. "If that's all you hear all day, it can destroy you."

At his apartment in Newark, Latallade wears a black T-shirt stamped with the name of a Anthony Haynes, a death-row inmate who was convicted of murdering a Houston police officer in 1998.

As an homage to Johnny Cash, Latallade dresses in dark colors. His bookshelves are filled with prison memoirs, like "In the Belly of the Beast," alongside contradictory tomes like Marx's "The Communist Manifesto" and Napoleon Hill's "Think and Grow Rich."

His tattoos also tell a story. On his left bicep is an illustration of the gurney on which prisoners are strapped for lethal injections. The word "Freedom" is written across his upper chest. His prison number, 305375, is tattooed on his shoulder blades. It's also the name of the nonprofit corporation he founded to fight the death penalty.



Becoming X

Latallade was born in Brooklyn but spent most of his childhood in Morris County. In fourth grade, his family moved to Mine Hill, where he was the only Puerto Rican kid in town. Classmates threw rocks at him and called him "spic," he says. He went on to write a song called "The Spic in Black," a play on the famous Cash tune.

"I didn't even know what the word meant, but I knew it was bad," Latallade remembers. With the song, he says, he was trying to transform a slur into a badge of honor.

In his teens, he developed a PCP addiction and was dealing drugs when his criminal record began. It ended when he sought treatment for substance abuse. He was later diagnosed with bipolar disorder and Meniere's disease, an inner-ear condition that has eroded his hearing and triggers episodes of vertigo.

In Mine Hill, his parents worked hard to make a new life for themselves and were at a loss to help him adjust, he says. One person he could turn to was his older sister, Mary.

"She was my anchor not to jump over the edge," he says. "When I was in high school, she kept handing me self-help books, like (M.) Scott Peck's "The Road Less Traveled," telling me to read these books. I was one of the only cats on the street doing illegal activity, but with a book in my hand."

Mary was a college graduate who gave him "tough love" when he kept landing in prison, he says. Now a stay-at-home mom in North Carolina who processes disability claims for the state, she let him know that, until he changed, she couldn't help him.

But the biggest incentive to stay out of jail was his daughter, Sheana, now 18. Latallade's marriage to an exotic dancer in the early 1990s ended after several years, but he formed a close bond with his daughter, whom he raised as a single father in Budd Lake for several years after his ex-wife moved to Texas.

"When I got custody, I told her, 'I'm not pushing you to be an adult, but we're going to be a team.' It was tough, but I learned a lot and so did she. I learned how to be patient and flexible."

His daughter, who now lives with her mother in Texas, will join him on the walk, too.

Ex-con and activist

After his release from prison in 2001, Latallade got a degree in sound technology from the County College of Morris and was about to start an internship for a major music label, but his prison record prevented him from being hired, he says.

That's when he began speaking out against the prison system and started corresponding with inmates on death row.

His stalled rap career picked up after he began writing about his beliefs. He got a slot on the Warped Tour in 2004, which led to gigs in Italy and other European countries, sponsored by Senza Voce.

"His mission is to bring the truth to light," says his manager, Timothy Kostenko, a rapper and financial advisor with Morgan Stanley whose stage name is "Tim Grins."

Kostenko, who grew up in the Sussex County town of Vernon and now lives in Annapolis, Md., is funding Latallade's walk, despite the fact that he's uncertain about the death penalty.

"Sometimes I look at a guy that killed four people, three cops, and I think, 'Why should this person be allowed to live?'" he says.

But he believes in Latallade.

"What he's doing is important. I've seen kids who are the result of three, four generations of poverty. He's an example to them that, listen, you don't have to choose this route. I can see it in his eyes that he's on a mission. I've told him, 'Why don't you convince me?'"

Additional insight:

Favorite rapper: Melle Mel of Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five

Favorite singer: Mary J. Blige

Need to walk to Texas: Lots of prayer and focus

First thing he did when he got out of prison: "Spent time with my daughter."