

Syriani, Elias Hanna ^[1]

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by Biff Hollingsworth and Tim West, Special Collections at Wilson Library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2008

7 January 1938 - 18 November 2005

Elias Hanna Syriani was a convicted murderer executed by lethal injection by the state of North Carolina. His photograph was used in a controversial 2000 [Benetton](#) ^[2] "[We, On Death Row](#)" ^[3] advertising campaign that featured images of 26 prisoners sentenced to death.

Syriani was born on 7 January 1938 into an Assyrian Christian family in Jerusalem, which at the time was part of the British Mandate of Palestine. When Elias was 10 years old his community became part of the newly created state of Israel. Soon after, Elias's father was imprisoned by the state of Israel and released to Jordan two years later. Elias's father suffered a mental breakdown in prison, such that upon his release he was unable to work. As the oldest son, Elias was called upon to help support his family. He worked as a machinist. Later, Elias joined the Jordanian Army, serving for nine years. During this period of his life, Syriani was also well known as a singer for a Jordanian radio station.

In 1974, Elias Syriani was introduced by a mutual friend to Teresa Yousef, a Jordanian woman who had immigrated to the United States (then living in New Jersey). The two exchanged letters briefly until their marriage was arranged by their families. With his marriage to Teresa, Elias immigrated to the United States to join his new wife. The couple settled near Chicago, Ill., and had four children, each two years apart: Rose, Sarah, John and Janet.

In 1986, Elias lost his job as a machinist, so the family decided to move to [Charlotte](#) ^[4], N.C. According to those close to the family, after Elias and Teresa moved to Charlotte, Teresa began to dress in a more American fashion and began working outside the home at a nearby gas station deli. Elias disapproved of these changes and the couple argued about it, Elias often becoming very abusive. Police were called to the Syriani home ten times within the span of two years. In one incident, Elias tried to strike Teresa with a baseball bat. Teresa took her children to a battered women's shelter, then to relatives in New Jersey. But she soon returned to Charlotte.

In 1990, Teresa filed for divorce and secured a restraining order that required Elias to leave their home. Several days later, as Teresa drove home from work with 10-year-old John in the car with her, Elias blocked her car with his van and approached her car door. Elias opened Teresa's door and began striking Teresa with a screwdriver in the head, face, arms and hands. Even as their son John tried to stop him, Elias struck Teresa 28 times with the screwdriver. John ran to get help and, as neighbors came out of their houses, Elias fled. After 26 days on life support, Teresa succumbed to a fatal two-inch puncture wound to her brain. She was 40 years old. Syriani was arrested, tried, and sentenced on 12 June 1991 to die by lethal injection.

After the murder of their mother, the children - Rose, Sarah, John and Janet - wrote their father out of their lives. They were sent to be raised by two aunts, Elias's sisters. Of the four children, only John (at age 18) had ever visited their father at Central Prison in Raleigh, N.C. All of this changed in 2004, when the four children began to consider a visit to see their father in prison. Sarah was about to be married and wanted to visit her father in order to "cleanse her heart." Eldest daughter Rose wanted her father to know how far she had come without him in her life. In August 2004, all four children visited their father. All four children tell a similar version of that emotional day - each relaying how, almost immediately during the visit, they began to feel great sympathy for their father. They returned the next day. Each of the children, all by this time in their 20's, found that day and in the days that followed that their anger was turning to forgiveness. After leaving Raleigh, the children continued to correspond with their father.

The visits with their father led the four children to begin advocating for commutation of their father's sentence. They arranged a meeting with North Carolina Governor [Mike Easley](#) ^[5], where they told Governor Easley that they "lost the most when their mother died... but now they have their father back, and they have the most to lose again." Despite their personal attempts to persuade Governor Easley to commute their father's sentence, Easley denied the appeal for clemency in mid-November 2005. After nearly fifteen years on North Carolina's death row, Elias Syriani was [executed](#) ^[6] on 18 November 2005.

References:

Kelley, Pam. "Forgiving a Father." *The Charlotte Observer* (N.C.), 26 June 2005.

Tomlinson, Tommy. "Dad killed Mom, but they can't picture him gone." *The Charlotte Observer* (N.C.), 13 November 2005.

Office of the Clark County (Ind.) Prosecuting Attorney. "Elias Hanna Syriani." Death Penalty Case Files. 2005. Clark County Prosecuting Attorney, Jeffersonville, Ind. <http://www.clarkprosecutor.org/html/death/US/syriani997.htm> ^[7]

(accessed 21 February 2008)

Additional Resources:

"ELIAS H SYRIANI." Offender Public Information. North Carolina Department Of Public Safety
<https://webapps.doc.state.nc.us/opi/viewoffender.do?method=view&offenderID=0398002> [8]

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