Left for dead

Greg Wilhoit supported capital punishment—until he wound up on death row

You'll never hear Greg Wilhoit complain about living in Sacramento. After being wrongly convicted for the 1985 murder of his wife and spending five years on Oklahoma's death row before the conviction was overturned, Wilhoit understandably wanted to get as far away from Oklahoma as he could.

"It was worth doing five years on Oklahoma's death row for the opportunity to live in Northern California," Wilhoit says with a thick Southern accent. After he was exoncerated in 1993, he moved to Sacramento, where he quickly became a death-penalty abolitionist and public speaker.

Wilhoit's story begins with the violent murder of his wife while his infant daughters slept in their upstairs bedroom. Wilhoit and his wife had been separated for three weeks. The only alibi he could offer was that he was sleeping alone on the night of the murder.

The horror story reached its climax when he was sentenced to death while being represented by a once-prominent attorney, who was disbarred while on Wilhoit's case. But for Wilhoit, the hardest day was about eight weeks prior to the trial, when arrangements for his children's care had to be made.

"We actually went and toured an orphanage so my daughters would have somewhere to stay when their daddy went to death row for murdering their mom. It was a bad day," he says as a tear falls into his coarse gray beard.

Though the superstitious Wilhoit found himself in cell No. 13 on death row, he still vehemently supported capital punishment for the first three years of his sentence.

"My whole life I was an advocate and a proponent of the death penalty. Just because I was on the business side of a death sentence didn't mean that I would compromise my convictions," Wilhoit says.

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It wasn't until the 1990 execution of Charles Troy Coleman, one of the few friends Wilhoit made on death row, that he had a change of heart about the death penalty.

"Nobody could have been more shocked or surprised than I was, when instead of indifference, I was overwhelmed with grief," Wilhoit says. "The world wasn't a safer place and the sun certainly wasn't going to shine much brighter.

Before Wilhoit could share his epiphany with the world, he first needed to escape death. Enter public defender Mark Barrett.