

Fighting for Their Lives: Inside the Experience of Capital Defense Attorneys

Susannah Sheffer

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In this revealing analysis of the legal profession, researcher Susannah Sheffer interviews long-time capital defense attorneys with the goal of answering this question: How does it feel to know that your job is to save a person's life?

Sheffer has written about and worked on death penalty-related issues for fifteen years. Here, she presents an informative and compelling description of the responsibility and personal anguish attorneys of death row clients feel about their role in the death penalty process. *Fighting for Their Lives: Inside the Experience of Capital Defense Attorneys* offers a glimpse into a part of the judicial process that is not only rarely discussed in the culture—as it usually occurs through a series of documents, filed with and responded to by the court in writing rather than in dramatic courtroom settings—but, as the interviews disclose, also remains undiscussed even among colleagues.

The information gathered from interviews with twenty attorneys—six women and fourteen men who have practiced between eight and thirty-two years—explains in detail how capital defense attorneys internalize their work. Sheffer explores the range of often conflicting emotions that capital defense attorneys experience, from exhilaration over the high-stakes nature of the work to tremendous stress about the responsibility they bear. Through her well-written and clear descriptions, even readers who are not familiar with the legal process will fully grasp the magnitude and impact of the attorneys' responsibilities.

Throughout the account, Sheffer allows the attorneys to convey their feelings in their own words and to explain what motivated them to enter this type of legal work, how it has affected them personally, and why they continue, despite the many challenges. She highlights the similarities in their responses, and discovers that the attorneys share a common motivation, primarily social justice. One of the most thought-provoking quotes is from Benjamin (Sheffer promised the participants confidentiality and they are identified only by pseudonyms), who describes an experience with a particular client, but one that is also typical: "We sentenced him to death ... Then we took twenty years to make him into someone whose life was worth saving, and then we killed him. That's the system."

Sheffer's insightful book will be of interest to all capital defense attorneys and others working in the judicial system, as well as to those who work on death penalty issues in other contexts, including politicians, journalists, and advocates. It will further appeal to readers working in high-pressure jobs and facing the same conflicting feelings about their own professions.

By so thoroughly depicting the mindset of a capital defense attorney, while still acknowledging opposing views, Sheffer presents a highly persuasive argument against the death penalty. *Fighting for Their Lives* serves to inform and also encourage readers to consider the effect the death penalty has on all involved in the process, as well as society at large.

MARIA SIANO (Spring 2013)

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