

# The right to live?

## 1 Before you read

a) You are going to read an interview with Eric J. in Texas. There are some words and phrases in the first part that you don't know, but you know words like them. Try to guess what they mean.

1. to mess up your life → Line 4–5
2. to drop out (of school) → Line 6
3. to break into houses → Line 7–8
4. to fire a shot (or a gun) → Line 14–15

b) Look at the two photos. What do you think they show? What do they maybe tell you about Eric?

## DEATH ROW: AT THE END OF THE LINE

### A

Houston. Eric J., a young man who is in a Texas jail, asked for this interview.

“I feel I have to tell people how easy it is to mess up your life, and everyone else's, too,” he said. “I dropped out in eighth grade. I was only 16 and couldn't get a job. I joined a gang. We broke into people's houses, that sort of thing.” When he was 17, Eric and two 18-year-olds robbed a store. “One of the gang gave me a gun,” he said. “He told me to guard the door. I didn't like the idea. They ran into the store. I thought the owner was getting a gun. It all happened so fast, I guess I panicked. I fired a shot. I was so shocked: The guy was dead! I wasn't able to move and the police caught me.”

### B

Eric got the death sentence. He has been in jail for seven years. It is the morning of his execution<sup>1</sup> day.

“I was on 'Death Row' for three years, 'waiting to die'. Every morning you wonder if they'll change the sentence. Waiting and hoping is terrible.”

When we asked him how he now felt about his crime, he said, “It took me a long time to understand why I was in this mess. In those days I wasn't interested in school.



I thought life in the streets was more 'real'. I didn't know what 'real' was. This, here, this is the real stuff – when you have to die. I want other kids out there to know that.”

### C

Yesterday Eric made his last phone calls and got longer visits. At the execution he was able to talk to his family through glass.

“Mum, Dad, Terry. Thank you for all your support, your presents and letters, calls and visits all these years, especially on Death Row. I broke the law, that's a fact. Now they're killing me for killing. That's the law of the land. I'm ready to go now. I love you all.”

He also spoke to the parents of the man he killed.

“First of all, I know that saying sorry won't bring your son back to you. But I am really sorry about what I did. I carried that gun. I killed a man. Killing is wrong and nothing can make it right. I'm sorry.”

### D

Eric J. was executed by lethal injection<sup>2</sup> at 6:34 pm on 10th November 2004. In 2005 the US changed the law so that someone under 18 could not be executed. Over two thirds of US states still have the death penalty<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>execution / to execute [eksɪ'kju:ʃən]/[ˈeksɪkju:t] – Hinrichtung/hinrichten; <sup>2</sup>lethal injection ['li:θəl in'dʒektʃən] – tödliche Spritze;

<sup>3</sup>death penalty ['deθ ,penəlti] – Todesstrafe

## 2 What happened to Eric?

- Read part A (Lines 1–16). What did Eric do? What sentence would he get in Germany?
- Read part B. What sentence did he get and how did he feel about it?

## 3 The execution

- Read part C. What is your impression of Eric just before his execution? Write notes.
- Compare your ideas with your partner. Write a profile of Eric J. Think about his crime, his gang, his feelings about the jail and Death Row and why he asked for the interview.
- Compare your profile with the others in your group. Have you forgotten anything?

## 4 A killer



- Read the text again and work out what Eric means when he says:

- “I guess I panicked.”
- “Waiting and hoping is terrible.”
- “...this is the real stuff.”
- “That’s the law of the land.”



- Readers wrote to the newspaper about Eric and his interview. Half your group reads Lucille’s letter, the other half reads Damian’s letter. Each half group writes short notes.

Sir/Madam:

I read your article “At the end of the line”. Why did you print this interview? Why didn’t you interview the parents of the poor guy whom that kid killed? Eric J. had to pay the price – OK he said sorry and maybe he really was sorry, but that won’t change anything.

We have so many killings but I’m glad we have the death penalty in our state. It probably stops more people from killing. And it saves the state money. We don’t have to keep the killers in jail.

Lucille B. Grant, Houston

Mr Editor:

I read the interview in your paper yesterday. I really feel for the family of the man who was killed, but I feel for Eric, too. His family have now also lost a son and brother. How does another death help anyone? What is the point? People have died for crimes that they didn’t do. When we’ve executed them by mistake, we can’t bring them back to life. I believe we shouldn’t use the death penalty. We say it’s wrong to kill, then we kill the person who did it!

Damian Johnson, Dallas



- Use your notes to tell the other half of your group what your letter writer thinks.

- Write a list of ideas for and against the death penalty. Add your own ideas. Vote for or against the death penalty.

## Lösungsvorschläge:

Ex. 1:

- a) 1. Das Leben wegwerfen/verschwenden; 2. Die Schule abbrechen; 3. In Häuser einbrechen;  
4. einmal schießen

b) The first photo shows an injection. It is maybe a lethal injection for someone who gets the death penalty. The second photo shows prison cells, it could be Death Row in a prison. Maybe they tell us about Eric – that he is, or was, in prison and gets, or already has got, the death penalty.

Ex. 2:

- a) He killed someone. He would get a long youth sentence.  
b) He got the death sentence. He understands why and he wants to tell other kids, so that they don't mess up their lives.

Ex. 3:

- a) didn't like school – joined a gang – did what the older members told him – thought that breaking into people's houses was OK – robbed a store – he was only 17 – now he is sorry – does not want others to do the same.

b) Eric killed a man when he was 17. He was robbing a store with two other gang members. It was not his gun and he but probably did not mean to kill anyone – but he did. Now that he is in jail and on Death Row, he wishes he had been more sensible. He hopes they will change the sentence, but all he can do is wait. He knows that what he did was wrong and hopes other people won't make the same mistakes. That's why he asked for the interview, and to say that he is sorry.

Ex. 4:

1. "I guess I panicked": He had a gun in his hand, but it wasn't his, one of the 18-year-olds gave it to him. He thought the man in the store was going to get a gun. He acted without thinking.  
2. "Waiting and hoping is terrible": He hopes that he will get a long jail sentence instead of the death penalty, but he doesn't know if that is possible. He just has to wait – but the date of execution could come before the change in his sentence. Every day he hopes, but nothing happens.

3. "...this is the real stuff": He could act tough with a gang on the streets but now he knows that he is going to die.  
4. "That's the law of the land": Actually, you know what will happen to you if you do something wrong.

b) Lucille's letter: Don't feel sorry for people who kill others. Death penalty: stops people killing, saves money on jails.

Damian's letter: Killing a killer doesn't help the dead person or their family – another family loses someone. Sentence not always right, mistakes can be made.