

Californians debate merits of death penalty before November vote

By Sam Stanton, Sacramento Bee

Sharron Mankins, McGregor Scott and Bill Babbitt each have watched a man die inside the death chamber at San Quentin State Prison, and each has a strong view on whether voters should end California's death penalty in November.

Even after 20 years, Mankins has no regrets about watching Robert Alton Harris die by cyanide gas for the 1978 murders of her 16-year-old son, Michael Baker, and his friend John Mayeski.

"We saw justice served," the 69-year-old Southern California woman said in an interview last month. "It took a long time, but it helped us all.

"I think it helped the whole family."

Scott, who witnessed the lethal-injection execution of Darrell Rich in March 2000 as the Shasta County district attorney, remembers the event with almost clinical precision.

"I do not want to minimize or downplay the fact that the man's life was taken that night," Scott said of the so-called "Hilltop Rapist," who killed four young women in a 1978 crime spree.

"But what I observed that evening could not in any way be described as cruel or unusual punishment. It was a very calm process in which he appeared to go to sleep. And that was it."

To Mankins and Scott, the death penalty is an important tool for prosecutors and victims, one that they both believe should

be retained.

For Babbitt, it is a costly waste and a reminder of the night in 1999 that he watched his brother, Manuel Babbitt, die by injection for the murder of 78-year-old Leah Schendel of Sacramento.

“Why don’t we take the money and fix people like Manny Babbitt ..., take that money and try to solve crimes?” asked Babbitt, who turned his brother in to police after Schendel’s slaying.

These are the opposing viewpoints that will play out in the coming weeks over Proposition 34, which asks voters to end the death penalty in California and allow death row inmates to be resentenced to life in prison without any chance of parole.

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