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Wrongfully Convicted Former Death Row Inmate to Speak at LeMoyne-Owen College Thursday, October 6th at 10:00 a.m.

MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE (Sept. 28, 2016) Ndume Olatushani, who spent 28 years in prison (nearly 20 of which were on death row), will share his harrowing story of being wrongfully convicted and sentenced to death on Thursday, October 6, 2016, at 10:00 a.m. at LeMoyne-Owen College in The Little Theatre. Mr. Olatushani will participate in a panel discussion about Tennessee's current death penalty system.

Other panelists include: Cynthia Vaughn, whose mother Connie Johnson was murdered in Shelby County in 1984 and whose step-father is now on Tennessee's death row; Reverend Stacy Rector, Executive Director of Tennesseans for Alternatives to the Death Penalty (TADP); and Peggy J. Lee, Esq., adjunct criminal justice instructor at LeMoyne-Owen College who also practices law in a private firm in Memphis.

The LeMoyne-Owen College Accelerated Studies for Adults and Professionals criminal justice major presents this free event. Criminal Justice instructor Bruce Cole says dialogue is critical to criminal justice reform. "Injustices occur throughout the criminal justice system and the death penalty is the only process that is irreversible once it is carried out," he says.

The use of the death penalty continues to decline across the United States with death sentencing and executions at a 40-year low and with 19 states having abandoned the death penalty altogether. Though Tennessee hasn't executed anyone since 2009, the state still has 64 people on its death row, some who have been there for decades. This panel will explore why states are moving away from the death penalty and will include the perspectives of those who have been directly impacted by it.

Ndume Olatushani was sentenced to death in 1985 for the 1983 murder of a Memphis store owner, Joe Belenchia, which took place during a botched robbery. Although he had never been to Tennessee and numerous witnesses put him in St. Louis at his mother's birthday party at the time of the crime, Olatushani was convicted and sentenced to death.

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In 2011, his conviction was overturned when the Tennessee Court of Criminal Appeals found that some of the state's witnesses had close ties to other suspects, which could have led them to implicate Olatushani. He was awarded a new trial and was subsequently offered an Alford plea. This plea deal allowed Olatushani to maintain his innocence, granted him an immediate release from jail, but, at the same time, required that he plead guilty to a lesser charge. After 28 years in prison, Olatushani took the deal and was released on June 1, 2012. "I am free today despite the system, not because the system actually works," Olatushani says.

Cynthia Vaughn lives in Memphis and worked 18 years as a police dispatcher. Her mother, Connie, was murdered in 1984, and her stepfather, Don Johnson, was convicted and sentenced to death for her mother's murder. For most of her stepfather's incarceration, Ms. Vaughn was a strong supporter of the death penalty. She has since changed her mind and now believes that the current system inflicts even more pain and trauma on victims' families.

Panelist Reverend Rector says the public is taking a closer look at the death penalty. "Increasingly citizens are becoming skeptical of the death penalty system because it is a very expensive government program that doesn't seem to be serving anyone," he stated. "Victims' families endure decades of litigation while the cost is far more than life without parole. Add the real risk of executing an innocent person, and one must ask why we continue to rely on a program that just isn't working."

This event is free and open to the public. Contact Bruce Cole at LeMoyne-Owen College at (901) 435-1429 for more information or email him at bruce_cole@loc.edu.

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The American Missionary Association founded The LeMoyne-Owen College in 1862 to educate freedmen and runaway slaves during the Civil War at the Union Army's Camp Shiloh in Shiloh, Tennessee. The school relocated to Memphis a year later, but was destroyed during race riots in 1866. Lincoln Chapel, as the school was then known, was rebuilt and reopened in 1867 with 150 students and six teachers. Lincoln Chapter was renamed LeMoyne Normal and Commercial School in honor of benefactor, physician and abolitionist Dr. Francis Julian LeMoyne and relocated to its current site at 807 Walker Ave in 1914. After more than 50 years of steady growth, LeMoyne merged with Owen College in 1968. Today, The LeMoyne-Owen College has a student body of more than 1,000 students and offers 4-year degrees in five disciplines: Business; Education; Fine Arts and Humanities; Natural, Math and Computer Sciences; and, Social and Behavioral and Sciences.

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