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

Susannah Sheffer

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How do attorneys who represent clients facing the death penalty cope with the stress and trauma of their work? Through conversations with twenty of the most experienced and dedicated post-conviction capital defenders in the United States, *Fighting for Their Lives* explores this emotional territory for the first time. What it is like for these capital defenders in their last visits or phone calls with clients who are about to be taken to the execution chamber? Or the next mornings, in their lives with their families, in their dreams and flashbacks and moments alone in the car? What is it like to do this work year after year? (These attorneys had, on average, spent nineteen years doing capital defense.)

Through vivid interviews amplified by the author's responses and commentary, these attorneys reveal aspects of their internal experience that they have never talked about until now. How do capital defenders manage the weight of the responsibility they carry? To what extent do they experience symptoms of trauma in the aftermath of losing a client to execution or as a result of the cumulative effects of engaging in capital defense work? What motivates them, and what do they draw upon, in order to keep engaging in such emotionally demanding work? Have they considered practicing other types of law? What can we learn from capital defenders not only about the deep and long-term effects of the death penalty but also about broader human questions of hope, effectiveness, success, failure, strength, fragility, and perseverance?

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