

Deskovic: End death penalty

Wrongly convicted man speaks before Bronxville group

Ken Valenti
The Journal News

BRONXVILLE — For most of his talk, Jeffrey Deskovic spoke carefully and evenly as he recalled his ordeal with a legal system that locked him away for 16 years for a killing he did not commit.

But, ending with a list of others wrongfully convicted, he paused by the third name — Sami Leka — and said quietly, “excuse me” twice to regain his composure.

Out just six months from the prison term that took up almost half of his 33 years, Deskovic is speaking out.

Yesterday, he made a pitch against the death penalty in New York state and for other reforms, such as ending the practice of offering criminals deals to testify against others. Had he been 18 when he was arrested, he said, he is sure he would have been executed long before his release last year.

“I have no doubt in my mind that I would have received the death penalty,” he told 15 members of the Bronxville League of Women Voters. “There would have been no 2006 for Jeffrey Deskovic.”

His arrest stemmed from the 1989 slaying of a 15-year-old Peekskill schoolmate after police obtained a confession, a statement that Deskovic said was forced from him after more than seven hours of interrogation. He was convicted even though semen recovered from the victim did not match his DNA.

After years of seeking new DNA tests — requests that were rebuffed by then-District Attorney Jeanine Pirro — Deskovic got his break last year when the Innocence Project took up his case. The new district attorney, Janet DiFiore, agreed to call for new DNA tests, which implicated another man, Steven Cunningham, who was already in prison for another crime. Cunningham pleaded guilty to second-degree murder in the case last week after a judge promised him 20 years to life in prison.

Speaking in the tea room of the Bronxville Women’s Club building, Deskovic said when police interview suspects, the sessions should be recorded on video.

“It would prevent them from omitting those dirty little details they would rather not have the courts and the rest of the world know that they engaged in,” he said.

The talk, arranged by New Yorkers Against the Death Penalty, had a powerful effect on the league members who came to hear it.

Member Edith Szold told him: “Your story is a terrible indictment of the system.”

Sandra Slade, president of the Bronxville league, encouraged him to keep spreading the word.

“I hope you will go on passing your message around,” she said. “Your message is very, very important.”

Deskovic talks wherever he can on how to reform the system. He is working toward a degree in psychology at Mercy College and hopes to go on to law school after graduating in the fall. His goal, he said, is to work to exonerate others who were wrongfully accused, a prospect that brought a smile to his face as he struggled to find a way to describe how he felt.

“That would be, like, so ... wow,” he said. “That would be unreal.”

Reach Ken Valenti
at kivalent@johud.com
or 914-696-6255