

RUTH FRIEDMAN BIO

Ruth Friedman has dedicated her career to fighting for the rights and lives of men and women sentenced to death, working first on behalf of state-sentenced people in Alabama and Georgia and then for those facing execution in the nation's federal criminal courts. She is the founding director of the Federal Capital Habeas (or "§ 2255") Project, established by the federal defender program in 2006 to assist those condemned to die in the federal system. Before Ruth arrived, there was no entity tasked with securing representation for the incarcerated people on federal death row or advancing their interests in the courts. Ruth recruited a staff of exceptional lawyers to examine the case of every person on the row and began to develop the law for those facing federal execution.

Under Ruth's leadership, the § 2255 Project has recruited and supported counsel in nearly every federal death row case while providing direct representation. The § 2255 Project explores complex substantive issues affecting death-sentenced federally incarcerated people, opening up new areas of the law that have led to multiple grants of relief. Ruth and her team were responsible for years of complex litigation relating to execution methods and practices affecting federally incarcerated people. Today, Ruth's office has become the central resource for information, policy analysis, and strategic assistance on the implementation of the federal death penalty. Equally important, in identifying and addressing the systemic issues apparent in these cases, the § 2255 Project brought to the fore how the comparatively well-funded system, sometimes touted as a "gold standard" in capital punishment, cannot escape the racial bias, prosecutorial overreaching and human error that plague the implementation of the death penalty in every instance.

Ruth started her capital career as a law student at SCHR, known then as the Southern Prisoners' Defense Committee. Recruited to join the staff upon graduation, Ruth wrote direct appeals, led habeas proceedings, and assisted at trials in Alabama, Georgia, and throughout the South. When Bryan Stevenson left SCHR to start a capital office in Alabama and asked Ruth to join him, she divided her time between the Southern Center and, first, the Alabama Capital Representation Resource Center, and later, the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) in Montgomery as they changed the face of capital representation in that state. For years, Ruth continued to work on behalf of people on the Southern death row alone and in conjunction with the Southern Center's Steve Bright, Clive Stafford Smith, and Palmer Singleton.

After leaving EJI and before starting the federal program, Ruth devised strategies to provide habeas resources to death row populations in underserved states through private grants and a contract with the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts. During this time, she partnered with longtime colleague George Kendall and others to successfully challenge attempts by Congress further to curtail incarcerated peoples' access to the habeas remedy. Ruth has advocated, litigated, lectured, and trained in courts and classrooms throughout the country and is widely known for mentoring young lawyers.

Ruth received her J.D. from Yale Law School and her undergraduate degree from Harvard University.