As the Stanford Undergraduate Research Journal enters its second year of publication, the editorial staff have become curious about how some of last year’s authors are doing. Although producing a publishable paper is quite a feat, it is not necessarily a culmination of their research endeavors: most of the researchers from last year’s journal are currently hard at work furthering their studies. Of particular note is Michael Osofsky, who published a paper titled, “The Psychological Experience of Security Officers Who Work With Executions.” In his paper, he discussed his results from interviewing 124 correctional officers affiliated with the death row and found that “participants in the execution process stress ‘caring professionalism,’” and even though they act with respect and decency, they “frequently have a hard time carrying out society’s ‘ultimate punishment.’”

Following publication, Osofsky extended his research from Louisiana and Alabama to a third state, Mississippi, and after conducting upwards of another hundred interviews, has completed the most extensive study ever conducted in this area. Osofsky states that although results continue “to show the two-fold conclusion of ‘caring professionalism,’ sets of differences have emerged within each state, largely as a function of the ‘top-down’ nature of a maximum-security penitentiary.” This differentiation is primarily a result of decisions by the Warden of each facility to determine exactly how a prison’s “execution team” will operate. In particular, Osofsky points out that a Warden in Louisiana emphasizes “religion and openness,” while a Warden in Alabama favors a “code of silence” and a Warden in Mississippi stresses a need to act with “extensive formality.”

Shortly after publication in SURJ, Osofsky was invited to an execution in Louisiana, which offered a unique perspective on the actual mechanism of execution. He speaks particularly vividly of the emotions surrounding the act itself and the way in which “what came through was the need to express professionalism as a coping device, an almost strange reality where the officers’ means of making sure that everything worked was by not letting mistakes occur. The concept of taking another’s life seemed to weigh heavily on their minds, and many opposed the death penalty. Still, the need to do a good job was supreme, and they were all able to perform their roles on the execution team. The implications are profound in that it is possible for normal people to humanize an entirely dehumanized process.”

Personally, Osofsky admits, “I couldn’t help being overwhelmed by an eerie feeling. While I’ve read a lot about capital punishment in books and the media, the feelings I experienced when that inmate looked me in the eye less than fifteen minutes before he died will never leave me. No one really seemed to want to be there, yet we were there, inextricably caught within the laws of the land.”

After publication in SURJ, Osofsky has gone on to present at numerous prestigious events including the 155th and 156th Annual Meeting of the American Psychiatric Association. He has also published in several other journals including Psychiatry: Interpersonal and Biological Processes and Criminal Defense Weekly Magazine.

For the future, Osofsky has received interest from several additional states to extend his research and plans on continuing his work next year while in Ireland as a George Mitchell Scholar. He has also received interest from several publishers on putting together a book on his research and intends to do so in the coming year. Ultimately, he hopes to affect future policy decisions on the death penalty after finishing his Honors Thesis and Coterminal degree in Psychology this spring.