

Clemency

(Continued from Page 3) and co-star Lynn Whitfield, have become backers.

"If Stan Tookie Williams had been born in Connecticut in the same type of situation, and was a White man, he would have been running a company," Foxx told the AP when the film aired last year on FX. "But, born a Black man who has the capability of having brute strength and the capability of being smart in the ways of the world, he's going to get into what he gets into."

Williams' support is particularly deep among Blacks but extends much further, said Farrell. Working with Tutu, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Farrell gathered signatures from more than 100 religious leaders, lawmakers and others of prominence for a clemency request that went to the governor Monday. Among those whose names are attached: NAACP Chairman Julian Bond; U.S. Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa; Harry Belafonte; Bonnie Raitt and

Russell Crowe.

Is there reason to think that Schwarzenegger's Hollywood ties might make him more receptive to celebrity pleas?

"No," Farrell said flatly. "One would hope that because he comes out of an industry beyond the political world that he's less subject to the pressures of politics, but, unfortunately, his career hasn't demonstrated that."

So far, Schwarzenegger hasn't said much about the execution, other than that he views it as a complex subject.

"It's never a fun thing to do. You're dealing with someone's life," he told reporters.

Williams' lawyers have requested a meeting with Schwarzenegger but haven't gotten a commitment.

The famous have long rallied to high-profile prisoners, including American Indian activist Leonard Peltier, convicted of killing two FBI agents, and Jack Henry Abbott, whose jailhouse letters to novelist Norman

Mailer were published as "In the Belly of the Beast." Abbott's release, which Mailer supported largely because of the convict's writing talent, ended tragically when he fatally stabbed a young man six weeks after being released. Back in prison, Abbott committed suicide.

Such celebrity campaigns rankle victim advocates. Nancy Ruhe, executive director of the National Organization of Parents of Murdered Children, argues that they glamorize a man like Williams and confer unwarranted role-model status.

"He becomes someone to look up to," Ruhe said. "There are so many people in our country you can look up to, but most certainly it should not be someone who has murdered several people."

If Schwarzenegger com-

mates Williams' sentence to life imprisonment, it would be the first time a California governor has done so since 1967. That's when Ronald Reagan — the last actor-turned-politico to govern California — spared the life of Calvin Thomas, a 27-year-old man convicted in a firebombing that killed his girlfriend's toddler son. His lawyers argued that Thomas was brain-damaged.

Comparing Schwarzenegger and Reagan, veteran political reporter and Reagan biographer Lou Cannon sees a key difference: The future U.S. president had quickly made the transition from actor to leader, while Schwarzenegger, as Cannon sees it, still is struggling with the metamorphosis.

"I don't think he's going to be dismissive of these (stars), because they're from

his community, but ultimately that's not going to make his decision," said Cannon. "He'll decide it on the merits."

Whitfield, who came to know Williams while preparing to film "Redemption," said those merits are self-evident.

"I don't think of myself as speaking as a celebrity. I come with the advantage of having delved into his story," she said. "No one has said, 'Can you just open up the gates and let Stan be a free man in the world.' ...But he, at least, can continue to do the work he's doing."

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Offenders

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each of them thinks about that question especially hard. Ribeiro says being an ex-offender on the outside is like wearing a scarlet letter.

"On job applications or apartment applications... my record always comes up," said Ribeiro, who completed his most recent — and he says his last — stint behind bars in 2000. Ribeiro has survived on the outside, though — thanks in part to the help he has received through programs like Faith Seeds. He works as the night shelter manager at the Bethesda Center and has a place to call home.

Ribeiro prays that others who are released will find the help he did because without it, he doesn't believe he would be a free man today.

"The change in me came from within, but without the mentoring and encouragement... I would have been right back in there," he said.

Parmon has long been an advocate for helping ex-offenders make a smooth transition to the outside. But those like her are few and far between in the General Assembly, where any talk of starting programs to help ex-offenders could be viewed as being soft on crime. She and another legislator tried to push through legislation that would not require ex-offenders to reveal their criminal pasts on applications if they had served time at least 10 years ago. The legislation got a chilly reception from other lawmakers and died a quick death.

Parmon said until the community realizes that it is more sane and economically sound to help ex-offenders rather than locking them up time and time again, lawmakers will never change their tunes.

"It has to be an outcry in the communities across the state," she said.

Glover said ex-offenders are not looking for hand-outs, just helping hands that can guide them along the path that they must follow. Faith Seeds will provide some of those hands, but more are desperately needed, she said.

"This is not about giving them something. This is about creating an opportunity for them to be successful," said Glover.

T. Kevin Walker writes for the Winston-Salem Chronicle.

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