As memorial remembers brutally slain inmate, killer or killers still free

By DENVER K. SCHIMMING

We have often heard the phrase, “They are getting away with murder!”

Just the other day standing at the gas pump, a woman looked at me as she was pumping gas into her car and complained aloud: “These oil companies are getting away with murder!” We all understand that in her frustration what she meant, of course, was not literal murder.

In this case, it is.

On July 5, 2004, Estelle Richardson, 34, a female prisoner at the Corrections Corporation of America-run Metro Detention Facility in Nashville, was found unresponsive in a segregation cell. She was in solitary confinement. She was declared dead that same day at a local hospital.

An autopsy conducted by the state medical examiner found she had a fractured skull, four broken ribs and a damaged liver. Her death was ruled a homicide. The day before she died, Estelle was forcibly removed from her cell by CCA officers. Estelle also suffered from mental illness.

When investigators arrived at the CCA-Metro facility, they asked to see the videotape of Estelle’s cell extraction the day before her death. This is a required procedure for correctional facilities to carry out when an inmate is removed from their cell by force. According to the state attorney general’s office, the investigators were told by CCA staff that the video camera had “malfucioned,” and no video was available. Yet, when an investigator asked to see the camera and inspected it, it appeared to be in working order.

(Charges against four guards were dropped in May 2007.)

Prison is a separate world unto its own. They have their own laws, their own commerce and industry and even their own dress code. But the one commodity that all prisons enjoy is absolute, unrestricted, and a vast majority of the time, unaccountable power over their incarcerated population.

Children deserve justice

Behind many prison walls, absolute power often does corrupt absolutely. And it was in this environment that Estelle lived. And died. No one, whether they are in prison or not, deserves to leave this life the way she did. Her children deserve real justice. Not the kind of justice you can buy or the kind you receive based upon the color of your skin. Estelle was a beautiful African-American woman who grew up in poverty. Would more have been done to fully investigate her murder if her home ZIP Code had been in Belle Meade, Brentwood or Green Hills?

On Tuesday night, July 1, at 7:30 p.m. in front of the CCA-Metro Detention Facility where she was killed, at 5115 Harding Place, there will be a memorial service to remember Estelle and her death that took place four years ago. I cannot quit thinking about her children and have often wondered if the last thoughts that ran through her mentally ill mind were of her kids as she was being beaten. Did she cry out their names? With the multiple injuries she received inside the CCA facility, how long did the deadly assault go on? Did the assailants laugh as they broke her bones? Sadly, without the videotape, we will never know. But rest assured, someone does.

A $35,000 cash reward is being offered for information that leads to the recovery of or proof of the videotape along with information that leads to the prosecution and conviction of the person or people responsible for Estelle’s death. You can go to www.whokilledestelle.org for more information.

After almost four years, the questions still remain today: Who killed Estelle Richardson, and what happened to the videotape, if any existed, of her forcible cell extraction the day before she died? Her death remains unsolved. Does anyone care?

Quite literally, someone is getting away with murder. 

Denver Schimming of Goodlettsville is a local businessman, prison-reform advocate and public speaker. E-mail: dkschimming@comcast.net.