

Inmate's slaying in CCA custody torments ex-cellmate

Woman appeals to DA to reopen cold case that was ruled homicide

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Sharron Peterman says her memories of Estelle Richardson have haunted her for years.

Peterman remembers the bruises that marked her friend's body after run-ins with guards in a Metro jail.

She remembers the tattoos that seemed like sleeves on a guard's arm when he entered their cell to confront Richardson. She remembers the time when she learned that Richardson was dead.

Peterman was an inmate with Richardson, 34, whose lifeless, beaten body was found in a solitary cell on July 5, 2004. Her death, ruled a homicide, remains a mystery.

Peterman, 39, has gone to the Davidson County prosecutor to tell him what she recalled from her days in the cell with Richardson, urging him to press on, and to find out the truth at the prison operated by Corrections Corporation of America.

Peterman wants the cold case solved.

Peterman has not been able to let it all go despite the four years that have passed since Richardson's death, despite charges being dropped against four guards, despite a settlement between CCA and Richardson's family.

"I still lose sleep over this," she says. "I'd want someone to find out what happened to me. I think Estelle's kids deserve to know. I don't want them to get away with what they think they got away with."

Peterman went to the district attorney last week. Her plea to reopen the case coincides with a judge's ruling on Tuesday that CCA must abide by the state's public records laws.

Nationwide, CCA has been under scrutiny for its treatment of prisoners. Since Richardson's death, the nation's largest for profit prison operator, which has 65 detention centers, has faced criticism, lawsuits and complaints stemming from their practices.

Richardson's death prompted public skepticism of the detention centers and became a lightning rod to derail the nomination of CCA's general counsel, Gus Puryear, for a federal judgeship.

Richardson's death also shed light on what mentally ill inmates have faced at CCA facilities. Locally, a man didn't leave his cell or shower for nine months at the CCA detention center. And another man lost part of his ear during an altercation. In Texas, the treatment of detained immigrant families triggered national coverage, with the ACLU fighting for more humane conditions.

Not a model prisoner

Peterman says she was serving 406 days in jail for drug possession when she first met Richardson in 2001. And when Peterman failed to complete her community service, she was reunited in jail with

Richardson for four days in June 2004. Peterman says Richardson was not a model prisoner and had run-ins with the guards while doing time for food stamp fraud and drug possession. Richardson was classified a special needs inmate by the prison and had to take psychotropic medication to control her emotional problems.

"I understood what was going on and she acted up," Peterman says. "She took her medication during pill call. She was thrown in there, and they don't know how to deal with people who may be manic-depressive or sick."

Richardson, however, was not the only one being mistreated, Peterman says.

An older woman, who bunked with them in the solitary confinement area of the Metro Jail in 2004, was dragged out of the cell by guards after they yelled about the poor conditions, says Peterman.

"The woman had health issues and had defecated on herself," Peterman says. "She was with us for a couple of days. I watched as the guards came and dragged her out and kicked her with steel-toe boots."

Weeks after her release, Peterman found out about Richardson's death on the news. She died of blunt force trauma, suffering a cracked skull, cracked ribs and damaged liver.

Four guards were charged with her beating death. Without any evidence, including video that would have shown her being removed from her cell, the prosecutor had to drop charges against the guards.

Guards claimed the video camera was not working at the time. Prison policy is to videotape the removal of an inmate from a cell. There were suspicions surrounding that claim after a Metro investigator checked the video camcorder and it worked. The guards, according to the company, no longer work there.

"More broadly, with respect to the criminal case, CCA has cooperated fully in the investigation and will continue to do so," CCA spokesman Steven Owen wrote in an e-mail. "On all other matters we defer to the office of the district attorney."

Richardson's family received a settlement after they filed a lawsuit against Nashville-based CCA. Details of Richardson's treatment and the use of excessive force surfaced during the lawsuit her family filed against CCA.

According to the suit:

On April 26, 2004, Richardson was maced, or pepper-sprayed, while she was in a caged shower. She was maced for not putting on her pants quickly enough to the officer's liking. She was handcuffed and placed in leg irons while officers put pressure on her back when she was face down.

On June 27, 2004, Richardson went to the medical clinic for having blood on her head. An inmate said she had injuries to her thigh and back prior to July 5, the day she was found dead. And on the next day she was seen by a nurse for "blood oozing" from the left ear.

On July 2, 2004, she had an altercation with a guard in a shower cage, where she bled from the head.

On Sunday, July 4, 2004, the day before she was found dead in her cell, guards went to her cell and told Richardson to "get her nasty ass up and clean her room." An altercation followed with the guards.

The next day at 6 a.m. Richardson was found dead.

Efforts have continued to find out what happened to Richardson.

Critics say open records would make the prison corporation, which answers to shareholders, accountable.

"It would have been a huge help," says Denver Schimming, who served time in prison and is an advocate for prison reform. "None of those details have ever come out: who was involved and the circumstances around her murder. It's a good, minor victory now. But it's great that we're moving in that direction."

An anonymous donor has offered a \$35,000 reward leading to the conviction for those responsible for her death and \$10,000 of that is for the videotape of her cell extraction, according to a Web site, whokilledestelle.org, started by Alex Friedmann, who single-handedly has taken CCA to task. Friedmann filed the suit against CCA for open records.

Assistant District Attorney General says the case is not closed, but it's being treated as a cold case.

"I would love to find out what happened," Rob McGuire says. "I would dearly love to tell Ms. Richardson's family who killed her and under what circumstances. I'm not going anywhere. I hope to do that."