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Officials will seek death penalty in Richardson case

By Michael Abramowitz
The Daily Reflector

Tuesday, December 08, 2009

Officials will seek the death penalty for a man accused in the June 30 shooting deaths of two people outside a downtown Greenville night club.

Pitt County District Attorney Clark Everett announced the decision during a hearing Tuesday for James Earl Richardson held at the Pitt County Superior Court’s on-site courtroom at the Pitt County Detention Center, with Judge W. Russell Duke Jr. presiding.

Richardson is charged in the homicides of Drew Kirby and Landon Blackley outside The Other Place nightclub on Fifth Street.

Everett cited two aggravating circumstances that he believes warrant application of a rule that allows him to seek capital punishment.

“The defendant knowingly created a risk of death to more than one person by use of a weapon, a .45-caliber semi-automatic pistol, which he fired at least six times into a crowd on the sidewalk of East Fifth Street,” Everett said.

Everett also alleged that by killing each of the victims during the act of killing the other, Richardson created a second aggravating circumstance, according to North Carolina general statutes.

"Mr. Blackley and Mr. Kirby were in no way associated with Mr. Richardson. They just happened to be in the wrong place when he started shooting into the crowd," Everett said.

The state has never found the death penalty to be disproportional to a double homicide conviction, Everett said in explaining his decision.

Following the announcement, Duke kept Richardson’s bond set at $5 million, despite arguments from Richardson’s attorneys, Thomas J. Moore and Damian L. Tucker, to have his bond lowered to no higher than $2 million, the highest bond set for the other current capital murder suspect in Pitt County.

Speaking for Richardson’s character, his sister and brother testified that he is an intelligent man with a college education, that he comes from a good family of accomplished siblings, and has worked with at-risk school children.

They also testified that Richardson, who has no prior criminal record, made his own decision to return to Greenville and turn himself over to the Greenville police on July 4 and defend himself against the charges in court, rather than remain at large as a fugitive.

Moore also called Rufus Huggins, president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, to explain his part in Richardson’s surrender. Richardson’s family requested that Huggins be present when Richardson turned himself over to his friend, Greenville police officer Shawn Moore, at his grandmother’s home.

"My main concern was for James’ safety that day, and I’m sure that’s why I was asked to be there," Huggins said.

Richardson’s family expressed anger and concern over Everett’s decision to seek the death penalty.

His older brother, Donald Perkins, said Richardson’s bond amount is unnecessarily high because his brother
poses no threat to the community and would not run.

"Why would he turn himself in if he was a threat? If he was a threat, you would have to go get him, and someone else would have been hurt," Perkins said.

Richardson, 32, was indicted by a grand jury on Sept. 14 with two counts of first-degree murder, clearing the way for death penalty prosecution. He has maintained his innocence in the case.

Police have said he is the lone suspect in the crime, allegedly firing multiple shots at the club from a white BMW as it drove by the club.

Police reviewed video tape from surveillance cameras that monitor the Fifth Street area where the shooting occurred. Investigators said the cameras did not capture the incident.

Before he turned himself over to Moore, officers issued warrants for Richardson a day after the shooting and offered a $10,000 reward for information leading to an arrest.

Richardson was a standout athlete at J.H. Rose High School and played basketball for teams in Europe and the NBA's developmental league.

While evidence and information still is being exchanged among counsel, Richardson's next hearing date is set for Feb. 2.

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Clue to disease rates is in genes

Genetic difference in the way some African-Americans process glucose may explain why they are disproportionately susceptible to diabetes and heart disease, scientists at UNC-Chapel Hill report today.

While it has long been understood that some diseases run in families, the UNC-CH finding adds clarity to the genetic causes and is certain to spark debate over the notion of an inherent, racially-based predisposition to disease.

"There's no doubt that this is a controversial issue," said Dr. Cam Patterson, chief of the division of cardiology at UNC-Chapel Hill School of Medicine and co-author of the study, published in the online journal PloS One. "But it's a big mistake to overlook the differences in genes and populations and ethnicities that are going to have an impact on health."

Patterson said the UNC-CH team was surprised by its discovery, which was made when the scientists began building a database for common molecular traits among people who have heart problems. One genetic marker, associated with poor glucose metabolism, showed up repeatedly.

"It really mystified us," Patterson said.

When the scientists checked which patients had this trait, they discovered the racial connection. A similar genetic finding shows up in a database of heart disease patients throughout West Africa, Patterson said.

The role of diabetes

The link between glucose metabolism and heart disease is diabetes, which causes heart problems. People with diabetes cannot properly process the sugars from food into energy, and the buildup of glucose in the bloodstream damages organs, including the heart.

In North Carolina and across the nation, type 2 diabetes is on the rise in all populations, the result of obesity and inactivity. But it hits African-Americans disproportionately. More than 13 percent of blacks in North Carolina have diabetes, while 8.7 percent of whites have it, state data show.

A similar disparity is found in heart disease among men.

Patterson said the genetic finding likely stems from geography, harkening back thousands of years when humans uniquely adapted to the food and microorganisms in their environments. Northern Europeans, science has shown, have different genetic tendencies than Southern Italians.

Broader view wanted

Joseph Graves Jr., a molecular biologist and dean of biological sciences at N.C. A&T State University in Greensboro, said he does not question the genetic findings, but he said they do not explain why blacks have higher rates of diabetes or heart disease.
Instead, he noted, African-Americans are disproportionately poor. As a result, they have less access to healthy foods, make fewer doctor visits and are exposed to more environmental toxins - all of which add up to higher disease rates.

"They're assigning causality to a gene that isn't simply the gene," Graves said. "And they're not doing a sufficient job of explaining how environmental differences, which result from our social history, are playing a role in making people sick."

Graves, who published a book in 2002 about biological theories of race, said there is no genetic basis for race written into the DNA codes of humans, but he concurred that geographic history can create inherited differences between people.

To the extent that there is no so-called race gene, the UNC-CH findings add to a growing number of studies that are finding molecular differences that predispose disease on people linked by their geographic histories. Earlier this year, a Wake Forest University team reported on a genetic link among African-Americans to a form of kidney disease.

Ministry unsurprised

Such insights could help those working to erase the disparities.

Barbara Lee, a clinical social worker in Pitt County who is director of an intervention to help blacks with diabetes and heart disease, said the hereditary nature of the diseases has long been evident.

"It does exist disproportionately in the African-American communities," Lee said, noting that her organization, Cornerstone Ministries, is working with black churches to help their members become more active and eat healthier.

The group won a $360,000 grant three years ago that was renewed in July by the state's Health and Wellness Trust Fund. Its mission is to tackle the health disparities of diabetes and heart disease - one of the primary goals of the trust fund.

The UNC-CH team is now studying interventions that could be specific to the different groups, based on their genetic makeup.

"The standard approach in medicine is to treat every patient the same, in terms of drug therapies and interventions," Patterson said. "But we know that every patient is not the same. Understanding genetics will help us understand what the patient needs."

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Louisburg College keeps accreditation

Louisburg College has stabilized its finances enough to win accreditation until 2016.

The two-year residential college in Franklin County was at risk of losing its accreditation. In recent years, the college had borrowed money for operating expenses, amassing a debt of about $5 million. Last year, the college slashed its budget and cut jobs and has stopped taking on debt through a line of credit.

The Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, which voted to extend Louisburg's accreditation Tuesday at a meeting in Atlanta, had kept the college on probation since 2006.

"We're very pleased," said college President Mark La Branche. "We have a very unique mission. And I'm excited we'll be able to continue that mission and grow stronger in it.

La Branche took over as president in January and made several changes to attract more students and generate revenue. He said the college has had to cut more positions, reallocate financial aid and increase its fundraising efforts. It also put more money into departments, such as recruiting, that La Branche said would produce a return.

As a result, the college saw a 10 percent growth in enrollment, to about 650 students, and a 20 percent spike in freshmen.

La Branche also said the economy has driven more students into education.
December 8, 2009

Former Dean Resurfaces, Leaving Scandal Behind

By TAMAR LEWIN

Two and a half years ago, Marilee Jones, the highly regarded dean of admissions at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, vanished from public sight when it came to light that nearly three decades earlier, when she was first hired there, she had lied about her academic credentials.

That revelation was a major scandal in academic circles, where Ms. Jones was well known for trying to help students calm down as they competed for admission to the most selective colleges. From the day she resigned, April 26, 2007, Ms. Jones went silent, cutting off contact with most of her colleagues at M.I.T. and in other admissions offices, and not responding to messages.

"I dropped off the grid, on purpose," she said in a recent interview. "I needed time to reground and heal."

But now, like many others tainted by scandal (think Martha Stewart), she has begun a second act. After a move to New York, and a divorce from Steven R. Bussolari, of M.I.T.'s Lincoln Laboratory, she has re-emerged with a new consulting business, offering her services both to admissions offices and to parents.

Ms. Jones still will not discuss what happened at M.I.T., or how her lies unraveled. "I've put that behind me," she said.

Only the bare bones of her misrepresentations are known. According to M.I.T., Ms. Jones, 58, had on various occasions represented herself as having degrees from three upstate New York institutions: Albany Medical College, Union College and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. In fact, she had no degrees from any of those places — only a 1973 bachelor's degree, in biology, from the College of St. Rose, an independent college in Albany, where she grew up.

Ms. Jones said that she had never read a single word of the news coverage of her resignation — but that she very much appreciated the support she had received since.

"I got hundreds and hundreds of letters and e-mails and packages and angels, from people I hadn't heard from in years, people I'd helped, and people I didn't know," she said. "It was awesome, and it really carried me through a hard time."

Ms. Jones's fall from grace came as she was reaching a nationwide audience, touring and speaking about the book she wrote with Dr. Kenneth R. Ginsburg, a pediatrician, "Less Stress, More Success: A New Approach to Guiding Your Teen Through College Admissions and Beyond," which cemented her reputation as the leader of a movement to calm the college-admissions frenzy.

It did not take long for Ms. Jones to gravitate back to what she knows best: college admissions. About four months after leaving M.I.T., Ms. Jones was hired as consultant by the admissions office at the Berklee
College of Music in Boston.

“We knew of her reputation, that she was someone who could give us excellent advice,” said Damien Bracken, Berklee’s dean of admissions. “Obviously we were aware of what happened at M.I.T., but she had such a stellar reputation as a dean there that we felt the value of the consultation was in the expertise she could provide. She spent close to a year working with me, and it was really, really great.”

And since then, Ms. Jones said, she has been hired as a consultant by two other institutions, which she would not name.

Ms. Jones said she had also been approached by institutions — she would not name them either — interested in hiring her as an admissions dean, but had not been tempted.

“I don’t want to work that hard,” she said. “And at this point in my life, I’m not interested in institutions that don’t really move me.”

One part of her new life is volunteering as a college expert for teenage cancer survivors at the Center for Survivor Wellness at NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital/Columbia.

Ms. Jones, who has a college-age daughter, remains committed to the mission of taking the stress out of college admissions. And to that end, she is consulting with parents, sometimes offering reduced fees, sometimes charging about $500 for a three-hour session, plus unlimited e-mail messages. So far, she said, not a single client has mentioned the M.I.T. résumé scandal.

Ms. Jones would like to expand her reach, with parent seminars at public schools.

“The bottom line is that I’m really afraid of how we’re raising kids, with so many expectations, and so much fear of failure,” she said. “Failure is practice, and we seem to want everything perfect, the first time. It’s important to learn to fall and get back up again. And if I can do it, anybody can do it.”

But her plans to move into the broader public arena are being delayed. She had offered to speak last Thursday at a college night for juniors at Montclair High School in New Jersey, but Scott White, a guidance counselor there, canceled the appearance.

Mr. White said he had no comment on the cancellation and no plans to reschedule.

Ms. Jones sees herself as a guidance counselor for parents, and stresses that she is not an independent college counselor mapping out strategies to get a child into college, but rather a counselor helping parents learn to support their children through a time of tension.

And New York City, she said, may be where she can be most helpful.

“I moved to New York because I’ve always wanted to live here and also because there’s a lot of work to be done here,” she said. “In New York, you have so many parents asking: ‘What’s the secret? Who do I have to know? How much do I have to pay?’ It’s so pervasive, it’s a cultural difference. It’s terrible for the system and it’s terrible for democracy, and it really hurts the kids.”

She added: “In their worrying about college, a lot of parents lose touch with who their kids are. I want them
to fall in love with the child again.”

Usually, Ms. Jones said, after parents share their worries about whether their child will get into an elite college, will be Ivy League material, will find a comfortable place in the world, they realize that the issue is not so much their child’s college admission as coming to terms with their own dreams and wishes.

“After they talk about their concerns, they reach the point, pretty soon, where they can say, ‘Oh, this is really about me,’ and then they can get out of the way and support their child,” she said. “Ultimately, this is about facing ourselves.”