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Pearl Beale Gets Justice: City Gives Biggest Payout In Wrongful Death Of Inmate

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In a “Special 40th Anniversary Issue” of its newsletter, the [Washington Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs](#) noted that the District recently made some big news. The city offered the largest settlement in its history for a wrongful-death case involving a prisoner. The prisoner had been fatally stabbed at the D.C. Jail six years ago.

The murder occurred in December 2002. During a four-day period that month, three men were stabbed—only one survived. “No corrections officers witnessed the incidents,” the Committee [reports](#).

The Committee goes on to report that the D.C. Prisoner’s Legal Services Project (now the [D.C. Prisoners’ Project of the Committee](#)), along with the firm [Sparks & Silber](#), and [Covington & Burling](#) filed the wrongful death case against the District on behalf of **Pearl Beale**. Beale is the mother of one of the deceased D.C. Jail inmates, **Givon Pendleton**. The case generated in excess of 50,000 pages of discovery documents. And thousands of pages of deposition transcripts. There were fights over a lot of the discovery right down to e-mail search terms.

Despite all the legal wrangling, depositions and discovery documents, the case landed big-time and in unexpected ways. Lawsuits involving inmates often disappear. This one did not. The lawyers in this case didn’t back down.

The Washington Lawyers' Committee's newsletter has a great summary of the case's impact: "For more than four years, the case was inextricably linked with reform of the D.C. Jail, with plaintiffs' attorneys advocating on a wide range of issues, from security, staffing, and population limits to the naming of a reform-minded Director of the Department of Corrections."

At the time, the stabbings were huge news. And made more so by then-Councilmember **Kathy Patterson's** expert oversight hearings on overcrowding and jail violence. The exploding jail pop was a defining problem. Following Patterson's hearings, a law was passed that would help curb inmate overcrowding. But [it took time and more rounds of agitating](#) before the D.C. Jail's pop was under control. *Washington City Paper* chronicled why [inmates were getting away with so many violent incidents](#). We also chronicled the [guards' fondness for macing private parts](#).

But now, the D.C. Jail pop is down, pretrial inmates are housed based on a new classification system, hi-tech security surveillance cameras keep an eye on areas where guards alone cannot, and the facility has solved its staffing-at-lunch-time issue by adding an extra officer to every cellblock. When reached via phone, Beale attorney **Douglas Sparks**, had a lot to say about the case. None of it involved money; he refused to comment on just how big the payout was. Instead, he wanted to talk about the case's impact on jail reforms, and its impact on Ms. Beale.

From our lengthy talk, it was clear the case had a huge impact on Sparks as well. He would write in a subsequent e-mail:

"During 5 years of litigation following the savage murder of 24 year old Givon Pendleton, his mother, Pearl Beale, never stopped telling his story despite her own grief. With eloquence and dignity, she put a human face on the rampant violence at the jail. To their credit, city officials all the way from the Mayor down to the newly installed Director of Corrections finally listened. The fundamental changes they made to how the jail is run today would have been unthinkable before Givon's death. This, more than anything, should be Givon's legacy: The jail is safer, less crowded, better managed, and more humane because prison reform advocates cared and District leaders acted."

Indeed, the D.C. Jail may not be the joke it once was. Partly because Beale became a big-time advocate for improving jail and prison conditions. She gave [eloquent statements](#) before a commission and [never let up](#) in sharing her story and the story of her son's death.

No words, no money, and no reforms will bring back her son. What should we take away from this case? Beale's own testimony about the horrible consequences of governmental indifference:

“On December 11, 2002, my 24 year old son, Givon Pendleton, was brutally stabbed nine times in the District of Columbia Jail. As he lay dying right there in that jail, no corrections officers were there to intervene or to help. My son Givon was being held at the jail on a pretrial status for non-violent charges, but his attacker, another inmate, was awaiting trial on two first-degree murder charges. Not long before attacking my son, he and his gang had beaten another prisoner as well. That horrible day will be with me forever....

It is true that it may seem he had gotten a bit off track, but he was a good child. And on that December day, when my son’s life was ruthlessly ended, he was waiting for his chance to present his case in court. He never got that chance. Instead of being given an opportunity to a trial, as we are all guaranteed by our Constitution, he was handed a death sentence that was carried out prior to any trial or conviction. In fact, the day I buried him was the day he was scheduled for court.”