

Attorneys battle over civil case in jailhouse death

By **ROB JOHNSON**
Staff Writer

The civil legal battle over Estelle Richardson's jailhouse death has opened with a furious round of courthouse jabs. The legalese zings with counterpunches that allude to kidnapped clients, hijacked plaintiffs and allegations of unethical attorney behavior.

And the defense hasn't even responded yet to the case.

Richardson, the 34-year-old victim of a skull-crushing jailhouse beating, left behind two children when she died inside a Davidson County facility operated by a private corporation.

Now the woman's children, son Savion Richardson, 6, and daughter Saviyance Beck, 14,

Richardson find themselves in the midst of a legal squabble between two sets of attorneys seeking to represent them in a multimillion-dollar wrongful death suit against Corrections Corporation of America, the private company that operates the Nashville facility where Richardson was killed.

Her July 5 death has been ruled a homicide, and Metro authorities are still conducting a criminal investigation into the circumstances surrounding her death.

By July 29, the firm of high-profile Nashville trial attorney Bart Durham had filed a \$60 million civil rights lawsuit in Nashville's U.S. District Court against CCA. The corporation has yet to respond in court to the lawsuit. Friday, CCA deputy general counsel Steve Groom declined to comment, saying that the company's response would have to come in court filings. He added that CCA was honoring a request by Metro police not to discuss the Richardson case publicly because of the ongoing criminal investigation.

For now though, the legal battle pits two law firms against one another. Durham's nemesis in the Richardson case is lawyer Geoffrey Fieger, the one-time Michigan gubernatorial candidate who is perhaps best known to Americans as the man who has represented assisted-suicide advocate Dr. Jack



Fieger asserts that he represents the children's true legal guardian, Estella Buie. She was Richardson's grandmother, and after Richardson's parents died, Buie became her adoptive mother. Buie, like Fieger, lives in Michigan.

Durham counters that he represents the children's proper guardians: Tyrone Gibson, Savion's uncle, and Jimmy T. Beck, Saviyance's father.

The allegations between the two legal camps has been salty:

Beck, Gibson and their Nashville attorneys have refused to back away from the case, Fieger charges in court documents.

"At one point, the attorneys for Tyrone Gibson and Jimmy Beck Jr. flew Mr. Gibson to Michigan and suddenly appeared banging at the door of Estella Buie demanding entry and asking her to 'sign something,'" states a motion filed by Terry McNabb, a Nashville attorney affiliated with Fieger. "She refused, sending them away."

Fieger's team of attorneys charges that Durham's has advised another family member, who has been keeping the children recently, not to surrender the children to Buie, "fostering the necessity of a complaint to the Lansing Police."

Durham's camp, which includes his son Blair Durham and Nashville attorney David Randolph Smith, has an entirely different view, according to its motions. They contend that "justice requires" Buie not be vested to bring the suit that Fieger wishes.

Buie has been an unenthusiastic guardian, they contend, and the children have been living with Nikeya Brown, their aunt.

Swirling around the suits are questions about who fronted Buie the thousands of dollars in funeral expenses she obtained for Richardson, according to court filings.

Meanwhile, family members in both Michigan and Nashville have gone to probate courts to try to get Buie dismissed as the children's guardian. What those probate courts do, the motions show, will largely shape who eventually represents the interests of two children who, for now, instead of a mother, have relatives and two teams of attorneys trying to sort out what's best for them.

They stand to win millions if their current federal suit is successful — assuming the plaintiffs' attorneys can figure out how to proceed. ■