

ESSENCE

WHY IS SHARON RICHARDSON STILL IN PRISON?

TRUTH AND JUSTICE

Should a battered woman convicted of conspiring to murder her abusive boyfriend be granted clemency?

By Kristal Brent Zook

Sharon Richardson is in jail for murder and conspiracy. And a growing number of legal advocates, elected officials and community leaders think she should be allowed to go free. Convicted of conspiring to kill her boyfriend, Jeffrey Bridges, in May 1990, she has served 14 years of a 20-to-life sentence at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in upstate New York. But Richardson's story is not quite that simple. For one thing, she was an abused woman, battered in body and spirit by the man she is convicted of murdering. For another, she did not actually wield the knife that ended Bridges's life. That gruesome deed was done by Dwayne Mitchell, a young acquaintance of the couple, who—along with Richardson and three teens—was sent to prison in connection with the murder. But while Mitchell confessed, served 12 years and was paroled in May 2002, Sharon Richardson, now 44, has maintained her innocence, yet is still doing time.

Since her incarceration, she has been a model prisoner. She has a stack of certificates attesting to her accomplishments in baby and adolescent care, AIDS counseling and group-therapy sessions. [CONTINUED ON PAGE 168]



She is part of an honor housing program, in which a few prisoners enjoy private rooms with their own keys, and she was selected to be a clerk to the former prison superintendent. While incarcerated, she earned her associate of arts degree in social sciences with a 3.5 grade-point average, and her instructors described her as a “steady and hardworking” student. She also has a stable home to return to, job offers from friends and supporters, and a family who loves her.

So why is Richardson still in jail? Last September her lawyer, Stacey Shortall, and her colleagues at the prestigious New York law firm Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison LLP put that question to New York’s governor, George Pataki, and the state’s clemency review board. A decision is expected later this month.

Shortall and her colleagues say battered women who kill violent partners are often too harshly treated by the justice system. They point out that recidivism rates for women like Richardson who have no prior record, possess a college degree, have undergone counseling and demonstrated a solid work history are virtually zero. Further, they argue that given the abuse she endured, the time she has served, and her exemplary behavior in prison, Richardson deserves clemency. So committed are the lawyers to securing her release, they agreed to take her case pro bono.

Richardson’s case differs from other domestic-violence clemency cases in a few significant ways. “At the end of the day, clemency is really about mercy,” Shortall explains, adding that,

among domestic-violence victims who’ve killed their abusers and been released, “the common factor is that they actually admit they committed the crime.” Richardson, on the other hand, has always insisted she is innocent. “She certainly takes responsibility for anything she might have said or done that led to this,” says her attorney, “but she doesn’t admit she was directly involved.” Shortall adds, “At the same time, the clemency bureau really wants to see a lot of remorse here. Our courts said she did it, and she’s been through all these appeals, so from their perspective, she still is not being truthful about her involvement.”

Shortall also points out that Richardson’s relationship with Bridges lasted only four months. “I’m opposed to putting domestic violence on a scale, because abuse is abuse,” Shortall says. “But in terms of how the clemency bureau might see it, the women in some of the other cases endured really long, ongoing abuse. I also think you can never escape the racial features in these appeals. Package all that together, and this isn’t an easy political case.”

Nevertheless, a strong, grassroots momentum is building for Richardson’s cause. Beulah “Bea” Jordan, Richardson’s mother and a tireless advocate for her release, has single-handedly passed out hundreds of “Free Sharon Richardson” buttons and T-shirts and has secured more than 600 signatures on a petition to free her daughter. In a black-and-white composition notebook, she displays dozens of business cards and handwritten messages of support taped to the pages.

“Anyone who has served two thirds of their sentence should be out,” says Charles Barron, council member for the forty-

“Clemency is not about **guilt** or **innocence**. It is about **mercy** and

BATTERED-WOMAN SYNDROME Domestic violence causes more injuries to women each year than car accidents, muggings and rapes combined. Indeed, as many as one third of adult women will be victims of domestic abuse in their lifetime. In the courts, the term “battered-woman syndrome” is sometimes used to describe the mind-set of women who finally defend themselves against their abusers. First defined by psychologist Lenore Walker in the late 1970’s, the condition encompasses a wide range of posttraumatic stress responses, including loss of memory, a puzzling absence of emotion, and intense anger at the abuser, all of which can leave the woman looking remorseless and guilty to a jury. But despite a growing awareness of the psychological effects of repeated abuse, battered-woman syndrome is still hotly debated among legal experts, some of whom refuse to acknowledge that it exists at all. Indeed, many law-enforcement officials have difficulty recognizing victims of the condition, especially when the abuse lasted only a brief time, as in the case of Sharon Richardson. But Bernita Walker, founder of Project PeaceMakers in South Central Los Angeles and a cop for 25 years, points out that after a woman has been battered, she becomes attuned to when her partner is likely to strike. “She may know, for example, that if he takes off his ring, he’s getting ready to hit her,” Walker says. “So she throws a hot skillet at him before he makes his move. But he’s still the primary aggressor. The justice system needs to understand that.” —K.B.Z.

second district in Brooklyn. “Whether Sharon Richardson is innocent or guilty doesn’t matter. Fourteen years is enough. Even two of the actual killers have been released. It serves no purpose to keep Richardson in prison. Let her out.” Barron, who has rallied fellow council members in support of Richardson, plans to hold a press conference outside Governor Pataki’s office to bring attention to her appeal.

“We have to start having a different perception of justice,” says Tamar Kraft-Stolar, director of the Women in Prison Project. “We have to ask ourselves, would we rather pay for Sharon Richardson to stay in prison at a cost of \$32,000 per year or would we rather she serve the rest of her time in a productive way and pay taxes? That’s a very different way of looking at punishment.”

It appears that many clemency bureaus are beginning to see things Kraft-Stolar’s way. Over the past 15 years, as the criminal-justice system has become better educated about the effects of domestic violence on a battered woman’s psyche [see box], more than one hundred clemencies have been granted in 23 states to women who murdered their abusers. After 14 years behind bars, Richardson hopes to become only the third battered woman and the second Black victim of domestic violence in New York State’s judicial history to receive mercy.

EARLY-WARNING SIGNS

At the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, Richardson confesses she is nervous, but you would never guess it from her demeanor. She has a melodic voice and calm manner; one can see why prison

officials have given her such extensive responsibilities as a group-therapy leader, AIDS counselor and child-care worker in the prison nursery. She is immaculately dressed, and the pink, gray and lavender scarf wrapped around her head matches, to a tuned perfection, the exact pink in her blouse, the exact gray of her fitted, pencil-cut prison skirt. She is wearing gold frosted lipstick. Her toes, neatly painted in fuchsia, are tucked into black sandals. Her locks, caught in a ponytail, cascade down her shoulders and back.

Sitting in the drab prison visiting area, she's a long way from home. As a child she attended a private Catholic school in her Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood in Brooklyn, and at 5, became one of the first Black models to appear in a JCPenney catalog. She took ski trips and tap, modern dance and ballet lessons. She was a society girl, a debutante living in her mother's 32-room, four-story landmark brownstone.



Sharon Richardson's daughter, Unique, right, frequently visits her mother in prison.

to be, too. "I hid things from my friends," she remembers now. "When I saw my mom staggering, I'd say, 'Oh, she's on medication.' I made sure that she was okay once she got in the house, helping her with her clothes. I wanted to do it." Years

of therapy in prison have helped her understand the connection between the impulse to take care of her mother and her attraction to violent men. "I see how being a caretaker for my mom is something that I took into my relationships," she explains. "You feel you can fix them. And if you can't fix them, it has to be your fault. So you have to keep on trying and trying. But you can't ever fix another person. They have to fix themselves." (Today Bea Jordan recognizes that her drinking may have affected her

daughter more than she realized at the time. Five years ago she decided to give up alcohol.)

the issue of rehabilitation. And Sharon has been rehabilitated."

"Sharon was always lending things, cooking, feeding people," Bea Jordan says of her daughter. "She would have a new pair of jeans and give them away to a friend. 'Mommy will get another pair,' she'd say. And what did Mommy do?" asks Jordan, throwing up her hands. "Got her another pair!"

"I spoiled her," Jordan admits. "I was in a position to do so."

Bea Jordan, whose family had emigrated from Barbados, was a national buyer for 730 Sears, Roebuck stores in the late 1950's, the third African-American ever to fill the position. For more than 25 years she prided herself on knowing how to turn on the charm—to be political, as she puts it, in a mostly White-male business environment. Jordan liked to invite coworkers to dinner, people who had probably never been to a Black home. And she also went out drinking and socializing with colleagues as often as three nights a week.

From the outside, Jordan's only child appeared to have it all. But as she grew to adulthood, there were signs that something wasn't right. Some of the men she chose, for example, were drug dealers or were physically abusive toward her. One boyfriend was a pimp. Today Richardson traces her poor choice of men back to her childhood in that expansive Brooklyn brownstone. Sometimes, she recalls, she would hear her mother, who was divorced, walking through the house in the middle of the night, mixing drinks in a punch glass. That she managed to go to work every day still amazes Richardson. "I thought, *She must be a powerful mom to do that.*"

Her mother was so powerful that Richardson felt she had

SPINNING OUT OF CONTROL

In her early twenties, Richardson married, gave birth to her daughter, Unique, in 1979, and divorced soon after. Perhaps as a result of her attraction to violent men, in 1983 she became a corrections officer. She admits now that she occasionally used drugs in those days, and that her judgment wasn't always on point. In September 1987 she gave birth to her son and married his father ten months later. But by late 1989 she was working long hours, was overweight and lonely, and on the way to a second divorce. "I was needy," she says.

Enter Jeffrey Bridges, a drug dealer who, when Richardson met him in January 1990, was being held on weapons possession charges in a Brooklyn jail. He was brown-skinned with "Indian" features and dark hair, says Richardson. Though she knew it was against the Department of Corrections policy to fraternize with inmates, they began a friendship. "It was unprofessional," she admits. "But was that enough to stop me? Of course not." Even Bridges's cousin, Sophie, warned her not to get involved. "But I was gone," says Richardson. "I can't put it any other way."

After hiring a lawyer to represent Bridges (the same one who would later represent her on murder charges), she also posted his \$5,000 bail. Within a matter of weeks she brought him home to live in the Brooklyn apartment she shared with her then-10-year-old daughter and 2-year-old son. "I ask myself, after all these years, *What was I thinking?*" she says. But Richardson also remembers rationalizing her decision: "I said, *He's not going to put his hands on me. I'm a good girl. I'm nice and*"

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I have this job and I make this money. I'm going to do so many things for him, why would he put his hands on me?" But he did. Almost as soon as he moved in, the violence started.

In her book *The Battered Woman*, Tampa psychologist Lenore Walker explains that domestic violence tends to occur in three distinct phases. The "tension-building phase" involves escalating verbal and emotional abuse by the abuser and is followed by the "acute-battering phase," in which the abuser subjects his partner to intense acts of violence. This is usually followed by what Walker calls a "contrite-loving phase": The abuser may apologize for his behavior and shower his partner with overwhelming displays of affection. This cycle can lead otherwise normal women to become passive, fearful and so emotionally paralyzed they are unable to leave the relationship. Abused women tend to become isolated from family and friends, their self-esteem plummets, and they grow increasingly detached from their emotions. Walker says that while these symptoms are more profound with repeated instances of abuse, a woman can be affected even by one such cycle with her abuser.

There is no indication of how many cycles of abuse Richardson endured during the four months she lived with Bridges, but she maintains that she was severely battered, as well as sexually and verbally tormented. She claims she was not allowed to leave her apartment without Bridges's permission, and when she did, he would often walk behind her to monitor how other men responded to her. If they looked her way, Richardson says, she would be beaten when she returned home. Indeed, there are hospital records showing five stitches for a gash to her forehead, damage to her jaw, and other injuries. Later, after Richardson was behind bars, her daughter, Unique, revealed that Bridges had also sexually assaulted her, a common occurrence in homes with male batterers and girl children.

Soon after arriving at Richardson's house, Bridges invited a soft-spoken teenager named Dwayne Mitchell into the home as well. Recently arrived from South Carolina, Mitchell, then 17, was known in the nearby Lafayette Gardens housing projects as "Country." "He had a red sports car, and Jeffrey was attracted to that," Richardson says, adding that she allowed Mitchell in because "he was young and needed someplace to stay." But the friendship between Mitchell and Bridges soon turned sour. In April 1990 Mitchell was arrested for possession of a gun used during a robbery, though he claimed Bridges had been the one who had used it. Later that same month, Mitchell was again arrested,

this time for possession of four vials of crack cocaine that he claimed Bridges had asked him to hold. These charges were later dropped.

When Mitchell was released in May, the relationship between him and Jeffrey Bridges became volatile. Bridges threw Mitchell out of the apartment, threatening to shoot him. According to one of the teens convicted in the slaying, Bridges believed Mitchell and Richardson had been having an affair. Richardson firmly denies this. However, Mitchell soon returned to live with her, while Bridges went to stay with friends in Coney Island.

Richardson recalls that in one conversation with Mitchell she spoke of having Bridges's bail revoked so he would be sent back to jail. Mitchell said prison was "too good for him" and intimidated that guys like Bridges could be "dealt with." To this, Richardson gave a response that still haunts her: "You do what you have to do," she told Mitchell.

"For so long I've said I didn't kill Jeffrey," she reflects. "But did I play a part in his death? Yes, I believe that now. If I said that to Dwayne, and he did take it in, that leaves me responsible. I was older. I shouldn't have said that."

A DEADLY AMBUSH

It rained the night Jeffrey Bridges was murdered on May 5, 1990. Richardson claims she went to get him in Coney Island and brought him back to her apartment so he could be picked up by a bail bondsman and returned to prison. Mitchell and three other assailants (a fifth participant was never found) were arrested and the story soon emerged that they had committed a murder for hire and that Richardson had offered them \$5,000.

They said it was after midnight when one of the five (most likely Mitchell) laid two butcher knives on Richardson's kitchen table. Then they waited for Bridges and Richardson to come home. When they opened the apartment door, Richardson's son was asleep in Bridges's arms. As the five teens rushed him and began to attack him, the little boy fell to the floor. "Not in front of the kids!" Richardson was reported to have shouted. Gathering her children, she retreated to the bedroom and closed the door.

Only when she came out, long after her children had fallen asleep and the men had left, taking Bridges's body with them, did she realize that "what sounded like fighting turned out to be more." A large area of her hallway floor was covered with blood. Richardson made a decision to tear up the stained carpet, cut it into pieces, and have it carted away. "I own that," she acknowl-

edges. "I pulled it up and threw it out. Why? Fear. I was afraid someone was going to see it. That's when the lies started."

In statements given to the police days after the murder, the four teens admitted to wrapping the body in trash bags and bedsheets, putting it in Richardson's car (Mitchell testified that Richardson had given him keys), and dumping it in Brooklyn, where it was discovered by authorities that same day. Richardson was brought in for questioning a few days later. Her lawyers note that she was held for 19 hours before being read her Miranda rights. She was given a polygraph test, which she passed, but the next day, after 36 hours in custody, she was formally arrested.

Mitchell was also arrested upon his return from South Carolina, where he had fled in Richardson's car. He soon admitted his role in the murder and struck a deal with the district attorney's office. In exchange for his testimony that Richardson had hired him and four others to kill Bridges, he would receive a reduced sentence of six to 18 years. It was a far better prospect than the life sentence he might have faced had he refused the deal and gone to trial, especially given that Mitchell clearly had his own motives for killing Bridges. But though his testimony was "the pivotal piece" of the prosecution's case, his statements were full of inconsistencies about who actually did what that night.

Indeed, half a decade later, on December 19, 1996, six years before his release from jail, Mitchell changed his story. He signed an affidavit recanting his earlier testimony and saying that Richardson had played no part in the murder. "It just happened," he wrote. Rakheem Mohammed and Sammy Atkins, two of the other assailants who remain incarcerated, signed similar statements in 1996 and 1997. Their recantations were obtained by attorneys at the Albany Law School Clinic, which had been instrumental in spearheading campaigns to free Charline Brundidge and Linda White, the two battered women granted clemency by New York's governor in 1996 and 2002, respectively. Both the state and district courts, however, found the recantations in the Richardson case "not credible."

A SHIFT IN CONSCIOUSNESS

Richardson also made inconsistent statements about the night of the murder. She initially claimed that there was no one in the apartment when she emerged from the bedroom, but she later changed that statement, saying that she told a man, unknown to her, to "get out." "I said a lot of things when they questioned me that are foggy," she admits now, sounding weary. "The lawyers have

reminded me of that. And it's painful."

But attorney Stacey Shortall points out that the purpose of a clemency appeal is not to prove innocence. "Sharon has been prosecuted and found guilty," she stresses. "Clemency is about mercy and the issue of rehabilitation. And Sharon has been rehabilitated. That's what we have to focus on."

Richardson does seem capable of forging a stable life outside of prison. Apart from the awards earned in prison and the job offers from friends, she also has strong support from her third husband, Stuart Kelly, a car-service dispatcher whom she married in 2000. A longtime acquaintance, Kelly remembers having a teenage crush on Richardson back when he was 17 and she was 20. When he heard she had been charged in the murder of Jeffrey Bridges, he followed the case and later visited Sharon in jail. After courting her for more than a year, he convinced her to marry him.

Richardson's daughter, Unique, now 25 and a school-safety official, is also in a position to offer moral support. Raised by Jordan after her mother went to jail, Unique is currently in a committed relationship and happily expecting her first child in November. "I worried about her for a long time," Richardson says of her firstborn. "But she pulled through and made me proud. No early pregnancies, no drugs, no cigarettes, no alcohol."

Richardson says her son, now 17, isn't doing quite so well. Just 2 years old at the time of the murder, he has trouble with school, and his mother believes he's in a lot of pain. His father, who raised him after Richardson was convicted, declined to let his son be interviewed. "He loves his mother," he said, "but he's trying to live his own life now."

Richardson, too, is trying to forge a new be-

ginning. Asked what she has learned about herself over the years, she pauses. "It's hard to figure out that point where you change," she reflects, "but your life is like this walk, and you finally get to this bridge and you look over and realize things have changed, and you've changed, and you don't feel the ugliness and disgust inside anymore. And you know you weren't put on this earth to be abused and taken advantage of. You finally know you're God's child and you're beautiful."

But is that shift in consciousness, along with her good behavior and strong family and community support, enough to win her clemency? Richardson hopes it will help. But she knows that nothing can erase the nightmare of what transpired in her apartment on that rainy night 14 years ago. "There were times," she admits, "when I did want something to happen to Jeffrey Bridges. The abuse was that bad. My emotions at that point were so detached. I didn't feel anything anymore. *I didn't care*. But who do you say this to?"

With this last thought, Richardson's eyes fill with tears. "You can't say that in the courtroom," she says. "You can't tell the DA. Can't tell the judge. If I make it to the clemency board, how do I tell them that? I mean, I found out that he molested my daughter *after* all this had happened. Had I found that out prior, who knows what I would have done?"

She is silent for a long moment. "But they want that remorse piece," she says finally. "They want it badly." □

Kristal Brent Zook is a contributing writer to this magazine.

To learn more about Sharon Richardson's bid for clemency and to find out how you can help, log on to sharonrichardson.net.