

Terminal Incarceration

The short, sad lives of some detainees facing relatively minor charges end in jail. Here are three such cases.

By Rob Jordan

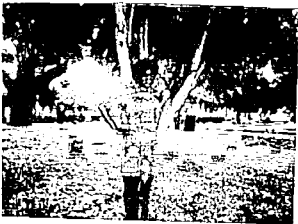
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As she laid her head on her big sister's chest and listened to the heartbeats slow, Harolyn Frazier thought of opportunities lost. In the wake of a seizure, 38-year-old Lola Davis was brain dead, and Frazier had given hospital staff permission to turn off life support. A guard sat on a bench nearby. Outside the narrow window, evening light gave in to darkness.



Jacqueline Carini

Lola Davis (left), in her twenties, poses at a Liberty City park; Harolyn Davis flips through old photos of her big sister; a teenage Lola relaxes on her grandmother's porch in Opa-locka; Lola as a pigtailed eight-year-old



Lola Davis, in her twenties, poses at a Liberty City park

Frazier sobbed quietly, thinking of the baby girl Davis had given birth to six months earlier. She thought of life without her sister, the only close family she had left. She thought about how their lives had taken such separate paths — Frazier had become an ordained minister and successful office manager, while her sister had been condemned to draw her last breath in a place where freedom is a hallucination. Then the heartbeats stopped.

Within minutes the guard had "secured the scene." As Frazier consoled two of Davis's daughters outside, a police officer arrived, followed by a homicide detective who dutifully recorded the details. "Deceased was an inmate at TGK [Turner Guilford Knight Correctional Center] on charges of possession of drug paraphernalia," the detective wrote. "She suffered from advanced breast cancer and was on a respirator. On January 7, 2005, she was transported to Jackson Memorial Hospital, where she was pronounced [dead] in the emergency room. According to family, she was single and had seven children."

Davis's was the first "in-custody death" of the year and one of 33 in Miami-Dade's jail system during the past two years. Among the 50 largest jail systems, Miami-Dade ranks eighth in deaths per capita, its rate of death almost 40 percent higher than the norm, according to Bureau of Justice statistics for 2002, the most recent year for which data is available. The average age of those who die while locked up here is 42, a year shy of the life expectancy in Haiti.

Some of the deaths — usually beatings or suicides — make the evening newscast. Most recently, in February, the corrections department released information about a mentally ill inmate who had died of hypothermia the previous month. The man's body temperature had been twenty degrees below normal when he was found unresponsive on his cell's concrete floor.

But most inmate deaths — brought on by years of illness, drug and alcohol abuse, or some combination of the three — go largely unnoticed. Sometimes prisoners find their deathbeds on jail cell cots, but more often they spend their last moments in a hospital clinic under a guard's watch.

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Jacqueline Carini

Harolyn Davis flips through old photos of her big sister, Lola

Through its contractor, Public Health Trust, an independent healthcare provider created by the board of county commissioners, corrections provides regular medication to 1750 of the county's 7000 inmates, runs seven jail-based clinics, and operates one ward at Jackson Memorial. In addition to more basic treatments, Ward D, as it's called, handles the business of death for most terminally ill prisoners, who, like all county inmates, are awaiting trial or serving sentences of less than a year. This year corrections has budgeted \$19.4 million for healthcare, with more than twenty percent, or \$4.1 million, going to Ward D.

Years before fate wheeled her down the linoleum hallways of Jackson, Lola Davis roamed the streets of Overtown and then Opa-locka, where she grew up a tomboy with pigtail braids. Her father had been a faint memory — he died in combat in Vietnam when Davis was two. Her mother, on the other hand, had been a powerful presence, a well-known community figure who helped organize political campaigns for the likes of former Opa-locka Mayor Willie Logan and former Vice Mayor Helen Miller. "We lived a life in city commission chambers," Frazier says.



A teenage Lola relaxes on her grandmother's porch in Opa-locka

The two girls idolized their mother and were devastated when she was diagnosed with breast cancer. One day, as they cooked a meal of chicken and pudding in anticipation of her return from yet another hospital treatment, Davis, then sixteen, and Frazier, then twelve, received the news: Their mother had died.

Davis was inconsolable. She questioned what kind of God would allow her mother to die at 32. Already rebellious and moody, she began staying out later and later, getting into trouble, starting fights. "Lola went wayward after my mom passed," Frazier says. While Frazier went to live with family friend Evelyn Brown in Liberty City, Davis moved in with her grandmother in Overtown because Brown couldn't handle her. "I said Lola is out of hand; I can't do nothing with Lola," Brown recalls. "I don't know what happened; she just got to where she wanted to be in the streets with her friends."



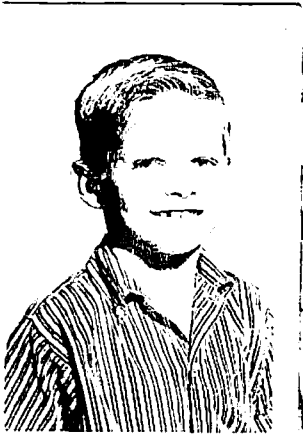
Lola as a pigtailed eight-year-old

By the time she was twenty, Davis was doing cocaine and hopping from boyfriend to boyfriend, getting pregnant and getting into trouble. She was arrested for shoplifting purses and groceries, selling nickel bags, stealing license plates, and, once, robbing a man of five dollars at knifepoint. Sometimes, when she had nowhere else to go, she would stay with Frazier, now raising a child in Overtown. Davis would take her sister's clothes. She would take her money. She would take her car without telling her. Through it all, Frazier forgave Davis, and the sisters remained close despite their disparate lives. "We didn't have to speak every day, but we had that sister bond, that sister love," Frazier says.

The last time Davis rode in the back of a patrol car — arrest number 24 — was in May 2004. She was 37. Shortly afterward, a medical exam at TKG confirmed what Davis had suspected upon finding a lump several months before: She had advanced breast cancer. She was also in the third trimester of pregnancy. As fearless as she was on the streets — she had survived numerous fights and a car accident that left her limping for months — Davis was afraid to face the possibility of cancer, Frazier believes, and hadn't sought medical care before the jailhouse diagnosis.



Daniel Rogers with his Rhodesian ridgebacks, Max and Grady



Daniel as a young boy



A twentysomething Daniel hams it up with friends



Cedric Robinson as a second-grader



Jacqueline Carini

Ruby Robinson, Cedric's older sister, looks at a high school portrait of him

After giving birth in August of that year, Davis steadily weakened under a barrage of monthly chemotherapy treatments. She suffered seizures regularly. In late December, Frazier brought Davis's baby daughter to see her mother at TGK. Davis held the little girl and cooed in her ears, joking about how mama had lost all of her hair to chemo. "You know I look like a boy now," she said, her smile lifting gaunt cheekbones. A week later she was dead.

All of Davis's seven children — ranging in age from one to seventeen, some of them living with their fathers, others with their grandparents — attended their mother's funeral.

A Polaroid photo is often included with a terminal inmate's medical records. Some of the patients, intravenous lines in their arms or breathing tubes in their noses, stare at the camera, eyes wide. Overweight and jaundiced, Daniel Rogers sleeps in his photograph.

As a teenager at Carol City Middle School, Rogers was voted best looking. He was a surfer, a popular, easygoing guy. "He had these, like, ocean-blue eyes," says Carmeline Campbell, Rogers's younger sister by fifteen years. "He was gorgeous." Dottie Hall, Rogers's younger sister by three years, remembers how girls at school would try to befriend her so they could meet her brother. Hall was used to it and didn't feel any jealousy. The two were good friends. "I was his little sister, and he would look out for me," Hall says.

By age seventeen, Rogers had dropped out of school and was learning to be a carpenter. He had always been good with his hands, liked to work on anything mechanical, loved fishing, boating, racecars, backyard barbecues, playing with his two Rhodesian ridgeback dogs — "anything macho and manly, really," Campbell would later write in a eulogy for her brother.

Rogers's journey to a jail deathbed may have begun when he was 21. That was the year he broke up with "the one true love of his life" and turned to the bottle for comfort, his sisters say. "He never had another relationship after that," Hall recalls. There was precedent for Rogers's descent: Both his father and older brother had died of cirrhosis brought on by alcoholism.

He was arrested six times over the years, mostly for public intoxication and fighting. Once, after being arrested for driving drunk with a suspended license, Rogers kicked out a police car window on the way to lockup. Then something changed in him. In his forties he finally put down the bottle. His body was ravaged by liver disease, hepatitis, and diabetes. He told his sisters and his brother John he was ready to turn over a new leaf. "He was evolving," Campbell says. "He wanted to live." In the years that followed, Rogers, a childless bachelor, spent more time with his nephews and nieces. He took them to autocross races and barbecued with them. He carved an elaborate beach scene out of bark as a wedding gift for his niece. He stayed out of trouble.



Cedric with Ruby's cat — the only photo she has of her brother as an adult

Then, in June of last year, something went wrong. Rogers had been feeling weak but was determined to take a kayaking trip in the Keys. He forgot the medications that stabilized his diabetes and became badly disoriented. He left his boat behind and got lost on the drive home. That night a switch went off. Rogers's sisters say he was angry at the tenants in his house for making noise as he tried to sleep. The police arrest report states Rogers yelled at the woman and her children shortly before 11:00 p.m., demanding a rent payment and banging on their door with a hammer. By the time police arrived, Rogers had broken down the door and was threatening the woman. He was charged with armed burglary.

Rogers's condition worsened as he awaited trial at TGK. When Campbell visited him one day, he sat shivering, wearing a blanket around his shoulders and gripping his stomach. Although neither Campbell nor her brother knew it at the time, Rogers was dying. A hernia had caused part of his intestine to become trapped in his abdomen, an autopsy later revealed. Strangely enough, Rogers was suffering from a medical condition called incarceration, in which the hernia becomes cut off from its blood supply, causing it to release toxins and poison vital organs.

A guard motioned that visitation time was over, but Rogers wasn't ready. "I have to go. I love you," Campbell remembers saying through tears. "Don't go," Rogers said faintly.

Still awaiting trial four days after his arrest, Rogers was transported to Jackson Memorial with an initial diagnosis of blood poisoning. Two days later, on Sunday, June 26, Campbell returned home from church to a phone message that her brother's condition was grave. Campbell rushed to the hospital with Hall and their brother John. Rogers was in a coma when they arrived. As the minutes ticked by and Rogers's pulse grew fainter, his siblings prayed he might go to Heaven. Campbell held her brother's hand and talked about whatever came to her mind. "You know, you just talk and talk," she remembers. "You go through your whole life."

In Ward D, guards in "roving position" walk the halls. They check on patients and mark "narrative" logs with their observations — "resting" being a common entry.

José Reigada, a former corrections officer who worked at Ward D for seven years until 2000, remembers flicking on room lights from the hallway to check patients through little door windows. Occasionally he would poke his head in and make small talk — the only visitor many patients ever had. Once, a middle-age Hispanic inmate confided he was dying of cancer. "How do you respond to that?" Reigada says, shrugging his wide shoulders.

Cedric Robinson never confided in his family that he was dying. Almost a year after Robinson's March 2005 death in custody, his sister Ruby Robinson and his 91-year-old mother Ruth Robinson assumed it was due to complications from diabetes. Cedric had told them little about his health, and they hadn't seen his medical records. He had died of AIDS — his last secret. When Ruby recently saw a copy of Cedric's autopsy report, she could only shake her head. "I didn't know that," she said. "I didn't know that."

The two had grown up close. As a young girl, Ruby would hold baby Ced on her hip as she made her way around the infamous James E. Scott Homes in Liberty City. "He used to think I was his mama," Ruby recalls. It was a violent and desperate place — a world unto itself, where family meant everything and happiness

came in the smallest of packages. "We didn't know about white people," Ruby, now 55, recalls. "Those people in the projects, the children don't have a chance."

For a while, Cedric concentrated on school work. He would study the Bible and brush up on his responsibilities as an altar boy at the Holy Redeemer Catholic Church. He became an ace mechanic, repairing bicycles he found in the trash and fine-tuning friends' cars. For Cedric, Ruby, and older brother Isaac, presents were rare on Christmas, milk was powdered, and cornbread with bell peppers and onions was a meal. Cedric dreamed of more — a good job, a sweet ride.

Cedric, often the target of other kids' practical jokes and beatings, developed a hot temper. "They just didn't treat him good," says Ruth. He became a fighter, scrapping with other boys at the slightest provocation. Many times he would run home, trying to outpace a boy he had been fighting, and shout for Ruby to unlock the door.

As an adult, Cedric came to believe the door would always be locked. His world was circumscribed. "He don't know anything about out of town," Ruby recalls of her brother. "Only thing he known about is Miami." It was a revelation for Cedric when a friend of the family would bring over Chinese food or pizza.

After drifting in and out of several jobs, Cedric applied for a position with the city, a secure salary that would be his ticket out of the projects, he thought. He didn't get it. "That's when he went rock-bottom," Ruby says. "He figured no one wanted to hire him." So he began hustling for a big-time crack dealer named Ike. It wasn't long before he was making serious money. He was generous with friends and family, paying for his mother's myriad pills and medical procedures.

Soon, though, Cedric was smoking most of his earnings from a glass pipe. After defaulting on money he owed Ike, he found himself out of work, addicted to crack, and homeless. In the years that followed, Cedric became well acquainted with the back of a patrol car. He was arrested 26 times, mostly for trespassing — looking for a place to sleep — crack possession, and fighting. "I told him: 'If you keep going back [to jail], I won't go see you anymore,'" Ruth remembers.

In January 2005, Cedric was booked on crack possession charges. Ruby didn't bother to visit him at the Metro West Detention Center, figuring it was just another screwup for the troubled brother she loved. Why visit him if he insisted on doing this to himself? Ruby had seen Cedric about a month earlier. "He seemed to be all right," she says. "He had a cold at the time, but that was about it."

The cold may have been a precursor to the pneumonia Cedric would develop in jail. With his immune system too weak to fight, his health slowly deteriorated during the month he spent at Kendall Regional Medical Center. Ruby says she wasn't notified of her brother's death until a day or two later. Cedric had died alone.