

Akil Al-Jundi, Inmate Turned Legal Advocate, Is Dead at 56

By ROBERT McG. THOMAS Jr.

Akil Al-Jundi, a Harlem street tough who became a leading legal advocate for young criminals facing prison sentences, but only after he had served 15 years for murder and survived the bloody Attica prison takeover, died on Aug. 13 at New York Downtown Hospital in Manhattan. He was 56, and the lead plaintiff in the class-action suit to obtain damages for more than 1,200 prisoners beaten, tortured or denied medical care in the aftermath of the inmate uprising of September 1971.

Colleagues said the cause was complications from diabetes.

To Legal Aid Society lawyers, judges, prosecutors and others in the Manhattan criminal justice system, Mr. Al-Jundi, who lived in the South Bronx, was a consummate professional who prepared presentencing reports with such meticulous care and argued for leniency with such persuasive passion that more than a few of the convicted criminals he represented had their sentences reduced or were routed to drug rehabilitation programs, mental health clinics or other alternatives to prison.

No wonder. As even some judges came to appreciate, an encounter with Mr. Al-Jundi was sometimes all the rehabilitation a young criminal might need.

That was because Mr. Al-Jundi spoke to them with a special understanding of where they were, what they might become and what they might avoid if they pursued education rather than crime. As a Legal Aid Society advocate since 1976, Mr. Al-Jundi knew whereof he spoke and had the scars to prove it.

A native of St. Croix, Virgin Islands, who moved to New York with his mother when he was 12, Mr. Al-Jundi, whose original name was Herbert Scott Dean, soon dropped out of school and became a gang leader in Harlem and the Bronx, where he used and sold drugs, committed armed robberies and served as a bodyguard for heroin dealers.

After numerous scrapes with the law, Mr. Al-Jundi's life on the streets

ended in 1961 when he was convicted of second-degree murder after thrusting an umbrella into the temple of a man who he said had come onto his turf to engage a prostitute.

Sentenced to 20 years to life, he proved to be one of the rare inmates who find salvation in prison. Mr. Al-Jundi, who credited a conversion to Islam with saving his life, became a demon for education. He obtained a high school equivalency diploma and began a lifelong habit of reading every book he could get his hands on.

An educated prisoner can be a threat to a system that routinely brutalizes inmates, and it was hardly surprising that after a disturbance at the Auburn Correctional Facility in 1970, Mr. Al-Jundi, who had previously taken part in a disturbance at the Tombs, the pens in the basement of the Criminal Courts building in Manhattan, was one of a number of inmates singled out for punishment: transfer to the dreaded Attica Correctional Facility near Buffalo.

A survivor of Attica who defended prisoners' rights.

During the spontaneous prison uprising in September 1971, Mr. Al-Jundi was part of the Muslim contingent that supervised guards taken hostage. The uprising ended on Sept. 13, when the state police, under orders from Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller, began an all-out assault, indiscriminately firing more than 2,000 rounds of ammunition over six bloody minutes, killing 10 hostages and 39 inmates and wounding hundreds of others.

As he later recalled it, Mr. Al-Jundi, who was shot through the hand by an explosive bullet and struck in the face by buckshot, was dumped in a cell and left bleeding for hours without medical attention after he began chanting to protest the



Akil Al-Jundi

torture of an inmate awaiting treatment for a stomach wound.

By the time he was paroled in 1975, Mr. Al-Jundi had undergone 34 operations to repair his damaged hand and had acquired a new mission in life: obtaining justice for the hundreds of inmates who had been mistreated.

As the minister of information for the Attica Brothers Legal Defense Fund, Mr. Al-Jundi gave his name to a Federal class action that led to a 1992 verdict that held the state responsible for a variety of atrocities but left the assessment of damages to later litigation.

Elizabeth Fink, the inmates' lead attorney, recalled yesterday that Mr. Al-Jundi, who took a leave from his Legal Aid Society job, had provided invaluable assistance during the trial.

When a former fellow inmate, Frank Smith, won a \$4 million judgment in June, Mr. Al-Jundi was too ill to be in the courtroom, but he was not forgotten. After hearing the verdict, Ms. Fink said, "He was the first one I called."

Mr. Al-Jundi, who was reunited with his high school sweetheart, Evelyn Battles, after his prison sentence and accepted her three children as his own, is survived by Ms. Battles; a son, Ronald; two daughters, Wanda and Monique, and five grandchildren.