

Editorial ? We must remember accused have rights for a reason

We hear a lot these days about the victims of crime, and the need to see to it that they are taken care of and that their rights are respected.

Fair enough. Innocent victims of crime must be protected. And those responsible for the crimes have to answer for their acts. But we live in what is supposed to be an enlightened society, which also makes sure the rights of those who are accused are respected. True, a lot of these people might seem to be not worth the bother. But then we get to those who face charges for offences they never committed. And then we have those who are sent to prison for something they didn't do.

No matter how hard some of us want to come down on criminals, or how much we care about the victim, the truth is no victim ever benefitted by having the wrong guy sent away.

That is why the weekend's passing of Rubin "Hurricane" Carter should not go unnoticed.

Mr. Carter was a middleweight boxing contender in his youth who in the 1960s had the misfortune to be convicted of three homicides. He spent some 19 years in prison before a federal judge in the United States ruled he had not received a fair trial. Mr. Carter was ordered released.

We would contend that Mr. Carter would have had every right to have left prison a bitter man. If any of us had gone through what he did, would we not have demanded to know who was going to restore the 19 years of life unjustly taken from us?

Mr. Carter was a different kind of man, who elected to use his experiences to try and prevent them from being repeated.

According to a CNN obituary, he said three years ago that prison gave him the opportunity to set aside the anger that made him a delinquent in his youth, and to see that his destiny might have rested in fighting for justice.

?Hatred and bitterness and anger only consume the vessel that contains them. It doesn't hurt another soul,? he told CNN. ?If I were to allow myself to continue to feel that anger and the bitterness of being a victim, I would have never survived prison itself. Prison can deal with anger; prison can deal with hatred because prison is about all those things. So I had to overcome those things.?

We like to think that our criminal justice system does a good job. Most of us in this society would probably agree that it would be hard to find anything better in this world. But that certainly does not mean the system is perfect.

Mr. Carter is not an isolated case. There are others who have been sent to prison for murder, only to be released when it was determined they hadn't done it. Joining Mr. Carter are the likes of Guy Paul Morin, Robert Baltovich, Donald Marshall, Jr., David Milgaard, Steven Truscott and others. Truscott was even sentenced to death. The really scary part is the names listed here are among those we found out about. What about others we haven't heard about. How many of them are in prison for offences they didn't commit?

We admit it's hard to know the solution to this problem. People who are found guilty of serious crimes must certainly answer for them. But we, as a society, have an obligation to be careful, if for no other reason than it's the standard we have already set for ourselves.