

WITNESS FREED IN DISPUTED JAILING SHE PROMISES TESTIMONY IN CASE OF SERIAL KILLER

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The woman who is a key **witness in** the Highland Park serial killer trials was **freed** from jail Thursday, 16 days after she was put there to ensure she would show up **in** court.

Donna, whose real name is not being used because she is an alleged rape victim and requested anonymity, led police to the man who then confessed to the killings, Benjamin (Tony) Atkins. She said Atkins raped and nearly strangled her last fall.

After an impromptu hearing **in** 30th District Court on Thursday, Judge William Bledsoe agreed to release her but ruled against an ACLU attorney who argued that the material **witness** law under which she was held was unconstitutional.

The release was a compromise between Wayne County Assistant Prosecutor Michael Reynolds and ACLU lawyer Paul Denefeld. The ACLU agreed to represent the 36-year-old woman after learning about her **jailing** from the Free Press.

"She's thrilled," Denefeld said. "She's very, very happy. She was very unhappy about being detained."

The law had allowed Bledsoe to give Donna the choice of posting \$50,000 bond or going to jail. Detectives said they made the move because she is a nomadic crack addict and also to protect her from people who were trying to collect money she owed.

Reynolds said Donna's testimony was key not only to her rape case, but to cases of the 11 women Atkins is charged with killing. Atkins' first preliminary hearing is Thursday.

Donna reaffirmed **in** court that she is willing to testify against Atkins and said she would like to enter drug rehabilitation. George Ward, chief assistant Wayne County prosecutor, said officials have arranged drug treatment for her at a Detroit area hospital. Today, she will go through orientation as an outpatient, though Ward said he was trying to get her into a residential program.

After the hearing, **in** which Donna sat with her back to the audience and her head covered by a hood, police whisked her out a back door and drove away as she shielded herself **in** the backseat.

Officials would not say where she was taken, but Reynolds said she would be **in** a supervised environment where her safety was ensured.

"We've done everything we can to make certain she does stay out of trouble," Denefeld said. "She says she wants to stay on the straight and narrow."

Donna was picked up Sept. 23 **in** a Detroit alley as she stood sobbing and sipping on a 40-ounce bottle of beer. She was put **in** a single-occupancy cell on the eighth floor of Detroit police headquarters.

In telephone interviews with the Free Press, she told of spending "23 hours a day" **in** her cell until homicide detectives began allowing her to spend her mornings **in** their office.

Denenfeld called her release a victory, though the law under which Donna was held remains intact.

"I'm hoping that the kind of publicity that this has generated will make our legislators wonder if it should be a law," he said.

Caption: Photo DAYMON J. HARTLEY

: The key **witnessin** the Highland Park serial killing trials is led from 30th District Court on Thursday after she was ordered released from jail.

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