

SERIAL KILLER DIES 4 YEARS INTO 11 LIFE SENTENCES

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Benjamin (Tony) **Atkins** , who grew from a tortured childhood into America's fastest serial killer, has died four years into the 11 life terms he was serving for a string of murders in Detroit and Highland Park.

Atkins , 29, died three weeks ago at Duane Waters Hospital, which is connected with the Egeler Correctional Facility in Jackson. Cause of death was listed as HIV infection.

Word of his death moved through the Detroit criminal justice community late this week when appellate courts announced that the challenge to his multiple convictions was moot.

"While no one takes joy in another's death -- even one who has committed such hideous crimes -- at least those who lost loved ones at Mr. **Atkins** ' hands can take comfort in knowing he will never be released back into society," said Michael Reynolds, who prosecuted **Atkins** in a four-month Detroit Recorder's Court trial.

During a nine-month period in 1991 and 1992, **Atkins** raped and strangled 11 women, many of whom had histories of prostitution and drug abuse. Several of his victims were found in abandoned motels and other derelict buildings near Woodward Avenue.

Atkins amassed the greatest number of victims in such a period of time in the United States, according to FBI investigators.

Atkins said he was driven by hatred of prostitutes.

Before he was arrested, as the toll mounted, a task force of investigators from Highland Park, Detroit, the Michigan State Police and the FBI was assembled.

The coalition underscored the urgency of the manhunt, given the frequently bitter relations between the Detroit city administration and the FBI.

Yet, through false starts and occasional stumbles, the task force pulled together, helped in great measure by a woman who had survived an attack by a street character she knew only as Tony.

"Any serial killer, especially a prolific one like **Atkins** , requires a good team effort," task force member Paul Lindsay said Friday.

While prostitutes and drug users are sometimes mocked and disdained -- even when brutally victimized -- the task force was not deterred.

"It doesn't matter who the victims are, you just want it stopped," said Lindsay.

With the help of the surviving victim, **Atkins**, who sometimes worked as a pizza cook, was arrested along Woodward.

Atkins was a study of childhood distress. He grew up in boys' homes when not living with his mother, a prostitute who turned tricks in the front seats of cars as the young **Atkins** watched from the back. He also was raped as a child by a caseworker, his attorney said.

At first, **Atkins** denied the killings, saying his homosexuality precluded any interest in women.

But watching the interrogation was Detroit homicide detective Sgt. Ronald Sanders. Scheduled to leave on vacation in an hour, Sanders asked for a shot at **Atkins**.

"You never had a father," Sanders said then. "I have a son exactly your age. You need to get this off your chest. Talk to me."

And **Atkins** did. Working his way through five cheeseburgers, **Atkins** confessed to the murders, including one victim that he had hidden in a secret basement beneath a vacant garage.

But, still, task force member James Dobson wonders what really pushed **Atkins**.

"Why? Why did it all happen," asked Dobson, who retired from the Highland Park police department as a lieutenant. "Who knows what happened in those lives that brought this to pass. And who knows what happened to him."

At trial, his attorney, Jeffrey Edison, fought hard to convince jurors that **Atkins** was a product of a harsh society and environment.

But in the end, jurors pronounced **Atkins** guilty. He seemed to shrug it off. His greatest concern on leaving the court room, a sheriff's deputy said, was getting a cigarette.

"Sooner or later," Lindsay said Friday from his East Coast retirement home, "justice does prevail."

Caption: Photo

Benjamin Atkins

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