

## SERIAL CASE DEFENDER SEES SOCIETY AT FAULT

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For 13 weeks, defense attorney Jeffrey Edison has sat next to and vigorously defended the man accused of being the nation's fastest serial killer. Most lawyers wouldn't dream of defending **Benjamin Atkins** -- a penniless, crack-smoking drifter who confessed to strangling 11 women and raping a 12th in less than a year's time.

But Edison, a genial man who is deadly serious about his life's work representing poor black defendants, took the case without hesitation.

"Why not?" he said. "He's no different than anyone else charged with a crime."

**Atkins**' trials, which have stretched out for more than three months, are expected to wrap up this week. The last prosecution witness -- a psychiatrist who interviewed **Atkins** and determined he was legally sane -- is to testify today. Closing arguments will be heard Tuesday and Recorder's Court Judge David Kerwin will instruct two juries -- one hearing the Highland Park cases, the other the Detroit cases -- to begin deliberations.

Edison acknowledges he has a "formidable, meticulous adversary" in Michael Reynolds, the assistant Wayne County prosecutor trying the case. Reynolds, a dogged and successful trial lawyer, has brought his trademark style to the Highland Park trials: more than 100 witnesses, charts laying out inch by inch every piece of information and evidence, a parade of experts, and the resources of state and federal testing laboratories, FBI agents, State Police and two city police departments.

Asked what he has on his side, Edison said with a laugh, "righteousness." He also has 18 years' experience as a criminal defense attorney, most of it in Recorder's Court.

Edison's strategy has been twofold: He has questioned at every turn whether **Atkins**' confessions -- taken in a small room in a special Detroit police department building -- were coerced, and he has presented the dreadful details of **Atkins**' childhood and adolescence as reasons he may have committed the crimes.

Edison has told jurors that **Atkins**, 25, was abandoned by his mother at age 2 and was raped by his caseworker beginning at about age 10 at the St. Francis Home for Boys in Detroit. Edison said **Atkins** had watched his mother, a prostitute, turning tricks in the front seat of a car.

The one witness Edison called, Dr. Michael Abramsky, stopped short of declaring **Atkins** insane, saying the legal definition of sanity is extremely narrow. But he said **Atkins** "was not in complete control."

"Nobody is born to kill," says Edison vehemently. "It's not **Atkins** that is the problem, it's society, the environment that produces a child who finally needs to strike out. There's other Atkinses walking around here and people just refuse to see it . . . "

Edison, 42, grew up on Detroit's west side and had typical experiences for a male black teen -- "guns pulled on me by police when I was 13, 14 years old" -- which helped him decide to be a criminal defense attorney.

He graduated from Howard University and Wayne State University Law School. He worked for the Legal Defender's Office in Detroit from 1976-80, racking up a string of acquittals that he declines to discuss. He is national cochair of the National Conference of Black Lawyers.

Edison said he doesn't know how much he'll be paid for the **Atkins** trials, but they have hurt his solo business. Attorneys who handle court-assigned cases usually earn a flat \$1,400 for a murder trial in Wayne County, but Chief Judge Dalton Roberson can award "extraordinary fees" for cases that stretch beyond two days. Still, Edison won't grow rich off the case.

Money isn't the point anyway, he said: "I've been blessed to have the opportunity to use my skills to advance the cause of African people. Many Africans lost their lives just to create the opportunity for me to make the contribution I'm making. No matter how tight things may get, I can't afford the luxury of saying I want to get out."

Caption: Photo

: Jeffrey Edison

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