

SUSPECT SAID HE SET FATAL FIRE, JURY TOLD - HIS CELL MATES TESTIFY IN 5 KIDS' DEATHS

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Author: L.L. BRASIER, FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

"I didn't mean for those damn kids to die."

That's what **Juwan Deering** allegedly told his cell mate during a conversation in 2003 as he described how, angry over a drug debt, he set a house fire in Royal Oak Township that killed five children.

Ralph McMorris, who shared a cell in the Oakland County Jail with **Deering** for about two weeks, testified in court Tuesday, the fourth day of **Deering**'s murder trial. McMorris, who was in jail for shoplifting and a traffic offense, said **Deering** told him he set the fire "using fluid that was on the porch. He said it went up in a swoosh, that it went up like a cardboard box."

Deering, 35, formerly of Royal Oak Township, is charged with five counts of first-degree murder and one count of arson in the April 6, 2000, fire that killed five children, ages 6 to 11. The fire began on the front porch of the old wooden house on Pasadena Street shortly before midnight. Investigators say charcoal lighter fluid was used to start the blaze.

McMorris and a second informant, Phil Turner, who testified earlier Tuesday, are crucial to the prosecution's case against **Deering**, an admitted drug dealer who prosecutors say was angry over a debt the father of some of the children owed.

Prosecutors do not have witnesses who can place **Deering** at the fire, but McMorris and Turner said **Deering** admitted setting the fire. Both men shared jail cells with **Deering** at different times. Turner testified that he and **Deering** were bunk mates in July 2000, and that detectives placed Turner there because they believed **Deering** had information about the fire. **Deering** was in jail at the time on a traffic offense and resisting arrest, unrelated to the fire.

During their three days in the cell together, Turner concocted a story that he, too, was a murder suspect, and he said that prompted **Deering** to open up. Turner was in jail on a drunken-driving offense.

"I said, 'How did you do it?' " Turner told jurors. Turner said **Deering** explained, "I used the lighter fluid to start the fire."

Prosecutor Gregory Townsend asked Turner, "Did he say where he got that lighter fluid?"

"He said the porch," Turner said.

In testimony last week, Marie Dean, 45, mother of four of the five children who died, said the family kept lighter fluid on the porch, near a charcoal grill.

The trial, before Oakland County Circuit Judge Wendy Potts, is expected to resume Thursday. **Deering** has insisted, through his attorney, that he is innocent and that prosecutors, hoping to close an old homicide case, are using him as a scapegoat. If convicted, **Deering** would get life in prison without parole.

Contact L.L. BRASIER at 248-858-2262 or brasier@freepress.com.

ILLUSTRATION: Photo

CAPTION: **Juwan Deering**

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