

ATKINS CONVICTED OF KILLING 11 WOMEN

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At first, juror Debra Evans couldn't do it. She couldn't bear to find **Benjamin Atkins** guilty of 11 counts of murder.

For four months she had watched **Atkins** rocking quietly in his courtroom chair. She thought about his brutal childhood -- abandoned at age 2, raped from the age of 10 and forced to watch his mother turn tricks in the front seat of a car.

If Evans voted to convict **Atkins**, he would go to prison for the rest of his life. She wanted to find him guilty but mentally ill, hoping he would be hospitalized rather than imprisoned.

But fellow juror B.J. Miller changed her mind.

"Rape is a violent act, not craziness. Murder is a violent act, not craziness," he told her. Even though the women **Atkins** killed were drug-addicted prostitutes, "They're still human beings. They deserved to live."

That convinced Evans, and sealed **Atkins**' fate.

After a four-month trial and three days of painstaking deliberations, two juries found **Atkins** guilty of a string of heinous stranglings and a rape. **Atkins**, 25, showed no reaction as the verdicts were read and as he was led away to spend the rest of his life behind bars.

"His only concern was getting a cigarette," said a deputy sheriff.

Atkins is the fastest known serial killer ever in U.S. history. Eleven women's bodies were found in just nine months. They had been crammed upside down in shower stalls in an abandoned motel or flung onto box springs and piles of garbage in empty rooms of vacant buildings.

It took 10 minutes for the jury forepeople to read all the verdicts against **Atkins** -- a slow roll call of death. The courtroom was nearly empty, except for a few relatives of victims and local news media.

"The contrast between this case and the one in Gainesville, Fla., is very interesting," presiding Recorder's Court Judge David Kerwin said later. "I can't help but conclude that the fact that these were poor, African-American women, addicted to crack cocaine with histories of prostitution, made them different to people than five Caucasian college students. It's inescapable to me, that disparity. When it comes to crime against poor folks in urban America, nobody in mainstream America really cares."

The **Atkins** cases are the last that Kerwin will hear before stepping down after 12 years on the bench. They also are the last cases tried by Assistant Wayne County Prosecutor Michael Reynolds. Reynolds and Kerwin will practice law privately.

After the verdicts, Reynolds and the mother of victim Vicki Beasley-Brown hugged.

"Thank you, Jesus. I was sweating," said Reynolds.

"This was blood, sweat and tears!" exclaimed Gloria Beasley, who buried her daughter under a dogwood tree two years ago today. Her broken body was found in Highland Park, in an abandoned apartment building called the Highlands.

None of **Atkins** ' family was in the courtroom when the verdicts were announced. His lawyer, Jeffrey Edison, was out of town.

Eddie Rankin, Beasley-Brown's 18-year-old son, solemnly shook hands with Highland Park Police Sgt. James Dobson, a 20- year veteran who devoted days and nights to studying clues.

"It's a very satisfying feeling, to know it came out right," said Dobson.

The case was solved with old-fashioned police work by a combined task force. Besides Dobson, veteran FBI agent Paul Lindsay sifted through hundreds of false tips and found a report by a prostitute named Darlene Saunders who had survived an attack. Dogged State Police Officer Royce Alston drove Saunders around night and day until she spotted **Atkins** , and Detroit Police Sgt. Ronald Sanders coaxed **Atkins** into confessing to each of the murders in detail.

One jury decided the three Detroit murders; a second decided the eight murders and one rape that occurred in Highland Park. He was acquitted of attempted murder of Saunders.

Members of both juries said **Atkins** ' own words did him in.

"The confession's 87 pages long. You couldn't get away from that," said Theresa Glenn of the Detroit jury. "It all showed up in black and white on paper."

Glenn was the last, anguished holdout against convicting **Atkins** .

"I just hope there's a message in this. I hope this is something we all learn from, so what happened to him doesn't happen to other children . . . so other children don't grow up and do this," she said.

"Society cannot be blamed for these deaths, but he should have gotten help."

BENJAMIN ATKINS ' VICTIMS

- * Darlene Saunders, 35, attacked and raped in October 1991 in Highland Park. She survived.
- * Debbie Ann Friday, 30, found strangled on Dec. 14, 1991 in Highland Park
- * Bertha Jean Mason, 26, found strangled on Dec. 30, 1991 in Detroit
- * Patricia Cannon George, 36, found strangled on Jan. 3, 1992 in Detroit
- * Vickie Truelove, 39, found strangled Jan. 25, 1992 in Detroit
- * Valerie Chalk, 34, found strangled Feb. 17, 1992 at Monterey Motel, Room 68, Highland Park.
- * Juanita Hardy, 23, found strangled at Monterey Motel, Room 35, Feb. 17, 1992
- * Unknown female's body found strangled at Monterey Motel, Room 18, Feb. 17, 1992
- * Brenda Mitchell, 38, found strangled April 9, 1992 in Highland Park
- * Vicki Beasley-Brown, 43, found strangled April 15, 1992 in Highland Park
- * Joanne O'Rourke, 40, found strangled June 15, 1992 in Highland Park
- * Ocinea Waymer, 22, found strangled Aug. 21, 1992 in Highland Park

Caption: Photo HUGH GRANNUM

Benjamin Atkins listens to the reading of verdicts Thursday in Detroit Recorder's Court. He was found guilty in 11 killings.

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