

KILLING SPREE BLAMED ON CHILDHOOD TRAUMA SUSPECT CHARGED IN 5 DEATHS

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Author: SUZETTE HACKNEY, DENNIS NIEMIEC, JOE SWICKARD and JACK KRESNAK
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITERS

In police custody as a suspected serial sex killer, ex-sailor John Eric Armstrong has woven a remarkable story about himself.

As a youth in New Bern, N.C., he was the fat kid who got teased and pushed around, was sexually abused as a child and lost his high school sweetheart to a guy who lavished her with expensive gifts.

For these reasons, Armstrong, 26, told police, he began a global campaign of terror in 1991, **killing** 18 prostitutes, including five in the Detroit area since December.

Investigators are confident he killed the Detroit-area women, but beyond that they wonder whether Armstrong -- a man who has the vanity plate "Baby Doll" **on** the front of his Jeep Wrangler -- is exaggerating.

"There are gaps in his time line that we are concerned about," said Detroit Police Cmdr. Dennis Richardson, head of the major crimes division. "However, nothing outside of Michigan has been confirmed yet. Our investigation is continuing very aggressively and very meticulously."

Armstrong -- whom friends and family call Eric -- has told police he has either killed or tried to kill every prostitute he's ever been with.

Police say Armstrong, who moved with his wife and young son to Dearborn Heights about eight months ago, may have killed up to 30 women -- and one male transvestite -- usually by strangulation after sexually assaulting them. Armstrong has claimed to have killed women coast-to-coast and in Asia and the Middle East.

While serving aboard the USS Nimitz from 1993 to 1999, he said he killed women while the ship was in port and then disappeared to sea.

Armstrong -- who police say was charged in warrants Thursday with five murders and three attempted murders -- has told investigators he has killed two prostitutes in the Seattle area and one near Spokane, Wash.

Cases unconfirmed

Dick Steiner, an investigator with the Washington State Attorney General's Office, said officials there have not been able to find any open cases of homicides for the dates and locations Armstrong has given Detroit police.

"Nothing has panned out so far," he said. "The problem is that it turns out now he is changing his story so much, nobody's going to have a tendency to believe much of what he has to say" about homicides in Washington.

Wayne County Sheriff's Detective James Hines and Detroit Police Officer Donald Johnson were the first to interview Armstrong at Detroit police headquarters after his arrest early Wednesday morning.

Armstrong described in great detail each of the **killings**, with facts that only the killer would know, Hines said. During the confessions his mood "would fluctuate from calm to an appearance of anger. But the anger didn't appear to be sincere," Hines said.

Armstrong, who is about 6-foot-2 and 300 pounds, had good recall of the slayings.

"He's a very unassuming person," Hines said.

Johnson, an officer with Detroit's Violent Crimes Task Force, said Armstrong was open and talkative while being interviewed. He has been remorseful, often crying, Johnson said.

"One of the first things he said was 'I need help,' " Johnson said of Armstrong. "Looking at him, you could never tell that he was capable of the crimes."

Armstrong told investigators he moved to Dearborn Heights because his wife's family lived there. Since coming to the area, he has worked as a fueler at Metro Airport, a security guard in Novi and a clerk at Target, police said.

He told police his wife is pregnant with their second child and that they were having marital problems.

After he listened to Armstrong confess to various murders, Hines said he called Armstrong's wife to let her know he was in police custody and was facing criminal charges.

The detective said he hung up **on** Katie Armstrong after a minute-long conversation. He said he had warned her that he wouldn't continue the conversation if she kept yelling at him.

Katie Armstrong accused police of harassing her husband, Hines said.

"She's in extreme denial," said Hines. "Apparently she didn't want to hear what I had to say. She was a very loud and rambunctious woman."

Katie Armstrong could not be reached for comment Thursday.

The Rev. Fred Zimmerman of South Redford Christian Church in Redford Township said he married Katie and Eric Armstrong **on** Sept. 25, 1998.

'A very nice man'

"He was a very nice man, outgoing," Zimmerman said. "You would never have guessed anything like this. I can't imagine Katie would have known about this."

Zimmerman said the wedding was well-attended and that Armstrong wore a white tuxedo.

"It was a very upbeat, happy wedding," he said. "Happy times for the whole family."

Zimmerman said the couple had met **on** the Nimitz; the minister said he didn't know Katie was pregnant -- she gave birth to their son **on** Feb. 4, 1999.

"I only met with them once or twice," Zimmerman said. "If I'm not mistaken, he came up from Virginia some place ...He was supposedly applying for the state police in Virginia. That was his hope after he got out of the military."

"I think that fell through for some reason -- if all this is true. It might've been a smoke screen," Zimmerman said.

Melonie Sandlin, 24, said she had gone from River Oaks Grade School in Dearborn to Dearborn High School, with the former Katie Rednoske and considered herself a best friend.

"She didn't date much in high school," Sandlin said, adding that she thought Armstrong "was her first love."

Sandlin said Eric and Katie Armstrong had recently gotten mortgage approval for a modular home in Belleville.

"She's got to be devastated," Sandlin said of Katie Armstrong. "I was going to call her, but I don't know what to say."

Eric Armstrong's mother Linda Pringle, reached at her home in New Bern, said: "I just don't believe the things they're saying."

Sgt. Raymond Garvey, of the New Bern Police Department, said there were no records of Armstrong being involved with the police, although Armstrong reportedly told Detroit police he killed his first prostitute in New Bern at 16.

"No sir, as far as I know this man didn't exist until today. We have no record of him doing anything illegal during his stay here in New Bern."

A woman who answered the phone at a home near Pringle's home in New Bern said: "He was a nice boy; his wife is a nice lady, and he's got beautiful parents and they're hurting right now."

Terry Fuhrman, assistant principal at New Bern High School, said he could not confirm that Armstrong attended there.

Armstrong's wedding announcement in the New Bern Sun Journal said he is a graduate of the high school, and Fuhrman said there was someone by that name in the senior class of 1992.

"If he went to school here, he was not a memorable character," Fuhrman said. He has been at the school for 16 years and has been assistant principal for 10.

Police in Norfolk, Va., are investigating whether Armstrong is linked to the **killing** of Linette A. Hillig in March 1998. Hillig's body was found behind a bingo parlor.

Police reports said there was evidence that Hillig had been sexually assaulted and was run over by a car.

The Nimitz, with Armstrong aboard, had docked in Norfolk **on** March 1 after spending time in port in Mayport, Fla., **on** Feb. 26 and 27.

Earlier this week, Detroit and Dearborn Heights police had said Armstrong was responsible for four murders of Detroit prostitutes. **On** Thursday, they added a fifth to the list, Monica Johnson, a Detroit in her 20s who worked as a prostitute in the Michigan Avenue/Livernois area. Police said Armstrong picked her up Dec. 3, offered her money and had sex with her. Police said he then killed her and dumped her body at an underpass at Springwells and I-94.

Johnson's body was discovered hours later by a passerby. Like the other Detroit victims, she had been strangled.

Contact SUZETTE HACKNEY at 313-222-6672 or hackney@freepress.com. Staff writers Alison Young, Jennifer Dixon, Ben Schmitt, Ruby L. Bailey and Darci McConnell contributed to this report.

Metro Detroit's serial killers

- * Bigfoot : Name given to man who raped, beat and killed seven prostitutes and other women in Detroit's Cass Corridor in 1975. Survivors said their assailant had enormous feet. The **killings** remain unsolved.
- * Benjamin Atkins : Raped and strangled 11 women in Detroit and Highland Park during a nine-month period in 1991 and 1992. Said by the FBI to have killed the greatest number of victims in the shortest time in the United States. Died in prison.
- * Oakland County child killer: Two boys and two girls were kidnapped and killed -- the boys sexually molested -- during a two-year period in southern Oakland County, beginning in 1976. No one has been charged.

- * John Norman Collins: Convicted of murder in the death of the seventh and final victim in a series of slayings of young women in the Ann Arbor-Ypsilanti area during a two-year period in the late 1960s. The other cases were never solved.
- * Leslie Allen Williams : Abducted, raped and killed four teenage girls. He was free **on** parole and living in Detroit when he confessed in 1992.
- * Victor Malone: Found guilty of the first-degree murder of a prostitute in Southfield in 1986 after he had been convicted of murdering two prostitutes in Detroit.
- * Donald Murphy: In 1980, 11 prostitutes were among 18 young women killed in similar circumstances in Detroit. Murphy was convicted of two of the murders and confessed to four others.

But Murphy's confessions came only after David Payton, the former girls' basketball coach at Highland Park High School, had told police he committed some of the same **killings** . Payton quickly recanted, claiming coercion by police.

The murder charges against Payton were dismissed, and he also was acquitted of robbing and raping two other prostitutes. Payton in 1991 won \$8 million from Detroit in a lawsuit after a jury found that police had coerced the murder confessions.

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{ KEYWORDS } JOHN ERIC ARMSTRONG; HOMICIDE; MULTIPLE; PROSTITUTE; ARREST

Caption: Police handout photo

John Eric Armstrong, 26, has told police he has killed or tried to kill every prostitute he's ever been with. Police say he began **killing** because he was teased in school, was sexually abused as a child and dumped by his sweetheart.

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