

# McWatters waits to hear fate

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**STUART** — He hates the term “Salerno Strangler.”

It’s what the new inmates whisper to one another as they pass by his solitary concrete cell.

“They peek in the window, get up close like I’m some kind of exhibit,” Eugene Wayman McWatters Jr. said Wednesday during an interview at the Martin County jail.

At Monday’s sentencing for the 2004 Port Salerno murders, Martin County Circuit Judge Larry Schack ultimately will determine whether McWatters and his popular moniker fade into obscurity with a life sentence or resurface ever so often with each death row appeal. In late September, a jury convicted him of raping and strangling Jacqueline Bradley, 43, Christal Wiggins, 29, and Carrie Caughey, 18, and recommended the death penalty.

For McWatters, 28, the options are a toss-up.

“I don’t want to live the rest of my life in prison, and I don’t want to die for what I didn’t do,” he said.

McWatters said he knew from the beginning he’d be “railroaded.”

And he knows to expect the death penalty.

“I know if I was the judge on this case, and I thought you were guilty, I’d sentence you to death,” he said.

But he said the jury never heard his real alibi for the night of Bradley’s March 2004 murder — he was in Port St. Lucie, helping his cousin fix a

car. And his June 23, 2004, confession to Martin County sheriff’s detectives, perhaps the most convincing piece of evidence connecting him to the DNA-free crime scenes, was a mere ruse to get investigators off his back.

“I thought I was playing a joke on them. You know, ha ha ha. If you listen to the tape, I was laughing through the whole thing,” McWatters said, insisting that he would have “hauled ass” long before his arrest if he was truly guilty.

He admits to having sex with Wiggins in exchange for giving her crack cocaine, but fervently still denies that he ever raped or killed any of the women.

And that’s a problem for the people of Port Salerno, who breathed a sigh of relief the day of his arrest, he said.

“I want them to know that even though there’s a conviction, they shouldn’t feel safe,” McWatters said. “They got the wrong guy and he’s going to do it again.”

McWatters is an imposing guy: 6 feet tall with a solid build. A reddish-blond mus-

tache and goatee break up the pale expanse of his face. He speaks earnestly when talking about his case with some statements cut off by laughter — the same jarring sound that often erupted during his otherwise formal trial.

With no televisions in solitary confinement, McWatters passes the time between hearings writing religious songs and drawing hot-rod cars, cartoon characters and nuzzling elephants. He uses a rag to rub colored print from newspapers and adds hues of yellow and orange to each picture and card he sells to inmates. They cost \$2 each, the money going toward toiletries like deodorant and toothpaste.

He used the same newspapers to follow “Gainesville Ripper” Danny Rolling’s own foray with the death penalty on Oct. 24.

“It’s tormenting to read that,” he said. “It’s mind-boggling to think that’s what might happen in the future.”

But he also knows what his last words would be: “I would tell them one last time that I wasn’t the one who killed their daughters.”

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