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Dad's death colors life of Wilk lawyer

By DAN CHRISTENSEN

Criminal defense lawyer Bill Matthewman is an ex-cop defending a cop killer.

The irony isn't lost on the former Miami police sergeant, but at this point in his high-profile legal career, Matthewman says he no longer frets about what others think of his clients.

'When I represent police officers charged with killing or shooting civilians, defendants and lawyers say, 'How can you represent those dirty cops?' " Matthewman said. 'When I represent civilians charged with killing police officers, police officers say, 'How can you represent that scumbag?' "

Matthewman is currently defending Kenneth Wilk, who was convicted Tuesday in U.S. District Court in Fort Lauderdale in the slaying of Broward Sheriff's Deputy Todd Fatta. Matthewman and Miami co-counsel J. Rafael Rodriguez will return to court Tuesday to try to persuade a jury to spare Wilk from the death penalty.

Three other federal capital trials have been held in South Florida since the death penalty was reinstated in 1988. Matthewman, a married father of four who lives in Parkland, has been involved in two of them.

Born and raised in Miami-Dade's Westchester neighborhood, Matthewman became a Miami patrolman in 1975 and rose to sergeant before quitting in 1981 to attend the University of Florida School of Law. He graduated with honors in 1983.

Matthewman, 53, was influenced to become a police officer, and later a defense lawyer, by the untimely death of his father who suffocated after falling inside an oil truck he was cleaning.

"I was 4 years old. I'd been waiting for him to come home and take me to the movies," Matthewman said. "Losing my father so young, I've always felt the underdog needs to be protected."

Matthewman was Chedrick Crummie's lawyer during the first federal death penalty trial in South Florida in 1996. A jury acquitted Crummie and two other members of two death-eligible murders that arose out of their membership in the "Boulder Boys" crack cocaine gang.

DEATH-PENALTY PRO

Matthewman, a name partner in the South Florida law firm Seiden, Alder, Matthewman and Bloch, has had 20 death-eligible cases in Puerto Rico.

In 2003, in the first death penalty case to go to trial there, client Hector Oscar Acosta Martinez was acquitted of the murder of a local businessman.

Last year, client Carlos Ayala-Lopez was convicted of killing a Veteran's Administration police officer, but the jury rejected the death penalty.

Matthewman has never been a prosecutor, and declined Thursday to discuss his personal views on the death penalty while Wilk's case is pending.

But Coconut Grove criminal defense attorney Bruce Fleisher, who met Matthewman in the 1970s when Fleisher was a local public defender and Matthewman was a cop, said Matthewman isn't a passionate opponent of the death penalty.

'DAMN GOOD LAWYER'

"A lot of defense lawyers are true believers. He's not a true believer. He's just a damn good lawyer doing the best for his client," said Fleisher, who represented Luis Gonzalez Lauzan Jr. in 2004 when a Miami federal jury refused to sentence him to death for orchestrating the murder of a government informant.

Matthewman's defense work has put him front and center in some of South Florida's most notorious criminal cases involving police officers.

In 1994, Matthewman helped win the acquittal of Miami Officer Armando Aguilar who was accused of fabricating evidence to help out fellow officers implicated in the 1988 beating death of neighborhood drug dealer Leonard Mercado.

In 2002 and again in 2004, Matthewman successfully defended Miami Officer Alejandro Macias in two criminal cases that arose out of a massive gun-planting conspiracy.

Seven other city officers were convicted.

Matthewman is now focused on sparing Wilk -- a client he was appointed by the court to represent -- a lethal injection.

Wilk told jurors he killed Fatta, but claimed he was suffering from AIDS-related dementia when Fatta and other members of a multiagency task force came to his Fort Lauderdale home to serve warrants on Aug. 19, 2003.

The jury found Wilk, 45, guilty of murder, possession of child pornography, obstruction of justice and the attempted murder of another deputy.