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Neighbor accused of murder in 3 Schenectady fire deaths

Suspect who reported the blaze is target of other arson probes

By Anne Miller

Staff Writer

SCHENECTADY - Kevin Lynch wanted attention. That's why, police say, he set fire to his neighbors' house and then tried to save them.

But three people perished and a fourth barely escaped the pre-dawn fire Sept. 1 on Alvey Street. Lynch, 20, was arrested a week later and arraigned Friday on arson and murder charges.

"I can't think of a worse way to die," District Attorney Robert Carney said. He and other law enforcement officials believe Lynch did not intend to hurt anyone, but must have known the house would be occupied that hour of the morning. Police are also checking whether he was involved in a series of other minor fires in the neighborhood.

The news of Lynch's arrest rippled down Alvey Street, where Barbara Hopper, 51, her daughter Vicki, 22, and Vicki's boyfriend James Parola, 26, had lived at 10 Alvey St. with Barbara's father, Francis J. Hopper Jr., who escaped.

Lynch, who lived down the street at 21 Alvey, was described by neighbors as a quiet young man who kept to himself. He struck them all as nice and polite.

Helen Micheli said he belonged to a church. She was so incensed when she first heard that police had questioned him that she told her husband she wanted to march to the station in his defense. The more she thought about what happened, though, the more the arrest explained things, like the other fires in the neighborhood.

Neighbors listed the fires on and around Alvey Street: the house at 23 Alvey lost a tree in the front yard, the blue house at number 17 had the porch burned off, and around the corner on Albany Street, an abandoned house caught fire in the week or so before the Hoppers' home.

Micheli said she talked to Lynch after the Hoppers' house burned. He told her he wanted to be a firefighter. He used lingo that impressed her, talking about the K-9 unit dogs looking for "accelerants."

"I was surprised at how unemotional he was," she said.

She paused, gathering her thoughts, fingering the curlers in her hand that she had just removed from her hair.

"I wonder why they had to die."

Officials have not released the cause of the fire or its place of origin in the house.

Richard Barlette, Arson Bureau Chief for the state Office of Fire Prevention and Control, said the state forensics lab is testing sections of the front porch for chemicals that could have spread the fire.

Authorities quickly ruled the fire had been intentionally set because the flames moved so fast and because all other causes had been eliminated, Barlette said. The electrical system showed no shorts. The heat was off. There was nothing in the area where the fire began that could have accidentally sparked the blaze, he said.

The woman who lives across from 10 Alvey photographed the blaze in the seconds before firefighters arrived. The pictures, posted on a blackboard at the press conference, show angry orange flames reaching at least 30 feet high and quickly engulfing the back of the porch.

"What kind of thinking goes into something like that? It's too foreign, it's too far removed," said the woman. She did not want to give her name. She said she was trying to forget what happened. The charred remains of the two-story house across the street constantly reminded her of the horror of that night.

"The smell is in the air," she said. "It's impossible."

In targeting Lynch, fire officials noted the profile of a kind of arsonist, the wannabe hero who wants attention. Officials said Lynch placed the first call telling firefighters of

the blaze at 4 a.m. He told fire officials he wanted to be a firefighter. He told police and the press that he put a ladder up to an upstairs window to help the women escape, but they were too scared to descend.

The day after the fire, Lynch was quoted in the Times Union, saying, "Why did she go back in?" of the older Hopper woman.

Investigators labeled him a suspect immediately, they said at a news conference Friday. The day before, officers asked Lynch to be at the police station, said Assistant Police Chief Michael Seber. After several hours of questioning, police formally charged him that night. Lynch has a court appearance scheduled for Sept. 14. He faces 25 years to life if convicted.

"I want to be careful not to prejudge the judicial process," said Mayor Brian U. Stratton. "My hope is that this will be some consolation to the Parola and Hopper families."