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Page: 1

Murder suspect torched other homes

Arson victim had warned survivor of fatal fire to be wary of neighbor

Andy Karr The Gazette

CEDAR RAPIDS - The man charged with setting a house fire that claimed two lives set fire to two homes in the same neighborhood when he was a teenager.

Brian Zirtzman was 13 when he set fire to a house at 3700 H Ave. NE on July 3, 1977. He was 15 when he set fire to a house at 3751 H Ave. NE on Sept. 2, 1979, according to court documents.

Both houses are in the block where Zirtzman lived with his parents and twin brother.

"They went and they took him down to jail," said Georgie CQ McNamara, 60, who still lives at the house Zirtzman set afire in 1979. "It took them about 15 minutes, and he said he did it."

Zirtzman, now 39, was living with his parents, at 3748 H Ave. NE, when he was arrested Thursday and jailed.

He remains in the Linn County Jail facing two counts of first-degree murder, accused of setting the April 6 fire at 3755 H Ave. NE that killed Jay Grahlman, 38, and his 6-year-old daughter, Jaymie. Four other family members escaped the fire.

Prosecutors believe Zirtzman set the April fire so he could save the family, whom he visited frequently. That plan went awry when the flames spread too quickly. Immediately after the fire, Zirtzman organized a church drive to help the family replace clothing and household items.

McNamara, who works at Drug Town on 32nd Street NE and for NCS Pearson in Cedar Rapids, said she wondered in April if Zirtzman might have been involved in ARSON, PAGE 8A

Arson/Psych report said Zirtzman felt little remorse

From page 1A

the fatal fire.

In her house fire in 1979, she said fire investigators told her Zirtzman had waited until no one was home, then gone behind her house, leaned in a window and held a cigarette lighter to bedroom curtains to start the fire.

The fire, she said, gutted her home and destroyed most of her family's possessions.

On Sept. 26, 1979, Zirtzman was adjudicated as having committed two counts of second-degree arson. He was sent to the Mental Health Institute in Independence in October 1979, remaining there until September 1980, when he was transferred to the psychiatric unit of the Linn County Department of Mental Health Services, according to court documents.

Zirtzman returned home to live with his parents, working at a variety of temporary jobs. He told the court last week he was unemployed.

In the years after the 1979 fire, McNamara said she kept her distance from Zirtzman, who made her uneasy. She said she warned other neighbors, including Vickie Reed-Grahlman, to be careful of Zirtzman.

"When Brian looks at you, it's like he looks through your clothes," she said. "He has very piercing eyes. He's just different."

McNamara said she was friendly with Zirtzman's parents, Delbert and Orion Zirtzman, who have lived in the neighborhood longer than she.

"Basically, the Zirtzmans are nice people," she said. "I just told Orion that I never wanted (Brian) over here."

She recalled a time, too, when Orion Zirtzman came to her house, upset that Brian had started a fire in the Zirtzmans' garage. McNamara called the Fire Department when she saw smoke coming from the Zirtzmans' garage.

The Zirtzmans have declined to comment on their son's arrest, outside of Orion Zirtzman saying on Saturday, "We feel terrible. For everybody. ... It doesn't seem real, like reality."

At the time of Brian Zirtzman's adjudication in 1979, juvenile referee Paul Kilburg, now a judge, recommended Zirtzman be placed in a treatment facility in Texas.

Records show placements were sought at five other youth facilities, but none would accept Zirtzman. He remained at Independence until his transfer to the Linn County psychiatric unit in September 1980.

A report written by Richard Dunkle, program director of the psychiatric unit, in October 1980, described Zirtzman as "a passive, dependent young man with limited insight and rather poor judgment."

"He has not seemed to internalize sufficient guilt or remorse associated with past anti-social acts and has, instead, minimized the significance and/or implications of these acts," the report said.

Dunkle recommended that Zirtzman be placed in a group foster home for adolescents but there is no indication in the file that his recommendation was accepted. Two months later, on Nov. 26, Zirtzman was released to his parents.

A follow-up report by the court's Juvenile Division in 1981 said Zirtzman was living at home and attending a special education program at Washington High School.

"He has not been referred for any law violations since September 1979," the report concluded.

Fire Department officials declined comment on this story.

Elizabeth Kutter of The Gazette contributed to this story.

Illustration: COLOR PHOTO

MAP

PHOTO

Gazette map

Brian Zirtzman, Charged in fatal fire

Zirtzman history

Georgie McNamara, House set afire by Brian Zirtzman

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