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Fighting fire

Christoph Trappe The Gazette

Shannon Salmons's life has been turned upside down by a fire that killed her 6-year-old daughter last year. "It has taken a part of my life away," the Logansport, Ind., woman said. "I can't ever watch anything like that (fires). It's flashbacks."

Her daughter, Jaymie Grahman, and Jaymie's dad, Jay Grahman, died after being injured in an April 6, 2003, fire at the Grahman home at 3755 H Ave. NE, Cedar Rapids. Brian Zirtzman, who lived nearby, is awaiting trial on two counts of first-degree murder, charged with setting the fire.

Though arson resulting in death is a relatively rare crime in Iowa, fire officials warn that even small fires can kill.

The warning comes after 12 arsons in Iowa City this year ... six of them in the last three weeks. That dozen is almost equal to the 13 arsons investigated in all of 2003.

Cedar Rapids has seen 17 arsons through Wednesday, on pace to match last year's total of 47.

Last year, Cedar Rapids ranked second in Iowa in damage caused by arson ... \$861,877 in 47 set fires.

Iowa City ranked fifth, with \$356,312 in arson damages in 13 cases, the Iowa Department of Public Safety and the local agencies reported.

Nationally, arson killed 350 people and caused \$919 million in property damage in 2002, the latest information available, according to the U.S. Fire Administration.

Arson can steal a neighborhood's sense of security, said Greg Buelow, Cedar Rapids Fire Department spokesman.

"People don't think that somebody would set fires," he said. "We also don't want a loss of life. It may just be a Dumpster fire, but a firefighter could still die."

Property taxes and insurance premiums also can increase due to arsons, Buelow said.

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Arson/C.R. program helps kids

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Given that half the arrests for arson involve children under age 18, the Cedar Rapids Fire Department has a program in place to teach children not to play with fire.

The Juvenile Fire Intervention Program saw 27 children last year and 17 to date this year.

Children are referred by schools, juvenile court and firefighters, said Buelow.

"Up to age seven, kids set fires out of curiosity," Buelow said. "Then, they don't know the difference between good and bad fires. Sometimes kids want attention."

In the program, fire officials will try to determine if a child will commit future arsons. They assign fire-safety homework to children and also inspect a home for fire hazards.

Some children are referred to professional counselors.

Arson prevention

- ° Lock and secure all windows and doors.
- ° Keep wood, paper and other combustible items away from buildings.
- ° Be observant, be watchful, be aware.
- ° Report suspicious activity to local authorities.

Source: Iowa City Fire Department

Tips for parents

- ° Teach young children that fire, matches and lighters are for adults only. Keep matches and lighters out of the reach of children.
- ° Teach older children to use matches and lighters safely.
- ° Do not leave cooking fires or lighted candles unattended.

Source: Cedar Rapids Fire Department

Illustration: GRAPHIC

Gazette graphic

Arson in Iowa Greg Buelow, C.R. Fire Department spokesman A firefighter adjusts a light Monday as members for the Iowa City Fire Department work to extinguish an early morning fire at the Iowa Book and Supply Commercial Sales building at 804 South Capitol St. in Iowa City. Iowa City has had 12 arson fires this year, and six of them have happened in the last three weeks.

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