

THE ANGRY SON



This investigation was heartbreaking; one that affected me emotionally. It is a case that involved a 7-year-old boy, his parents and younger sister, who lived in a large home in a wealthy Miami neighborhood. The fire within this home was in March in the late 1990s. One bedroom within this dwelling was subjected to extreme fire damage; however, the overall damage to the structure was not severe.

In essence, one bedroom was destroyed, which was occupied by the family's 7 year-old son Kevin.

The local fire officials had investigated the fire but had not made a determination as to the exact cause of the fire. It was a suggestion that the fire ignited as a result of an electrical fault but no specific item or object could be identified.

The fire originated at approximately 6:00 p.m. on the date and the entire family was home. The mother of the family was preparing dinner and the father, a prominent attorney was working in his office.

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The younger sister of Kevin was watching television when suddenly a smoke detector had activated and Kevin had exited from the second floor bedroom screaming there was a fire in his bedroom.

The residence did not have a fire alarm system other than battery operated smoke detectors. The prominent (well-to-do) father had immediately notified 911 and exited the family from their residence.

An immediate response time occurred from the local fire department and the fire was extinguished.

Investigators indicated that the fire appeared to have originated to one side of the bed where there was a night table, alarm clock, lamp and an unidentified object. As referenced earlier, the fire was listed as undetermined but possibly an electrical source of ignition.

The father, the prominent attorney with many political connections was unsatisfied with the local authorities' determination.

They researched and retained the services of Peter Vallas Associates to investigate the origin and cause of this fire. Their insurance company did not retain an expert such as our firm to investigate therefore the fire scene was released by local authorities and the exclusive investigation was performed by Vallas and son.

Obviously our initial examination of the room revealed that the fire was confined to Kevin's bedroom. Police interviews were conducted with the family including Kevin.

During our interview there was evidence that Kevin was extremely nervous and had extreme anxiety. It was apparent that he not only discovered the fire in his room, but was hesitant in further speaking about his initial observations of where the fire originated.

Kevin was not injured or burned whatsoever, but once the family explained to him that they had hired professionals to investigate the fire, he was non-cooperative.

SITE INVESTIGATION

During the examination of the fire scene in the reconstruction of the room I was able to identify that the fire originated on Kevin's bed. The electrical items that had been referenced were secured and removed and an electrical examination in our laboratories revealed that they were a victim and attacked by the fire. They exhibited no signs of electrical malfunction, defect or deficiencies. The building wiring, receptacles and all other ignition sources were eliminated as a potential cause of the fire.

A re-examination and conversation was held with Kevin. He was an intelligent boy for his age, but it was apparent that he was frightened and obviously uneasy.

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The questioning also involved whether or not he had possession of a lighter or matches or had ever nonchalantly *"played with fire."* I indicated to the father that we had ruled out any potential accidental cause of the fire and suggested that his son of 7 years old may have been angry to set the fire.

The parents were irate and deeply offended at the suggestion or the accusation.

The mother was naïve in recognizing that her son, Kevin had emotional issues with his father.

The strong headed father with his political connections stubbornly refused to believe that his son would conduct such an incident or fire setting. Immediately my firm was relinquished from the investigation and the father had filed a complaint against the firm and started a crusade to discredit me.

Peter Vallas Associates' investigation was discontinued and handled only by the local authorities as I was no longer allowed any questioning or conduct any further fire analysis on the case.

Rightly so, I was confident through the method of scientific analysis that there was no other explanation for the cause of the fire other than some form of a heated or ignited object in contact to the bedding material. I was also confident, based on a reasonable degree of investigative and engineering certainty that in all probability Kevin was playing with matches or a lighter or another ignition source that ignited the bed within his room.

DISTURBING CIRCUMSTANCES

Approximately a month and a half later there was a second fire within the home. ***"The father, mother and the younger sister had all perished and the residence had practically burned to the ground".***

Kevin was outside of the residential structure in the backyard upon the police and fire department arrival. Upon the investigation of the local fire officials, they had determined that the fire originated on a mattress within a guest bedroom on the first floor of the home. The dynamics of the fire did not allow for proper egress and evacuation of the family however Kevin had exited through a sliding glass door of the dining room on the first floor. Their interrogation revealed that Kevin had set a fire using a lighter, one of many which the father would ignite his pipe after dinner during the evening. The lack of egress and the smoke inhalation and burns to his family resulted in their fatality because it was determined that Kevin had emotional issues and was angry with his father.

I did not further investigate the second fire, but through further conversation with the authorities, they were convinced that I was correct in my initial investigation and they believed both fires were set by Kevin and unfortunately this resulted in a fatal tragedy.

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The ignorance of the father and the authorities in not recognizing that Kevin had emotional issues failed to comprehend my knowledge and opinion of a juvenile fire setter. Unfortunately I was ignored and tragically a family was lost.

In closing there are many statistics on juvenile fire setters. Children can be affected by abuse, stress or any type of psychological disorders.

We know that there are approximately 70,000,000 toy-like lighters that are imported to the United States that make it easily accessible for child's play.

It is also known that approximately 50 percent of all fires in the United States are set by children.

Over 40 percent of juvenile fire setters are under the age of 5 and 70 percent are under the age of 10. It is also represented that approximately 250,000 fires a year are the result of juvenile fire-setters.

Lastly, it is also noted that 55 percent of all United States arson arrests are children under the age of 18.

Until this day I regret that my professionalism was not absorbed or considered by the local authorities and Kevin's father.

I recommend to anyone reading this case history that they follow all fire prevention safety as well as being cognizant over emotional or distressed issues with children ***“playing with fire”***. There are many professionals that can assist with juvenile behaviorisms involving emotional distress with fire setting.

It is my suggestion and advisement adults should properly secure ignitable objects out of the reach of children to prevent such a tragedy as referenced in this case investigation.