

Suspect in Syracuse Arson Spree Pleads Guilty to Manslaughter in Fatal Fire

A Syracuse man charged in a fire-setting spree on the city's West End admitted his guilt today in a fire that killed an elderly man.

Shayne Davis, 32, of 1902. W. Genesee St., pleaded guilty before state Supreme Court Justice John Brunetti to a lesser charge of first-degree manslaughter and one count of second-degree arson.

Both the prosecutor and defense lawyer said Davis told police he set fires in that West End neighborhood because he was bored.

As part of the plea deal agreed to by the prosecution, Brunetti promised Davis a sentence of 25 years in state prison.

He had been facing a more serious charge of second-degree murder - which carries a maximum penalty of 25 years to life in state prison - for the June 18 blaze that claimed the life of 90-year-old Frederick Brown.

In pleading guilty, Davis admitted intentionally setting fire to the home at 424 Cayuga St., knowing someone was inside or that that was a reasonable possibility. He was not accused of intentionally killing Brown, just with causing his death during a felony arson.

Davis was accused of using a hand-held common lighter to ignite something on the enclosed porch at the rear of Brown's home about 12:55 a.m. June 18.

Brown was pulled from the burning home by city firefighters. He died in the hospital several days later from the complications of smoke inhalation.

Two of Brown's nieces and four of his grand-nieces and grand-nephews were in court for Davis' guilty plea.

"I wish it was longer," niece Carolyn Santay said of the promised sentence Davis faces. She said Senior Assistant District Attorney Timothy Hennigan had explained the reason for the plea deal to the family, but she declined to say what that explanation entailed.

Both Hennigan and defense lawyer Donald Kelly said the plea deal was a just resolution given possible proof problems with the prosecution case.

Hennigan said there were potential proof problems with Davis' confession, although he declined to elaborate. Kelly said there also could have been problems directly linking Davis to a number of the fires, including the one that claimed Brown's life.

"There was no direct proof he set that fire," Kelly said. But with the prosecution willing to let Davis avoid a possible life sentence for a murder conviction, Davis was willing to plead guilty to the lesser manslaughter charge, the lawyer said.

That enabled Brown's relatives to avoid the pain and anguish of sitting through a trial in the case, Kelly said.

The fatal Cayuga Street blaze was one of six fires Davis was accused of setting.

He also was facing second-degree arson charges in connection with fires May 4 at 507 Avery Ave. and May 13 at 406 Avery Ave. He was facing attempted second-degree arson charges for fires May 4 at 309 Erie St., and May 29 at 611 Avery Ave.

He also was facing a third-degree arson charge for setting fire to a car outside 1917 W. Genesee St. May 23.

Hennigan said Davis' fingerprint on the car linked him to that fire and two witnesses saw him running from the scene of one of the other fires.

After being linked to the car fire by his fingerprint, Davis confessed to police his role in the additional fires. He was arrested July 26.

Sentencing is set for Nov. 27.

Santay said she didn't know if any of the victim's relatives would address the court at Davis' sentencing. But she said relatives planned to be there as they have been for every one of Davis' court appearances.

"I don't think he shows any remorse," she said as she left court.

Kelly acknowledged that in the videotaped confession to police, Davis claimed he was "just bored" when he went out setting the fires.

"It was out of boredom," Hennigan said of the defendant's motive. "I can't give you any other reason or a better explanation for what he did."