

Retarded center torched after opening announced

By ROBERT A. WILLIAMS

Fire and police investigators combed Dongar Hills this morning for clues to the identity of arsonists who last night set fire to a neighborhood building — plagued with suspicious fires — that was to serve as a day center for retarded persons.

The structure, a two-story brick building at 26 Ducent Ave., near Hylan Blvd., was to have been used as a satellite facility of the Staten Island Developmental Center to provide counseling, therapy and recreation programs for 200 retarded persons. A blaze May 1 caused no-demon damage and the facility was scheduled to open in a few weeks.

Fire marshals said this morning that a liquid was used to set several separate and distinct fires in the newly renovated building.

Two firefighters were injured, not seriously, while fighting the blaze.

Last night's fire was reportedly the fourth in less than six months. Two fires were out or not caused little damage.

No arrests have been made in any of the blazes.

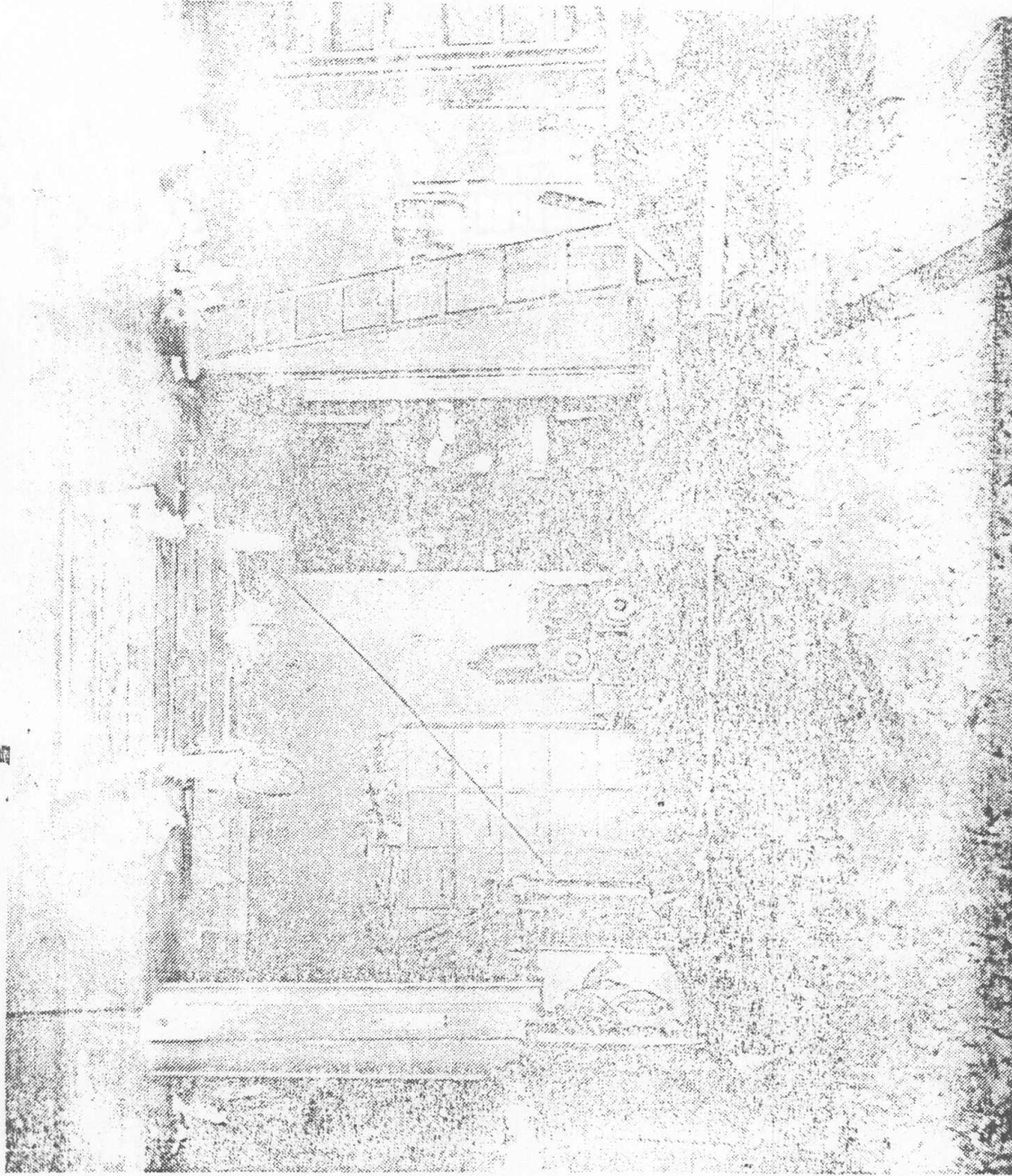
"I ordered marshals to begin their investigation immediately because of the nature of past fires in that building," said Deputy Chief Warren Haring, second in command of Island firefighters.

Chief Haring, off duty at the time in his Grant City home, was listening to a fire radio when he heard the address of the fire.

"I didn't know anything about the blaze, except the address, and, based on that, I felt an investigation should begin at once," he said.

Deputy Chief Fire Marshal John Baracato was alerted in minutes at his

(Continued on Page 2)



The interior of the Dumont Ave. building, which was to be a day center for the retarded, is wrecked after a blaze last night. It had been renovated after another fire May 1.

By Photo by Tony Caromonte

(From Page 1)

Dongan Hills home and arrived at the scene as firefighters were still working.

Based on his initial inspection of the burned out building, Barracato called for two arson squads, a supervisor and a photo unit.

"There's no question they were separate fires," Barracato said this morning as he stood outside the building. "Liquid was used, and that accounted for the rapid spread of the fire."

The first fire companies to arrive at the blaze reported flames leaping from most windows of the first floor.

Barracato said he called for extra

manpower because "there's a lot of canvassing I want to do before it gets light."

According to witnesses, the fire broke out about 9:30 p.m.

"I smelled smoke and went outside to see what it was and I saw the building on fire," explained a young woman who lives on Reid Ave., with a back yard adjacent to the fire building. The woman declined to be identified.

She said she raced back into her house and dialed 911 to report the fire.

Pat Capasso, who lives at 38 Dumont Ave., a few doors from the fire building, said he had arrived home from work and was washing when he heard fire engines.

"I saw a bunch of kids sitting in a car in front of the place when I came home, but I thought nothing of it," he said. "I wasn't in the house 15 minutes when the thing was blazing."

Fire dispatchers received a handful of telephone calls for the fire at 9:38 p.m. Firefighters who arrived first requested additional manpower because flames were rolling from the entire first floor.

In minutes, firemen brought four hoses into play, advancing through the front door, rear and roof.

A tower ladder was moved into position as a precaution, but was not used.

Firefighters from four engine and three ladder companies controlled the blaze about an hour after it began, at

10:34 p.m. Damage was heavy to the structure and its contents.

"The building was vacant and there was just too much fire showing when the companies pulled up," Deputy Chief Andrew Kerzner of Brooklyn's 12th Division said as he supervised operations. "Fires don't start by themselves. Somebody started that fire."

At one point during the height of the blaze, flames apparently short circuited overhead wiring, causing it to smoke, burn and fall to the ground. A Con Edison emergency repair crew at the scene said partial power was cut from three houses on Dumont Ave. because of the incident.

Firefighter Fred Tanachian of Engine

Co. 161, South Beach, was burned on the face and later complained of chest pains, and fireman Joseph Heins of Ladder 81, also South Beach, suffered from smoke inhalation. Both were taken by Fire Department vehicles to Doctors' Hospital where they were treated and released.

Joseph Perrotta, who identified himself as a partner with the firm that owns the building, told police that four fires have plagued the building since May 1 when a blaze caused medium damage only two weeks after Community Board 2 had approved the house as a day center over community opposition.

Another fire broke out Sept. 24 and caused light damage. Perrotta was not

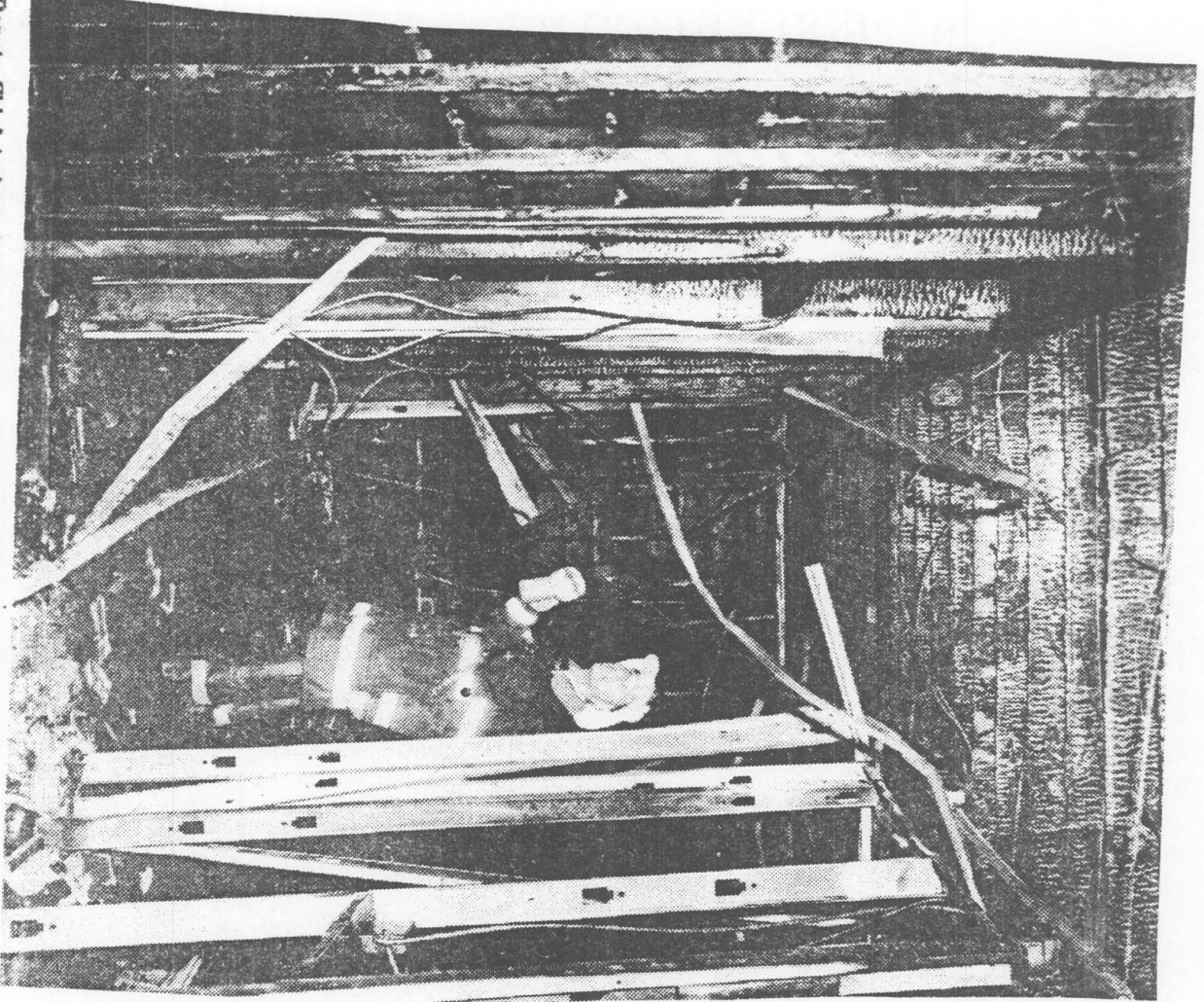
available last night to give details of the remaining blaze.

According to Elin Howe, director of the Office of Borough Development Services and of the Staten Island Development Center, the structure had been renovated and all fire-related damages repaired.

"We're looking forward to an opening by mid-November or at the latest by the end of the month," she announced Friday at a meeting of the Staten Island Regional Retardation and Disabilities Council at the Institute for Basic Research in Willowbrook.

Her remarks were carried Saturday by the Advance in a story on the center's opening.

Deputy Chief Andrew Kerzner inspects damage in the burned-out building at 26 Dumont Ave.



Firefighters move hoses as they fight the Dumont Ave. fire.

2
3
4
5