

# 2 teens charged with torching center

## Probers praise neighbors' aid, say they can't figure a motive

By BRUCE ALPERT

Two 17-year-old youths from Dongan Hills were arrested early today and accused of tossing homemade bombs Sunday into a neighborhood building planned as a day center for the retarded. Molotov cocktails, police said, fueled a fire that seriously damaged the two-story brick house.

Michael O'Hara of 247 Reid Ave. and Joseph Koeller of 1448 Hylan Blvd., both of whom live with their parents within two blocks of the fire-scarred building at 26 Dumont Ave., were expected to be arraigned later today on charges of arson, possession of dangerous weapons and criminal mischief, police said.

According to police, the youths tossed the molotov cocktails — bottles contain-

ing a flammable liquid — through windows of the building.

The Sunday torching of the Dumont Ave. house delayed state plans for a November opening of the center for the area's 200 retarded citizens. It was the third suspicious fire in the structure in less than six months.

Neighborhood residents and witnesses to the latest arson apparently led police to O'Hara and Koeller. Lt. Hugh Bennett, commanding officer of the Island's Crimes Against Property Squad, attributed a quick break in the case to "cooperative community residents."

"We canvassed the community and were able to talk to some witnesses who were helpful," Bennett said, adding that a joint police-fire marshal investigation

is continuing.

Bennett said that police have not determined a motive for the arson or whether O'Hara or Koeller might have been involved in the two previous suspicious fires at the building — the first on May 1, the second on Sept. 24.

O'Hara, a messenger in Manhattan, and Koeller, who is unemployed, were picked up in their homes, and after questioning by representatives of the district attorney's office and police, were booked about 1:30 a.m. in the 120th Precinct stationhouse, St. George.

Fire marshals, who canvassed Dongan Hills yesterday in the joint effort with police, said three or four separate fires had been set Sunday about 9:30

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p.m. on both floors of the recently renovated building.

Neighborhood residents told the Advance they saw a blue car filled with six young persons in front of 26 Dumont Ave. shortly before the fire.

Sections of the structure's roof and walls were badly burned, but little apparent structural damage resulted in Sunday's blaze. Deputy Chief Marshal John Barracato said.

"The investigation was top priority," said Barracato, who rushed to Dumont Ave. from his Dongan Hills home min-

utes after the fire was reported and dispatched two arson squads, a supervisor and a photo unit.

The investigation is being headed by Detective Gerard Marino and Fire Marshals Edward Kneafsey and Herbert Schiffer of the Fire Department's Major Case Squad.

Probes into the two earlier arsons at the building, occupied until yesterday by New York Foundling Hospital caseworkers, have failed to turn up any suspects.

The latest blaze occurred only one day after published reports telling of state plans to open the center by late November. The building had been approved as a facility for the retarded and headquarters for the Borough Developmental Services Office by Community Board 2 in April despite intense community opposition.

Two weeks after board approval, a blaze, apparently fueled by a flammable liquid, caused medium damage to a portion of the building, until a decade ago a private residence. A second fire, also declared suspicious by fire officials, caused light damage to the structure Sept. 24.

Joseph Perrotta, co-owner of the

building, said yesterday plans will be furthered for conversion of the building into the state-operated center. Under terms of a five-year lease, Perrotta and his co-owner are to receive \$34,800 a year in rent.

"There's no way I am going to be intimidated now," Perrotta said before the arrests.

Mental Retardation Commissioner Thomas A. Coughlin, deploring the arson incidents as "depraved acts," said the state probably will pay to repair the charred structure. Renovation costs may be \$45,000, three times as much as the May 1 arson, state officials said.

No new date for the center's opening has been set.

Before today's arrests, Anthony Pinto, president of the Willowbrook Benevolent Society, a parent group, blamed Sunday's incident on the emotionally charged statements of neighborhood residents opposed to the facility.

Some residents maintained that opening the center, slated to provide recreation and therapy to retarded citizens of the Community Board 2 area, would lower property values and endanger the safety of neighborhood youngsters.

"This kind of exaggerated fears and statements were probably overheard by neighborhood youngsters who thought they were doing a good deed by setting the place on fire," Pinto said yesterday before the arrests.

Borough elected officials, state mental retardation administrators and members of a local civic association opposed to the conversion of the house into a day center issued statements yesterday deploring the arson and calling for swift prosecution of those responsible.

"Fear, intolerance and prejudiced misunderstanding must never be allowed to dominate our lives," Borough President Gaeta said.

William Counihan, vice president of the Dongan Hills United Civic Association, which sparked opposition to the center for the retarded, decried the

arson as a "deplorable act."

"While we are still opposed to the state plans, we deplore any kind of violence of any sort," Counihan said.

Before today's arrests, an attorney for the U.S. Justice Department's Civil Rights Division, said the department may conduct its own probe of the Dumont Ave. fires.

The federal investigations, attorney Lucy Thompson said, could center on possible violations of the civil rights of the retarded persons to be served at the center.

Meanwhile, officials from the New York Foundling Hospital yesterday moved whatever furniture they could salvage from the building.

"We were planning to move on Wednesday to our new facility at 206 Bay St. (Tompkinsville)," said Rey Galindo, director of the hospital's foster care program on Staten Island. "I guess we were too late."

Galindo estimated the hospital's loss at several thousand dollars.



**Fire marshals question Dumont Ave. residents after a blaze wrecked a planned day center on the street.**

S.I. Advance Photo by Barry Schwartz



**The charred interior of an office in the Dumont Ave. building.**

S.I. Advance Photo



**Movers carry what can be salvaged from the New York Foundling Hospital office in the Dumont Ave. building**