

Bail set for youths accused in center fire

By JOHN E. HURLEY

Two 17-year-old Dongan Hills youths accused of torching a planned day center for the retarded in their neighborhood had bail set yesterday at \$2,000 bond or \$1,000 cash following their arraignment on arson charges in Stapleton Criminal Court.

Michael O'Hara of 247 Reid Ave. and Joseph Koeller of 1448 Hylan Blvd., both of whom live within two blocks of the planned state day center at 26 Dumont Ave., each face possible prison terms of up to 15 years.

Koeller was released late yesterday after putting up the \$1,000 cash, while O'Hara was taken to the adolescent detention center on Rikers Island.

Sunday night's blaze, which caused an estimated \$45,000 worth of damage, was the third suspicious fire at the as-yet-unopened center within the last six months. The center had been scheduled to open in late November for use by about 200 retarded persons. The Sunday torching has delayed state plans, and no new opening date has been set.

Ronald DeLucia, supervisor of the fire Department Major Case Squad, said the investigation into two previous fires, May 1 and Sept. 24, is still continuing,

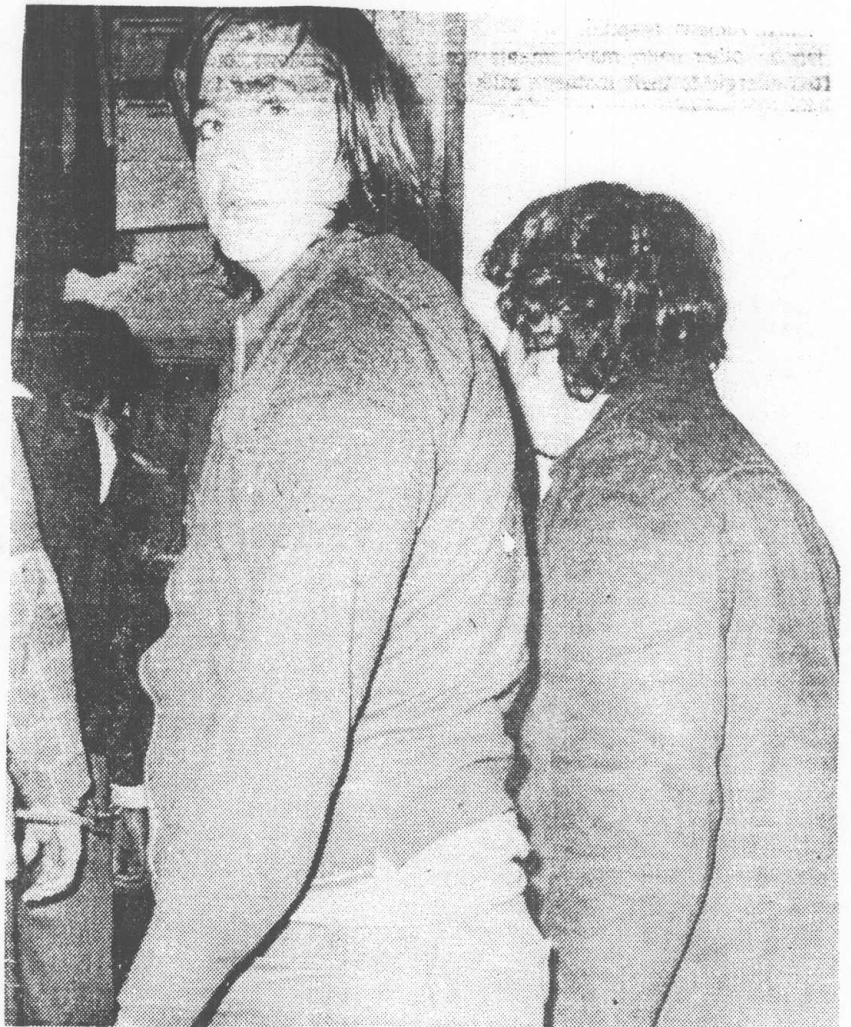
but he added that O'Hara and Koeller were not considered suspects.

O'Hara and Koeller were arrested early yesterday in their homes following

a 24-hour investigation by the Major Case Squad during which fire marshals and detectives spoke to at least 40 residents of the Dongan Hills community.

Fire Marshal Herbert Schiffer, one of the investigators, said yesterday that he was surprised not only by the community's cooperation, but with its apparent lack of opposition to the facility. "Everyone I talked to, and everyone my partner talked to, said they didn't mind it," Schiffer said. "It didn't seem to be a major concern with them at all."

The building had been approved as a facility for the retarded by Community Board 2 last April despite intense community opposition led by the Dongan Hills United Civic Association.



Arson suspects Michael O'Hara, left, and Joseph Koeller, both 17, leave the 120th Precinct stationhouse, St. George, for an arraignment in Criminal Court.

Detectives involved in the investigation also said that although they believed the two teen-agers acted on their own, the torching could not be classified as a teen prank. "No, I wouldn't say it was a prank," said Fire Marshal Edward Kneafsey. "Both of them knew what they were doing."

Investigators said they believed that Koeller actually made the gasoline-fueled molotov cocktail but was not present when O'Hara allegedly threw it into the two-story building. Detectives declined to say whether they thought O'Hara was alone when the firebomb was thrown.

Several neighborhood residents reported seeing a blue car occupied by about six persons in front of 26 Dumont

Ave. shortly before the fire.

O'Hara, a messenger in lower Manhattan for the last two months, has no prior criminal record.

Koeller, a student at Concord High School, was arrested last June 19 for allegedly tossing an M-80 firecracker onto the SIRT railroad tracks near Burgher Ave. in Dongan Hills. He pleaded guilty to the misdemeanor charge of unlawful use of fireworks and was fined \$50.

At their arraignment yesterday, Judge Anthony Marra set bail at \$2,000 bond or \$1,000 cash after turning down a request by assistant District Attorney Arnold Berliner that bail be set at \$5,000 in light of the "serious charges" against the pair.

Koeller was represented by Anthony Crecca, while Legal Aid attorney Joseph Lasky represented O'Hara. The parents of both youths were in the courtroom.

O'Hara and Koeller were ordered to return to court Friday to answer charges of arson, criminal mischief, conspiracy and possession of a dangerous weapon—specifically the molotov cocktail.

Koeller has resided at the Hylan Blvd. address all his life; O'Hara moved to the Reid Ave. address with his parents five years ago after living for 11 years at 12 Dumont Ave., a few doors away from the planned day center for the retarded.