

Arson turns up heat on one hot summer



Marlo Campbell

AND ANOTHER THING

I can empathize with St. James residents who may be nervous about a recent string of as-yet-unsolved arsons in their neighbourhood.

I live near Fort Rouge, where more than 20 suspicious fires were set in garages and garbage bins over the past several months, including one that killed three pets.

Truth be told, I found the situation more surreal than scary (I didn't have trouble sleeping, for example) but, like many others in the area, my household began taking what precautions we could — hiding our garbage, leaving lights on at night — in hopes our property wouldn't be the next one targeted.

The incidents made it clear how vulnerable any of us are to such a crime. Really, how does one go about protecting oneself from fires set at random under cover of darkness? (Answer: one can't.)

And I hate feeling vulnerable.

So it was that when Winnipeg police recently announced they had arrested a person they believe is the culprit behind 18 of the Fort Rouge fires, I joined in the collective sigh of relief — and then tried my best to ignore the fact that another fire was set in the area the day after that suspect had been taken into custody.

Now, it seems another firebug — or bugs — have picked up the torch, so to speak, in St. James.

If the person/persons responsible for the incidents in this part of town think they're engaging in some harmless mischief, allow me to state the obvious: unlike, say, spray painting a fence or stealing a lawn ornament, fires can kill people. It is no joke.

A bit of background: I grew up in St. James. When I was about 12 years old, an accidental house fire two streets over claimed the life of a man who had initially escaped the blaze with his family, only to perish in his home's front hallway when, to the horror of everyone watching, he ran back in. His death was the talk of the schoolyard the next day, as we kids sifted through the rumours swirling through the

community, speculating on whether he had gone in for his wife's wedding ring or to save the family cat; both popular theories. I never did find out the truth, but the tragedy instilled in me an acute awareness of what fire can do that has lasted to this day, such that whenever I sleep in unfamiliar surroundings — particularly on upper levels — I take note of whether or not I'd be able to fit through the window in order to jump to safety.

According to a story in the *Winnipeg Free Press* last week, 97 arsons have been reported to police since the beginning of July, including 78 that month alone — double the number reported during July

of last year — and they just keep coming.

It's all but impossible to prevent arson, although I submit accessible, consistent support for would-be offenders (especially those with diminished mental capacity, such as the man now charged with the Fort Rouge fires) and their families is a good place to focus resources.

All we citizens can do is try to remove temptations, report suspicious activity to police and ensure our smoke detectors are in good working order.

Have you checked the batteries in yours lately?

Mental health heroes to receive kudos

Do you know an individual or organization dealing with mental health issues that that have made a heroic effort?

The Canadian Mental Health Association, Winnipeg Region is seeking nominations for candidates deemed Heroes of Mental Health.

The winners will be honoured by CMHAW at a noon hour luncheon on Sept. 30 at the Manitoba Club on Broadway.

Organizers say the awards are intended to honour and celebrate the victories of people living with the effects of mental illness and acknowledge the contributions made by individuals and organizations to the advancement of mental health.

Award categories include individual, friend/family, professional, volunteer and media.

The event will feature a performance by Victoria Maxwell, whose one-woman show called *Crazy For Life* is based on living with bipolar disorder.

There will also be an art auction in

partnership with Humantree — a non-profit organization that donates profits from art sales to help underprivileged children, their families and orphans around the world.

For more information, visit www.cmhawpg.mb.ca.

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