

Arsonist finds crime doesn't pay, receives 23 years to life

By: Dennis Jay

A head injury slowed David O'Dell mentally, though it never affected his kind and trusting nature. He lived alone in an old wooden house in upstate Wayland, N.Y., employed by his best friend, Joseph Meyers.

Little did O'Dell realize that Meyers would betray him. He torched the rickety old home, burning O'Dell alive in an insurance plot so Meyers and his wife could live the good life.

Bigger plans

Meyers and his wife, Iryn, wanted to buy a double-wide trailer to upgrade their living quarters, and Joseph planned to buy two tow truck businesses. O'Dell was their ticket.

The couple virtually stole O'Dell's home out from under him — the first step in their insurance plot. They maneuvered to buy the aging house from O'Dell for half its value. Cunningly, they allowed him to continue living there. It was O'Dell's childhood home, a refuge for the aging loner. And soon became his fiery coffin.

Joseph and Iryn insured the house and her possessions for about \$125,000. They also bought a \$40,000 life-insurance policy on O'Dell.

The couple burned down the ignitable wooden home on a chilly February night in 2016. A blowtorch started the fire, and they made sure O'Dell was home to roast alive.

Flames consumed the brittle wooden home like kindling. O'Dell was quickly incinerated — he had no chance to escape the roaring blaze.

Investigators found what was left of his body amid the rubble — just 97 pounds of charred debris and seared bones. Forensics experts were forced to compare his singed backbone with an old X-ray to identify him.

Setting the scene

Joseph and Iryn made O'Dell seem like the arsonist. He was unhinged, losing touch with reality and was intent on killing himself, the couple told investigators.

O'Dell left his clothes on the heater after hearing "voices" telling him to burn down the house. He also stole \$40 from a tool box at Meyers' business shortly before the fire. At least that's what they said.

Their fairytale quickly fell flat once investigators looked deeper.

O'Dell was actually careful about fire around the house in which he'd happily lived since childhood, grieving relatives countered. He knew

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the old wooden structure was a fire hazard and made sure flammables were handled with care.

"When he was using the wood burners, he was always very careful. He could smell the smoke, and he would get up and take care of it, so he was extremely wary of any kind of smoke in that house," older brother Phil O'Dell said.

A wood-burning furnace in the basement also showed suspicious burn patterns suggesting someone intentionally set the fire. And small surprise that investigators found a propane torch at Meyers' business.

Meyers also left his cell phone on during the time before the fire. Big mistake. A phone mapping analyst tracked his and Iryn's movements as they drove back and forth between their home and O'Dell's house three times in the hours leading up to the fire. Surveillance video from Meyers' business, which was based at his home, matched the phone findings.

Many of O'Dell's caring relatives and siblings attended the trial, seeking justice for their youngest brother. They got what they came for.

Joseph and Iryn Meyer will have to forget the comfortable new doublewide. They'll spend 23 years to life in cramped jail cells. They were convicted of arson, insurance fraud, murder and other offenses.

“It tears your heart right out,” said older brother Phillip O’Dell about his baby brother. “(That) somebody who is supposedly good friends would do something like that to him, to that extreme. Why they would do it at all, I don’t know. It just rips your heart out.”