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QUEENS MAN CHARGED WITH SETTING FIRE TO WHITESTONE DINER

Faces Up To 15 Years In Prison

Queens District Attorney Richard A. Brown today announced that a 42-year-old Whitestone man has been charged with arson, reckless endangerment and burglary after allegedly breaking into a diner to steal cigarettes and then setting a fire that virtually destroyed the neighborhood eatery.

District Attorney Brown said, "The defendant is charged with setting a fire that destroyed a popular business and extensive damage to neighboring stores. The fire could easily have caused serious injuries or death to firefighters charged with fighting the blaze or any people who may have been inside or around the building."

Delano Reid, Acting Special Agent in Charge, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, New York Field Division said, "For a crime so often noted as victimless, this is a perfect example of how wrong that is, just ask the affected shop owners. The fire marshals and ATF agents are to be commended for their quick and decisive actions in this case."

District Attorney Brown identified the defendant as Michael P. Trantel, 42, of 15-29 159th Street in Whitestone. The defendant has been charged with third and fourth-degree arson, first-degree reckless endangerment, third-degree burglary, fourth-degree criminal possession of stolen property and petit larceny. If convicted, he faces up to 15 years in prison. He was arraigned today before Queens Criminal Court Judge Robert Raciti, who ordered the defendant held without bail. His next court date is November 25, 2008.

According to the District Attorney, at about 1:00 a.m., on November 2, 2008, inside of the Lollipop Diner located at 153-31 Cross Island Parkway North, the defendant allegedly stole some cigarettes and a lighter after breaking a window to gain access to the diner, then set a bag of Halloween candy on fire using the stolen lighter. The diner was closed for business at the time of the fire.

District Attorney Brown said that, according to court papers, the defendant first approached a security guard at the diner and asked for a cigarette, but the guard would not give him one. He then allegedly saw a pack in the diner so he kicked in the window and grabbed a pack of cigarettes and a green lighter. He then allegedly used the lighter to set fire to a bag of Halloween candy that was in a cardboard box, took some more cigarettes, and then left the same way he had entered.

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Surveillance video of the diner shows the defendant outside the diner, as well as entering from the front of the diner and exiting from the rear, according to court papers. The fire caused extensive smoke, flame and water damage to the entire diner.

District Attorney Brown said that the defendant was arrested yesterday by Fire Marshals Robert McDevitt and Dennis Quinci of the New York City Fire Department's Bureau of Fire Investigations, Citywide North Command, under the supervision of Supervising Fire Marshal Joseph Hennelly and Fire Marshals Mark Thompson and John P. Watkins of the New York City Fire Department's Bureau of Fire Investigations, Special Investigation Unit, under the supervision of Supervising Fire Marshal Robert Pinto. The cause of the fire was investigated by the Joint Arson Task Force, which included members of the ATF, the Arson and Explosion Squad of the New York City Police Department, and the Special Investigations Unit of the Bureau of Fire Investigation of the New York City Fire Department.

Assistant District Attorney Quynnda L. Fleming of the District Attorney's Economic Crimes Bureau, is prosecuting the case, under the supervision of Assistant District Attorneys Gregory C. Pavlides, Bureau Chief, and Christina Hanophy, Deputy Bureau Chief, and the overall supervision of Executive Assistant District Attorney for Investigations Peter A. Crusco and Deputy Executive Assistant District Attorney for Investigations Linda M. Cantoni.

It should be noted that a criminal complaint is merely an accusation and that a defendant is presumed innocent until proven guilty.

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Note to Editors: Press release e-version posted at www.queensda.org.