

local news

Trials of fire

As the inquiry into the destruction of their house by arson drags on, a lesbian couple tries to cope with loss

by Inga Sorensen



PHOTO BY LINDA KLIEWER

A Portland police detective says he doesn't know whether anti-gay bias was the motive behind a recent fire at the home of a Northeast Portland lesbian couple.

"I can't say for sure that it is a bias crime, and I can't say for sure that it isn't a bias crime," says William Law, a city police detective assigned to Fire Bureau investigations. "At this point I can say that I am 99 percent certain that this is an arson fire. The chance that this was accidental is very slim."

The Aug. 23 fire destroyed the home of Karin Sandwick, 35, and Leslie Waygren, 46.

For the past three years the couple have rented a small bungalow house at 3210 NE 70th Ave. The duo say they have not, until recently, experienced any problems.

"A couple of months ago someone wrote some ugly things on the sidewalk in front a bunch of homes, including ours," Waygren told *Just Out*. "They wrote something like 'shit' and 'fuck you.' In front of our house, they wrote 'cunt lickers.' That's been the only thing like that to happen."

Waygren says there has been some speculation among neighbors that a local youth may be behind the graffiti and the fire, which is believed to have started about 5 pm.

Law says investigators have interviewed some young people in the neighborhood.

"But at this point in time we have no solid suspects. We have no eyewitnesses who saw somebody at the scene," says Law, who nevertheless suspects the fire involves a juvenile. "It wasn't very sophisticated. It happened at an odd time of the day—5:00 on a weekday afternoon. If this was somebody who really wanted to do damage to Karin and Leslie, they would have set the fire at a different time."

The women, who were not home when the fire broke out, say many of their possessions were damaged or destroyed by fire, smoke and heat. Two of their cats perished.

Waygren, a circulation clerk for Multnomah County Library and Portland Community College, says the front porch, portions of the roof, and

a couple of rooms were damaged by fire and water, while much of the rest of the structure was affected by smoke. Computer equipment, original artwork, furniture and clothing were among the items destroyed.

Waygren has renter's insurance but doesn't expect her policy will cover all the losses.

Since the fire, she and Sandwick, a pre-college English skills instructor at PCC, have been staying at a neighbor's house. The couple, who have been together 14 years, describe themselves as "an out lesbian couple, though not way out." They say several other gay and lesbian people live on their street.

LaVerne Lewis is a member of a Portland Police Bureau Crisis Response Team designed to provide support to sexual minorities during times of crisis and trauma.

Lewis, who is the executive director of the Portland-based Lesbian Community Project, learned of the fire via a report in the Sept. 6 issue of *Just Out*. She contacted Sandwick and Waygren and has since been acting as their advocate.

"One of the things we're looking at doing is pulling together a neighborhood meeting to try and find out whether there have been other problems," says Lewis, who has been talking with the Metropolitan Human Rights Commission and a local group, Central Northeast Neighbors, about organizing the gathering.

"This gives neighbors a chance to dialogue about safety issues, to share information about other incidents, and work together as a community to deal with them," she says.

Law says he appreciates the hands-on approach.

"If this helps heighten awareness in the neighborhood and if it can help provide some answers, then we are all for it," he says.

Not unexpectedly, Waygren says she is frustrated by the entire situation.

"I feel like life has just gone on for everybody else," she says. "Well, it hasn't for us. We look at the house and it's still blackened and ruined. My cats are still dead. Karin and I still have a long way to go in dealing with all of this."



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