

Peek into mind of a serial arsonist

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LOS ANGELES - Ed Nordskog has spent 21 years as a detective, 16 of them investigating arson. The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Arson-Explosives Detail detective has personally investigated 24 serial arson cases. He has solved all but two.

And after interviewing 22 serial arsonists, Nordskog's summary: "They always say something you didn't expect."

The seasoned arson investigator and recent author invited guests to tour the darker side of the human psyche, along with the Los Angeles Regional Crime Lab at Cal State Los Angeles, during a recent seminar probing the motives and mind-set behind the phenomenon of serial arson.

True serial arsonists are a rare breed, Nordskog began. Fewer than five percent of all arsons investigated by law enforcement can be categorized as serial arsons. The vast majority are singular incidents motivated by personal disputes or financial gain.

But the destructive potential of that tiny subculture, which feeds off the thrill and excitement of fiery destruction, has both terrified and fascinated the public for centuries.

Recently, Hollywood and West Hollywood were gripped by fear as suspected serial arsonist Harry Burkhart, 24, allegedly went on an incendiary rampage, lighting fire to about 50 occupied structures between Dec. 20 and Jan. 2.

Nordskog is the lead investigator in the Hollywood arson spree, which he described as an unprecedented case.

"To set that many fires in that short of a time, he's one of a kind," Nordskog said. "No one's ever done that."

Nordskog is also investigating the arson that destroyed St. John Vianney Church in Hacienda Heights in April of last year, and he has taken part in the investigation into the largest arson, and in fact the largest fire in county history - the 250-square-mile Station Fire of 2009, which claimed the lives of two firefighters.

He declined to comment on the ongoing investigations.

"There is no profile for a serial arsonist," the detective said, adding that serial arsonists come from both sexes and all races and social backgrounds. "But there are some traits that show up."

"It's a crime of frustration and power," he said. "They're small people in a big world, and this is the only way they can have power."

Investigators generally subdivide serial arsonists into two groups: organized and disorganized, Nordskog explained. The organized type uses complex devices and intricate planning to elude capture. The disorganized type are just that - behaving erratically and impulsively.

One common feature shared among most serial arsonists is mental illness, Nordskog said. Often times, investigators find, they have been institutionalized in the past and have problems with abuse of either prescription or illicit drugs. They are likely to be highly intelligent, though underperformers at work and

school, and have no violent criminal history, though convictions for crimes such as burglary, theft or low-level sex crimes are common.

Physically, serial arsonists often display some type of physical disability or defect, such as skin problems or birth defects, as well as severe childhood trauma or traumatic brain injury, the detective said.

Serial arsonists are likely to be passive and nonconfrontational by nature, as well as neat and fastidious. Many are effeminate males or masculine females and have gender identification issues, Nordskog said.

For unknown reasons, he added, serial arsonists are 30 to 40 percent more likely to be homosexual than the rest of the population.

The first glimpse into the mind of the perpetrator of a serial arson is found in the charred clues left behind at the scene.

"You don't profile people, you profile scenes," Nordskog said. "The truth is, you look at the scene, and it will tell you what you have."

Through Hollywood distortion and even misconceptions among law enforcement officials, several commonly held beliefs regarding serial arson in popular culture are, in fact, myths, Nordskog said.

One such myth is the popular perception that serial arsonists get a sexual thrill from their fires.

"There's absolutely no documentation to prove that," Nordskog said.

Another common misconception is that serial arsonists often use complex incendiary devices to delay the ignition of their fires.

In reality, Nordskog said, the majority of serial arsonists prefer to set their blazes with a simple match or cigarette lighter.

Perhaps the most dangerous misconception of all about serial arsonists is that they are merely mentally ill and can be readily treated and rehabilitated, the detective said.

"Giving early parole to fire-setters, that is the norm," he said.

"Most people in the criminal justice world think they're just sick. Put them in front of a psychologist and they'll get better," Nordskog added. "They don't get better."

Along with the fear and horror inspired in the public by serial arsonists, there is also fascination. Guests at Nordskog's lecture eagerly questioned the detective about his cases and his work.

"This is phenomenal," guest Amy Lyons of Los Angeles said of the event. "I'm a true-crime junkie from childhood."

In between lectures, Nordskog chatted with inquisitive guests and signed copies of his book, "Torched Minds: Case Histories of Notorious Serial Arsonists," released last year.

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