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Worker charged with group home arson

By Mary Rodrigue, staff writer

The supervisor of an ill-fated group home for the mentally retarded has been charged with setting the fire that destroyed the Farmington Hills residence last November.

William Ricks, Jr., executive director of Group Home Services, Inc., was arraigned before Farmington 47th District Judge Michael Hand Monday afternoon.

He is charged with arson and burning insured property. Both felonies carry a maximum prison term of 20 years and 10 years respectively.

Ricks, of Pontiac, pleaded innocent to both charges. He is in the Oakland County Jail on \$50,000 bond awaiting an April 29 preliminary examination.

Ricks was arrested by Farmington Hills detectives Monday afternoon at a group home where he is employed in Romeo. The 48-year-old suspect works with retarded adults.

The home, at 30355 Glenmuir, in the West Franklin Estates subdivision near Fourteen Mile and Farmington roads, was to be his first solo venture as a group home supervisor. Five adults

ranging from severe to moderately retarded were scheduled to live there.

Ricks established Group Home Services in Detroit in February, 1980 to oversee operation of the Glenmuir home. The Macomb Oakland Regional Center (MORC), an arm of the state Department of Mental Health, develops plans for group homes but uses non-profit corporations to operate the homes.

RICKS WORKED for MORC for a year as a staff assistant, sometimes working with hard to handle retarded persons.

MORC operates 93 group homes in Michigan. The Glenmuir residence was to be its first group home in Farmington Hills. It has since opened another near Twelve Mile and Orchard Lake roads.

Ricks had insured the \$95,000 Glenmuir home and its contents for \$266,000. Though five residents were scheduled to move into the house, Ricks had no license from the state Department of Social Services by November.

He withdrew his application a week after the blaze.

Investigators immediately termed the fire an arson. Rags soaked in gasoline were strewn through the four-bed

room ranch, which was locked when police arrived.

A witness warrant is out on a second employee of Group Home Services.

"We're still trying to locate him," said Detective James Worthington, who conducted the investigation.

So far that person has refused to cooperate with police, he said. Worthington said he linked Ricks to the arson on the basis of the insurance money. Ricks had insured the house for \$175,000, less rent for \$54,000, contents for \$25,000 and the garage for \$12,000. The claim with Meadowbrook Insurance Agency of Southfield has been denied.

Worthington said the suspect had access to the house and handled all of the financial aspects. He was renting the house at the time of the fire.

THE HOUSE BURNED just hours after CBS-TV's "60 Minutes" aired a segment about neighborhood hostility in Novi towards a group home for the mentally retarded.

That sparked speculation that neighbors, who went on record, opposed to the Farmington Hills home, may have been involved.

The home had been a topic of conversation at meetings of the West Franklin

Estates Homeowners Association last fall.

On Sept. 12, 1980, Ricks sent the homeowners association board of directors a letter stating "It is our hope that you who represent the majority of the residents will assess the situation fairly and develop a wait and see attitude to give us an opportunity to prove ourselves."

Harold Merritt, association president, was surprised by the arrest Monday.

"I'm glad the subdivision people have been vindicated," he said. "I can't think of anyone in this area who'd do it."

Ricks asked Judge Hand Monday for a court appointed attorney. He told the court he is in the process of divorcing his wife, Dianne, who lives at the Detroit address printed on a letterhead for Group Home Services.

Mrs. Ricks, president of Group Home Services, said the organization planned to open several group homes.

"I'm very disturbed about it," she said. "Knowing him the way I do, knowing how he felt about the home, I know he didn't do it."

"I hope this isn't the end of Group Home Services. I'm in favor of going forward."



GRAIG PIECHURA/staff photo

William Ricks Jr. (center) flanked by Detective Sgt. Al Havner and Detective James Worthington, leaves the Farmington Hills police department for arraignment in district court.

State agencies under scrutiny

By Craig Piechura, staff writer

Officials at the Macomb-Oakland Regional Center (MORC) for the retarded say a pre-employment criminal history check of an employee arrested on Monday for the alleged arson of a Farmington Hills group home revealed only a 1970 larceny conviction.

However, court testimony shows that William Ricks Jr., 48, of Detroit had also been convicted in 1969 of passing bad checks in Harper Woods, in 1976 for welfare fraud and in 1977 for violating terms of his probation. Ricks concurred with the police account of the convictions.

Members of the neighborhood association that opposed the planned placement of five severely retarded adults in the home expressed concerns before the fire that the home would not be properly supervised.

Following Ricks' arrest those same homeowners are asking why state agencies were unaware of his background. The homeowners also said they have been vindicated after suspicions were raised that an irate neighbor may have set the fire.

"They gave him (Ricks) advance money before he even had a license," said Karen Pratt, wife of Robert Pratt, a board member on the West Franklin Estate Homeowner Association which opposed the group home.

"I'M A little suspicious about the lack of checking they give prospective administrators," Mrs. Pratt said. "You'd think they would've checked him out before now."

Before Ricks was hired by the MORC in August 1979, a state-employee fingerprint check of him was made, said John Torrone, public affairs director at MORC. Torrone said Michigan State Police files showed only a 1970 felony conviction for larceny by conversion in a case involving doctored money orders.

Farmington Hills police discovered Ricks' prior convictions during their arson investigation by checking with Detroit Police.

Michigan State Police Det. Sgt. Wayne Walter said it's likely that the other convictions didn't show up on state police fingerprint files because they weren't violent crimes and in each case Ricks was placed on probation.

"Our files only carry what local police send in," Sgt. Walter said. "Detroit has a very good record system for itself. But they don't send us misdemeanors and we don't get everything. A check of our files doesn't mean it (a conviction) didn't happen if nothing is there."

Torrone said Ricks mentioned in his employment application the one conviction that turned up on the state police file. On the basis of his disclosure and the fact that Ricks received good reports from his supervisor the year that he worked for MORC, Torrone said the request for an \$18,600 advance was granted to the unlicensed applicant.

The locked home was set ablaze by gasoline-soaked rags strewn about the house on Nov. 3, just hours after CBS-TV's "60 Minutes" ran a segment on community opposition to residential placement of the retarded.

RICKS NEVER was licensed to act as administrator of the group home. He withdrew his request for a license three days after the fire. The home would have been the first home run by Ricks for the state through a non-profit cor-

poration he set up in February 1980 called Group Home Services, Inc.

The home at 30356 Glenmuir is owned by Mike Solarz and Steve Rabinovitz, a Madison Heights attorney, MORC officials said.

The license was withheld by the Michigan Department of Social Services after Ricks reportedly failed to provide names and job descriptions of employees as well as explain admission policies and operational procedures.

The practice of lending money to prospective administrators before a group home is licensed isn't unusual, MORC's Torrone said. "The money usually goes for furniture and equipment and renovation," Torrone said. "The money was spent appropriately for that at this home. This is done because the Department of Social Services needs to see furniture and equipment in a home before it is licensed."

Mary Wagner of Farmington runs 10 group homes for 101 retarded residents, but only one home, the latest, is operated through a contract with the state.

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Ross recall gains steam

By Steve Barnaby, editor

A group determined to remove state Sen. Doug Ross, D-Southfield, from office will launch his recall campaign tonight at 8 p.m. with a meeting in Milford's St. Mary Church on Commerce Road.

The recall effort was launched after the freshman senator voted against putting a proposal on the May 19 ballot, backed by Michigan tax crusader Robert Tisch.

At the same time, Ross did support the proposal to put a Gov.-Miliken-backed property-tax-relief proposal on the ballot. The Committee to Recall Senator Ross, led by Milford resident Bob Tomczyk, is not only upset with Ross' anti-Tisch vote, but also with what he terms his "liberal" voting record.

"In a 'public-be-damned' attitude he has set himself above the people in determining what they should have and what they should not have," Tomczyk said.

Ross is a liberal spender whose voting record contradicts his public position that he is seeking tax relief for property owners, Tomczyk said. "On every bill passed by the Legislature during his term in office that resulted in increased taxes and fees, where we could confirm the roll-call vote, we found Mr. Ross voting in favor of higher taxes and fees," Tomczyk said.

ROSS WAS GIVEN a 6-percent approval rating by the Michigan Conservative Union, a 50-percent approval rating by the Michigan State Chamber of Commerce and a 95-percent rating by the politically

liberal-oriented Michigan Citizens Lobby.

"This represents the most liberal position in the Senate," Tomczyk said. The group also accuses Ross of co-sponsoring a bill which would have allowed state-funded abortions. But Ross aide Robert O'Leary denies that was the case.

"That originally was a hearing assistance bill when he sponsored it," O'Leary said. "But the bill was gutted with anti-abortion clauses. All the sponsors withdrew their support."

The group also says Ross sponsored a bill to tax military pay in the state. Although it passed in the Senate, the bill was defeated in the House.

But O'Leary said the bill was more than just for taxing military pay.

"The funds were to be earmarked for rent relief for senior citizens who pay more than 40 percent of their income for rent," O'Leary said.

"We had to find the revenues, and the military-pay bill would have provided the funds," he continued.

Michigan, O'Leary said, is one of the few states that exempt military pay from taxation. The federal government also taxes military pay.

O'LEARY DEFENDED Ross' sincerity in seeking tax relief, noting that the 15th District legislator last year introduced a bill to freeze property taxes.

"This is most curious," O'Leary said. "We have tried to get relief this year. It could be another year and a half to two years if the May 19 tax proposal fails," he said.

Daniel Schorr addresses forum

Newsman defends press freedom

'Whistle-blowers are very important, but they won't exist if they feel betrayed.'

—Daniel Schorr

By Mary Rodrigue, staff writer

The news media should use the First Amendment as a defense only in test cases affecting the public's right to know, according to newsman Daniel Schorr.

That theme kept popping up through Schorr's hour-long address at the Birmingham Temple of the Farmington Hills Humanist Forum on Monday night.

Schorr, an ardent defender of First Amendment rights, risked a jail sentence in 1976 for refusing to disclose the source of information for his reports on FBI and CIA scandals.

In his opening remarks, Schorr said he found the case of Washington Post reporter Janet Cooke winning a Pulitzer Prize for a fictitious story about an 8-year-old heroin addict "immensely troubling."

In part he blamed journalistic stardom.

"Janet Cooke grew up in an age of journalistic stardom," he said. "Stardom in entertainment is not in journalism, it gets in the way."

"All credibility of all newspapers are called into question."

He discussed his own confrontation with the House Ethics Committee five

years ago when he refused to name the source of a House report on CIA and FBI secret scandals, drug experimentation and assassination attempts during the 1950s and 1960s.

"IT WAS THE climax of a First Amendment confrontation," said Schorr, who broadcast much of the report on the CBS-TV Evening News.

"It's a reporter's dream, but one they hope won't happen because you could go to jail."

"CBS encouraged me to get the scoop but I stood alone before the (House) committee. No one else knew my source."

Schorr left CBS after that confrontation and now works for the Cable News Network owned by Ted Turner. He is senior correspondent.

He made comparisons to the Janet Cooke case.

"Somehow, the fail-safe mechanisms didn't work," he said. "At least one editor should've known (the source). Now they say they had too much faith in their reporter. They're dumping on him."

"We should all share the responsibility and the risks."

Schorr referred to questions common on his lecture circuit to illustrate how the power of the news media is changing.

"People ask 'Why is the top story the same on all three networks each night?' and 'Who are these informed sources?'" he said.

"Something subtle has happened. The power of the press has turned into the power of the media, which is the power to control and manipulate."



RANDY BORST/staff photographer

Daniel Schorr, veteran newsman, was in Farmington Hills Monday night to talk about press freedom.

"THE PRESS IS a vast establishment of its own today. Over the past decade, court decisions have denied or restricted privileges they claim."

Schorr defended the need for confidential sources.

"Whistle blowers are very important but they won't exist if they feel betrayed," he said, adding that most confidential sources are high government officials.

"The ship of state is the only ship that leaks most from the top."

If a reporter is the only person who can identify an otherwise innocent defendant, the case should be thrown out of court, Schorr said.

"It's ridiculous to think that the FBI or the police couldn't find out the same information as a reporter," he said. "There must be maintenance of a free press."

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