

Friend baffled by arson fire that killed Hills man

BY BILL COUTANT
STAFF WRITER

Tony Mendes had just turned his life around and decided to stay in Michigan before a fire took his life.

And that makes the circumstances surrounding the suspected arson fire all the more puzzling, said friend and co-worker Pat Feely.

"He was a real good guy," said Feely, a salesman for eight years at Earhard BMW in Bloomfield Hills. "We're really not sure what's going on."

Mendes, 34, died from smoke and soot inhalation in a fire at his Harlan Street home in Farmington Hills Saturday, Jan. 9. Farmington Hills Fire Chief Richard Marinucci is calling the fire arson.

"There is unusual burning and the point of origin — where the fire was located — indicates it was not an accidental fire," Marinucci said. "It has become a criminal matter."

Marinucci said fire department investigators knew within a couple of days that the fire was not accidental. Firefighters at the scene were also suspicious.

"It burned so fast that it completely burned off the roof," he said.

Once investigators cleaned off the new snow and looked at the damage, they could see it was an arson, he said.

Detective Sgt. Chuck Nebus of the Farmington Hills Police said investigators are still working on

the crime. Evidence is still being processed by the Michigan State Crime Lab. He added that police have no reason to suspect a pattern of arson.

"If this is an arson, there is nothing to indicate that there is an arsonist on the loose," Nebus said.

For friends and family, the thought that the fire was deliberate is hard to swallow, Feely said.

Mendes had gone to the North American Auto Show with friends on Friday, Jan. 8.

Feely said Mendes had been baptized at the Open Door Christian Church in Northville on Nov. 23. His memorial service was in the same church Wednesday.

"He was a born-again Christian," Feely said. "So we know where he is now."

Mendes' wife, Colleen, and three children had moved out and the couple were divorcing, Feely said. But the former Californian was a devoted father, Feely said. In fact, he had decided to stay in Michigan to be near his children rather than return to California.

"He valued work and family," Feely said. "He really loved his kids."

Mendes' wife had filed divorce papers about two weeks before the fire, Feely said. Mendes' renewal of faith had come because the auto salesman had faced personal crisis.

"It takes some pretty hard things in life to break a person's pride down," Feely said. "He knew that he had lost control of his life."

New bike path will bridge expressway dividing Hills

BY BILL COUTANT
STAFF WRITER

A grant for a bike path in Farmington Hills could be just the beginning for transportation projects that aren't strictly for motorized vehicles.

Farmington Hills officially received a \$338,022 grant for a bike path that runs from Heritage Park to Woodland Hills Park in Farmington Hills. The city will kick in \$80,000 in budgeted matching money and work on the

project should begin this summer, said Steve Brock, assistant to City Manager Bill Costick.

Brock, who wrote the grant application, Costick, Mayor Nancy Bates and Mayor Pro Tem Larry Lichtenhan attended the presentation of grants at the Southfield Civic Center by Pat Nowak, Michigan Department of Transportation Director, Thursday.

Southfield also received transportation grants totaling \$384,000 from the Federal Intermodal Sur-

face Transportation Efficiency Act.

"I think there is an increased interest in looking at alternative forms of transportation," said Robin Pannecouk, executive of communications for MDOT. "That includes landscaping, bike paths and sidewalks."

The 1½-mile-long, 8-foot wide path in Farmington Hills will run across I-696, thereby linking the northern part of Farmington Hills with the rest of the community.



PHOTOS BY ANN HEALEY

Judicial sisters: Newly sworn-in Judge Marla Parker (right) gets a congratulatory hug from Judge Susan Moiseev. They are the only women district judges in Oakland County. Parker replaces retiring Judge Margaret Schaeffer.

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Edward Gold, Oakland County Bar Association president, presented the gavel to the new judge, asking that she remember her days on the other side of the bench.

"When you put those robes on, I don't want you to forget that you were a lawyer," Gold said.

And Farmington Hills Police Chief Bill Dwyer gave Parker an indication of things to come.

"We will keep you very busy," he quipped before presenting her with an American flag.

City officials from Farmington and Farmington Hills made presentations and offered words of encouragement as Parker's family, including her husband, Brad, and daughter, Jill, beamed with pride.

Judge Schaeffer swore in her successor, Judge Susan M. Moiseev of the 46th District in

Southfield welcomed Parker into the rarified ranks of women judges in Oakland County. Moiseev is the only other woman serving as a district judge in the county.

"Marla served as a clerk for me when I was a lawyer and she was a law student," Moiseev said. "I'm glad she'll be joining me. It would have been lonely otherwise."

Parker said she would work to promote civility in her court.

Passing the gavel: Edward Gold, president of the Oakland County Bar Association, presents Judge Marla Parker with a gavel at her swearing-in ceremony.



Hills girl seeks Young Woman title

Christina Banchemo, daughter of Alfred Banchemo and Diane Dauble, leaves Jan. 25 for a week of tours, rehearsals and preparation in Marshall to represent Farmington Hills in the Michigan Young Woman of the Year Scholarship Program.

Banchemo, a senior at Mercy High School, has participated in the Varsity and Spanish Club, Drama Club, school musicals, and the pom-pom squad. She is a member of the National Honor Society and Spanish Honor Society and has served the community through her work as a March of

■ The Michigan program offers college scholarships totaling \$8,050.

Dimes fund-raiser, Salvation Army volunteer and through her four-year participation with SADD.

To become eligible for the Michigan Young Woman of the Year program, she first competed in the At Large Young Woman of the Year program.

Twenty senior girls will compete for the title and the opportunity to represent Michigan at America's Young Woman of the Year program to be held in Mobile, Ala., next June.

The Michigan program offers college scholarships totaling \$8,050. The girls are evaluated

based on the following: scholastic achievement, 20 percent; a 10-minute personal interview, 30 percent; creative and performing arts presentation, 20 percent; fitness, 15 percent; and presence and composure, 15 percent. Banchemo will be performing a jazz dance routine for her talent presentation.

Banchemo will spend the week with a host family. She will participate in luncheons with the Rotary Club and tours Albion College, Archway Cookies and downtown Marshall. She will also learn three new routines and rehearse her talent performance.

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