



Bullies suspected in house fire

Son told of fears before family home erupts in flames, mother burned

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Tracy Huffman
Crime Reporter

The day before his home burst into flames, critically injuring his mother, Pream Anandarajah told a friend he was worried the youths bullying him at high school were going to come after his family.

"He was telling me yesterday he was scared, that he thought they were going to come and bother the family," said Pream's friend, who asked not to be named because he fears he could become a target.

The friend said 18-year-old Anandarajah is small and was often picked on by a group of Sri Lankan youths who call themselves the BNS gang and hang around Birchmount Rd. and Sheppard Ave. E.

Now, Pream's mother is in hospital in critical condition with burns to about 30 per cent of her body. She and a younger daughter were asleep in the living room when a bottle was hurled through the window of their Gilroy Dr. home, police said. His sister remains in hospital with non life-threatening burns.

Pream and his younger brother were taken to hospital but released a few hours later. Their father was at work at the time of the blaze.

A bottle was found inside the living room and police haven't ruled out the possibility that the fire was connected to a stabbing hours before at a nearby high school.

"It looks like an arson," said Det. Joe Digiovanni, standing outside the home yesterday. "We're just in the preliminary stages of the investigation right now, so we really don't know what it's all about or who would do something like this."

Police would not confirm the names of all the victims, but the home is registered to Jeyaluckshmi and Subramaniam Anandarajah.

Firefighters were called to the home near Kennedy and Ellesmere Rds., just before 3 a.m. to find the front window broken and fire raging inside.

Investigators with Toronto police and the province's fire marshal's office would not speculate on the exact cause of the fire or the motive behind it.

Over the next day, the fire marshal was to sift through the bungalow, examine the scene and eliminate other possible causes for the blaze. The fire caused extensive damage throughout the main floor; smoke-stained pillows and charred furniture were in the front yard yesterday. A portion of the roof, above the living room, was partly collapsed as a result of the fire.

Police did confirm a bottle – likely used to set the fire – was found in the living room. A short walk from the home, in bushes behind a plaza, a television cameraman found a gas can. Police seized the can and poured the contents into glass jars. Forensic experts will examine the liquid and the red gas can.

Police are investigating whether the fire may be linked to a stabbing that occurred the same day at Winston Churchill Collegiate Institute, which is not far from the victims' home. A 19-year-old male received non-life threatening injuries. The victim had recently stuck up for Pream, who attends Stephen Leacock Collegiate Institute, according to Pream's friends.

Det. Const. Warren Stein said the two investigations are separate, but police have not ruled out the possibility they may be connected. No one has been arrested in either case.

Yesterday morning, Pream called his friend from hospital to tell him he was not seriously hurt. "He told me the bottle landed beside his mom ... His sister was screaming ... He tried his best to get them out," the friend said.

Pream has been bothered by bullies for more than a year, according to his friend, who said the teenager is a "good kid" who is not involved in any gang activity.

"They told (Pream) that they were going to come and beat him up if they saw him alone on the streets. He called me yesterday and said these guys were looking for him."

The friend said he did not know why they would pick on Pream. "They've chased him, beat him up a couple times and they surrounded him many times before, too. He is afraid of them," the friend said.

Students at Stephen Leacock Collegiate confirmed Pream was often given a hard time by tormenters.

"He's a nice kid, but he gets picked on a lot," said one who would not give her name.

George Benedek, principal at Stephen Leacock, wouldn't comment on any acts of physical intimidation occurring among students. "Bullying goes on at every school," he said.

Neighbours said the Anandarajahs, who moved in about two years ago, are friendly and their home is well maintained.

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