

Arson

Episode 2: The Eye Witnesses

As fires continue, the investigation hinges on the recall of three eyewitnesses, all teenagers. The task force comes up with some creative ways to track down the arsonist who is purchasing materials for his incendiary devices at local convenience stores.

Tom Daley: It's 4115 Anacostia Avenue, three o'clock in the morning, three boys are working in a nightclub, and they're hardworking kids and they come home and they pull up just like we just did, and they see a man sitting on their step.

Kara: By September 2003, the DC serial arsonist is still lighting fires to single family homes in the middle of the night; and the region which includes MD and VA is on edge. The firesetter is elusive. The task force has been looking for him for a few months, but credible leads are hard to come by. The team is on call 24/7 sleeping with pagers on their bedside tables. They need more fires to be able to catch the arsonist, but they're also terrified someone else will be hurt.

There were 24 fires set up to this point that I know of. 3 of them in Sept...one in Oxon Hill, MD, one on Quakenbos St NW DC and one on Dix St. NW DC. And so far there have been no eyewitnesses. Until now.

This is Arson. I'm Kara McGuirk-Allison.

Tom Daly is a lead investigator on the DC serial arsonist task force who remembers this september fire in great detail

Tom Daley: And they unnerve the guy to the point where they don't know what to do or whether to go up into the house or why he's there, but they're concerned and they don't want to come into the house. They unnerve him enough that he comes to the car, and the kid over here rolls the window down, and he says to the guy words to the effect of... He says to the boys, "Does Mr. Harris live here?" And the boys said, "There's no Mr. Harris that lives here." And the guy walked down the road.

Kara: The boys have pulled up to their house to find a stranger sitting on their front porch, in the middle of the night. It's unnerving. Their sister was home alone.....they went inside to make sure she was ok.

Tom Daley: One of the boys stayed outside and they found on the step a bag, and what they called was a bag of gas. They found a trash bag with a fully loaded device in it. And they took the device and walked across here to the sewer and threw it in the sewer.

Kara: That bag would become a critical piece of evidence. And When their parents returned from their own evening out, the boys told them what had happened. Their mom instantly thought of the serial arsonist. The neighborhood fires had been all over the news.

Tom Daley:

They called the fire department. The fire department called us. We got here about 10 or 11 o'clock, and we laid siege to the place for about 12 hours. We built a lean-to up to the house and then [inaudible] and fingerprinted, everything, recovered the device. And we got a shirt with DNA on it, and we recovered the gas, and I think we were able to test the gas to see where the gas was manufactured.

So, when I pulled up, Scott was already here and I said, "We have to pull all the strings on this. We've got a sighting, we've got three eye witnesses, we have physical evidence." This was our biggest break ever in the case.

Kara: So for the first time, the task force has potential eyewitnesses and a pretty much intact, unlit incendiary device.

Tom Daley: We're not done yet. But wait, there's more. When we last left our caped crusaders, the boys see him walk this way.

<<Kara>>

Yeah.

Tom Daley:

They came up here into the alleyway.

<<Kara>>

Yes.

Tom Daley:

And circled the block, okay? Because they didn't want to come into the house to let the guy know that they lived in that house.

Kara: So the task force has no real idea at this point who the arsonist could be, and it's all coming down to three eyewitnesses. Three TEENAGERS. That's a lot of pressure.

<<Kara>>

How old were they, do you remember, the boys?

Tom Daley:
Teenagers.

<<Kara>>

They were teenagers.

Tom Daley:

Yeah. They're about 17. Three brothers, maybe 16, 17, 18, something like that, all maybe about a year apart. They come out and come up the street. And when they turned the corner, he was gone.

Tom Daley:

So his car had to be pretty close.

He got in the car, they were rounding the block and he made good his escape, because if they had seen him leave in the car, we would have had the car, but we didn't, so enormous frustration. Yeah.

<<Kara>>

There must have been several instances where you would hear something on the radio, like there's a fire and then you'd rush thinking we'll trap him this time, and he escapes, right?

Tom Daley:

Oh, yeah.

<<Kara>>

And there was some story I read where he was leaving a fire and there's a fire engine coming towards him, and he was flashing his lights at them just to taunt them.

Tom Daley:

Yeah. He basically had set a fire up the street, fire department is rounding the corner, he turns off his lights and he's waving to them as they come up the street.

<<Kara>>

Unbelievable.

Tom Daley:

Yeah. And we know that, that happened because we got a video tape from a hotel across the street and saw his car doing it.

Kara: A series of near misses. Approaching a fire and just knowing the arsonist was most likely nearby. Not only is he consistently evading the investigators, he's taunting them. But these three boys offer the first real chance at figuring out who he is.

ATF's Scott Fulkerson says that there were no other eye witness accounts during the 22 month investigation.

Scott Fulkerson:

Kara, as far as my knowledge and my recollection, the only people that had actual contact or citing, and more specifically, a conversation, although brief, were the three siblings at Anacostia Avenue.

<<Kara>>

You had a sketch from them afterwards. Right? A sketch put together.

Scott Fulkerson:

We did. .. I'd say the shocking part to the investigators was even after that conversation had occurred and they had about a 30 second conversation with him in a period of less than three feet, and had a conversation with them, they still had a difficult time recalling what he had said, what he had looked like, what they had observed, and even the sketches that were produced. You've had an opportunity to see them. One would argue, are they actual depictions? Are they good, accurate descriptions?

<<Kara>>

Right. They don't look much like him.

Frank Molino: I interviewed them. They were very truthful, very sincere, what they'd seen. Said the individual was sitting on his step.

Kara: This is Frank Molino. He was a homicide detective with the Metropolitan Police Department and assigned to the task force. It was his job to interview leads, suspects, and these eyewitnesses.

Frank Molino:

Respect to these kids, yes, they were young. They were very honest. They were very honest, and be honest with you, I liked the kids. They were very squared away kids. And, I even remember talking to one. He was wanting to be a police officer.

<<Kara>>

Aww.

Frank Molino:

The question is, did they come home at three o'clock in the morning? They were making money. They were out selling... Not selling, but there they

were working for... At the time, and a lot of times, downtown in the cities, they put cards on your... For advertisements, on people's cars.

<<Kara>>:

Yep.

Frank Molino:

That's what they were doing. They were out making money.

A composite was generated. To be honest with you, I didn't like the composite, but it was the only thing we had to work with.

<<Kara>>:

Right.

Frank Molino:

I do remember when I showed the composite to them, they did not like it. It looked like Mr. Potato Head. And, back then, it's a little different than now. It was a computer generated composite.

Kara:

So even with strong Eyewitness accounts, a conviction based on them isn't always imminent. And our memories aren't necessarily reliable. To find out why, I contacted Dr. Kathy Pezdek, from Claremont Graduate University Department of Psychology. She does a lot of work with eyewitness memory. Kathy explains that our memory doesn't work like a camera.

Kathy Pezdek:

And so the three young men who were sitting on their front porch, who looked up and saw that there was a man there and so forth, they're not just recording what they're seeing to be played back later. A lot of people have that metaphor for eyewitness memory, that is just a matter of taking a video recording of an incident, a person, and then playing it back later. But that's not how memory works.

Kara:

To better explain how our memory DOES work...Kathy uses a pretty easy to understand metaphor. If you're reading a short newspaper article, and then someone immediately asks you what it was about, you'll be able to give them the gist.

Kathy Pezdek:

But reading an article, what we're doing while we're reading it is constructing an understanding of what's being said. And humans are constructors. We're always looking to make sense of things by constructing an understanding of what's going on or what's being said. And if I use that example of reading a newspaper article first, that makes a lot of sense to people because of course we don't just memorize the article. And then when you ask me what did the article say, I don't just play back the video tape that is my memorized version of what I saw in the article. And that's obvious. I mean, everybody knows it. No, of course I don't just recite back the article I just read.

Kara: So that construction process can really affect eyewitness memory.

Kathy Pezdek:

So the three young men who returned home and there was a man on the front porch, they're trying to construct what could this be, what's going on here? And they're trying to figure that out. They're not just remembering he put his right hand in his pocket, he pulled his hat down, he tightened up his jacket. They're not remembering those kinds of details. They're just seeing a man on the porch, and they're trying to construct an understanding of what's going on here.

So they're putting together, "Is this a FedEx worker delivering something at a weird hour in the middle of the night or is it a neighbor coming to warn me? Is it someone I know? No, I never saw that person before. So it's not somebody I know.

Kara: There are also a ton of factors that affect eyewitness memory. Some more obvious than others. like the three boys ran into the arsonist in the middle of the night...

Kathy Pezdek:

....so what was the lighting like? And lighting is especially important when you're looking at a dark skin person, because a lot of what you perceive in a face is a result of shadows, lightened dark areas, areas of contrast, and so forth. And so, you look to see whether the person has deep set eyes, are their cheekbones more forward or more back, what are their lines around the mouth, and so forth. And you get that information by seeing points of contrast between light areas and dark areas.

Kara:

Another factor is race....studies show that you are more likely to give an accurate description if you are the same race as the criminal.

Kathy Pezdek:

On average, there's about a 15% difference in accuracy between same race and cross race identification.

So you might say, well, that's not that much of a difference, 15%, but I say it is, because if that one factor alone accounts for 15% difference in accuracy, well, throwing all these other factors in terms of exposure time and the lighting that we've talked about and so forth, and it's chipping away at the probability of a correct identification.

Kara: So basically the three boys could have three different mental models of the scene, and of the arsonist.

Kathy Pezdek: And they have different expectations for what's going on. And particularly if you say this man was a mild mannered person, he wouldn't necessarily have aroused in them suspicion that this is a bad guy. So what's this bad guy going to do? And that would explain how three different eyewitnesses could have three different interpretations of what was going on.

Kara: Frank Molino says that he's ok with some inconsistencies in eyewitness accounts.

Frank Molino:

If everything lines up, just perfect, it doesn't mean they're lying. But, it's like, "Ah, this is too perfect." It's okay for a witness to say, "Oh, he had a gray sweatshirt on." Somebody will say, "No, I thought it was dark blue." It's your perception of what you seen. Doesn't mean the person's lying. As long as it just kind of has the same common thread. But, what you see, and I see... We can witness a crime, we're going to see different things of it.

And, you might interview a witness that says, "Yeah, the guy. That guy had a gun in his left hand." And, you have a witness number two that standing right next to him says, "Well, I didn't see the gun." And you're like, "Well, how didn't you see the gun and he seen the gun?" He could have been focusing on the guy's face. He could have been focused on his clothing. He'd maybe not seen the gun. Could he have been lying? Possibility. But, you have to take that into account.

Kara:

So while the task force was pretty excited to have three eyewitnesses, it's not a golden ticket to finding the arsonist. Overall, it's pretty difficult to find and convict an arsonist.

The US Bomb Data Center keeps data on fire related incidents with its Bomb Arson Tracking System Section. Hang with me because I'm going to throw some massive numbers at you. This comes directly from their 2020 report:

From January 1, 2020, through December 31, 2020, the report shows a total of 23,330 fire-related incidents. Of these, there were over seven thousand incidents reported as "Incendiary or Arson," that's 30 percent of all the fires reported. The total amount of damages for all fire types was estimated at well over 1.3 billion with 971 injuries and 558 fatalities associated with those reported fire-related incidents.

But with all those fires, each year on average, only about 4% of arsonists are convicted nationally. That number is most likely higher, but it's the closest approximation we have.

Compare that to...In 2018, the Bureau of Justice Statistics reported that felony conviction rates were highest for defendants originally charged with motor vehicle theft (74%), driving-related offenses (73%), murder (70%), burglary (69%), and drug trafficking (67%); and lowest for defendants originally charged with assault (45%).

And again, Arson convictions at around 4%.

All that just to show you what the task force is up against. It's historically really hard to find and convict arsonists.

The eyewitness accounts from the three boys in Anacostia did confirm what the profiler Ron Tunkel had said, that the suspect was most likely a black male. They added a few details like he had salt and pepper hair, light brown skin and no discernible accent. So that's something.

And in this instance, the really important physical evidence was that gallon jug the boys chucked across the street into a storm drain. Filled with gasoline and a cloth wick, this was the first time an incendiary device from the arsonist was found intact. A rare find for these investigators who typically are pouring through ashes to find credible evidence. But what clues could it offer?

Ray Kuk is currently the laboratory chief for ATF in Atlanta. During this investigation he was a chemist at the ATF lab in Beltsville MD where all the collected evidence from this case was cataloged and analyzed.

<<Kara>> In your experience, since you've done ... you worked with the police before you worked with ATF. What are the percentages, what are the odds, of finding something useful these days in an arson investigation?

Raymond Kuk:

It really depends on the conditions of the fire itself. It depends on how long before the investigation occurs. Because, typically, if you've got an arsonist who says, "I'm going to set this place on fire. I'm going to use gasoline," or something, they'll pour it onto a surface, with the assumption that everything will disappear.

Now, what happens with the ignitable liquid is, yeah, if you pour it on a carpet, as soon as you pour it on the carpet, as with any liquid, it starts to soak into the substrate so it starts to soak into the material. You'll still have gasoline present on the surface, and that will be giving off the vapors that will then burn. It will burn, but then you have this other stuff soaking into the material itself, the material starts to char, which then gives you another protective layer on top of that.

Because the ignitable liquids and things that are used to start fires, they're volatile, so if you just let them sit out they have a tendency to evaporate and go away, so you have to get them into this airtight container.

Kara: According to Ray, over the course of this investigation, the laboratory processed 55 submissions. That means 55 pieces of evidence that needed to be collected, examined and archived at the ATF Lab. They were eventually able to attribute 25 fires to the arsonist based on this physical evidence. But the Anacostia evidence was treated differently.

Ray Kuk:

Since this was an intact device, since the individual was seen sitting on the front porch, we brought the laboratory staff out to the scene.

I went out, and one of our fingerprint examiners. What we did is, we kind of deconstructed the device there on scene. You know, this was a scene where we actually found a hair on the handle of the jug, that was within the confines of the plastic bags that were there. We made the determination that we were going to fume the porch.

Kara:

You're looking for fingerprints?

Raymond Kuk:

Yep. Looking for fingerprints. We put a tent around the porch. We fumed it. We actually got some fingerprints from the handrail. We took the handrail from the scene and brought that to the lab.

We got comparison prints from the youths that had seen this individual, along with some of the other family members, to try to say if we could identify the prints, or if they were suitable for comparison, that we could potentially then eliminate family members.

To my recollection, I don't think that really went anywhere. The hair that was recovered, on the other hand, we knew at this point that it could potentially be of value. We had a little bit of root tissue on the thing, so that was sent away for DNA analysis.

<<Kara>>

That's how you figured out that it was most likely an African American man, right?

Raymond Kuk:

Well, no. You can't make that determination from DNA. The DNA that we used, or the DNA that is used forensically, you cannot make any of those determinations.

The hair itself, we had a trace chemist look at that. Based upon the characteristics of the hair, that's how we made the determination that it most likely came from an African American individual.

But at that point, with this single hair, it's on the device: so what? It could be significant, and it might not be significant. It could have come from ... I think we ruled out the kids who shoved the thing down the sewer drain, but it could have come from a clerk. It could have come from somebody who packaged the ... that was in the plastic bag when something was bought. We couldn't directly associate that hair with a perpetrator at this point. It was an unknown hair that was out there.

Kara:

To recap some of this physical evidence found in Anacostia so far...we have the gallon jug filled with gasoline, a cloth wick that has some DNA on it, a hair, and a plastic bag.

So there was a reason why the arsonist used this kind of incendiary device...a method to the madness. Scott Fulkerson.

Scott Fulkerson:

He carried the device inside of a plastic bag, so he wouldn't be detected. It looks like he's just coming from the corner store with a container of milk or juice jug. That's why... Part of the reason why would be detected. Right? Then he would place that bag on the front stoop of a home or a rear porch of a home. He'd peel the plastic bags down. He'd place a cloth wick around the handle of the container, which at one time we actually thought it was being stuck in the open top of the container, which wasn't the case. He actually had it wrapped around the handle, so he would light the cloth wick, and most of the time it was a sock, but it wasn't always the case. He used tore up pants, gabardine pants in the past. He's used T-shirts. He's used socks, but he would light the sock. The sock would obviously be soaked with gasoline. It would light. It would then start to melt down the plastic of the container. Okay, and it'd be very systematically melting, in a downward fashion, almost like a candle burns.

As soon as that container failed, right? Where the liquid would be able to seep out of it, it would fail, and then liquid would spill throughout the porch area is when the fire took off, and then all the vapors then... It would be a much greater area and the gasoline would spill throughout the porch area. A lot of times, adhering to the front siding or to the front door, and then the flames would spread significantly faster than if it was just burning as a candle. What that allowed him to do, and we did some testing at our ATF laboratory to prove this, was it would burn systematically like a candle for about a 20 minute period.

So it allowed him the opportunity to set the fire, leave the area, but yet be able to observe the fire without being detected.

Kara:

The slow burn of the contraption allowed the arsonist time to escape, and the black bags allowed him to walk around with the device unnoticed. But the very construction of this system, would lead to his arrest.

PSA Break

<<Kara:>>

<<(tape of a purchase at a 7-11 store)>>

If you make a purchase at your neighborhood convenience store, you're most likely going to walk out with your goods in some kind of flimsy plastic bag. The kind that gets swept up in trees, and blown into oceans. The kind that surrounded the incendiary devices left by our serial arsonist.

Tom Daley:

The consistent recovery, those are the consistent thing that enabled us to unlink it to the taskforce was the bag, the plastic remains of the bottom of the container, which the gasoline, isn't what burns, it's the fumes from the gas that burns. And then invariably the bottom part of the container of the one gallon, what would be a milk jug or water jug would survive.

Kara:

When one of these incendiary devices was used, it was usually placed near an egress..so maybe a front stoop, or porch. The melted gallon containers left a waxy round disk that could carefully be retrieved if they knew to look for it. Some of the containers were traced to local 7-11 stores. So that led to hours and hours of video surveillance tapes that needed to be combed through.

Tijuana Klass:

I'm gonna say my name is Tiajuana Klass, but my name was Tiajuana Patty at the time. My name is Tijuana class and I am a special agent assigned to our internal affairs division.

Kara:

Tijuana had been with ATF for three years and was brought in to help organize this investigation. She's one of a handful of women associated with the task force. Everyone I spoke with said how important her role was in finding the serial arsonist.

Part of her job was data management....evidence, videos, tip line calls, photographs you name it.

Tijuana Klass:

Overall, I'm sure we had a thousand leads that we had to follow up, whether it was somebody that called in or while we were doing a neighborhood canvas, somebody said I saw X, Y, or Z. And so then you have to follow up on that. Um, so they might not have been a thousand separate phone calls, but I'm pretty, but I'm pretty sure we had at a thousand leads that we had to follow up on.

Kara:

A thousand leads...tips, phone calls, hunches, video tapes, interviews. And the physical evidence...

Those plastic containers provided another opportunity to possibly track down the fire setter. What if they could somehow trace the incendiary device containers to the convenience stores where they were purchased?

Tijuana Klass:

We had agents, whose job it was in the middle of the night to go to refrigeration units at distribution centers taking, uh, a little like an awl or something, pointy tip and writing stuff in the bottom of the jugs.

Kara:

Rather than always being reactionary, and investigating after each fire is set, the team is trying to find proactive methods to stopping the arsonist.

So early on, agents went into convenience stores and hand wrote alpha numerical sequences on the bottom of 1 gallon jugs. Then someone on the team suggested it would be easier if they went to the distribution center instead, where the gallon jugs were being sent out to about 28 stores in the district area.

The idea being, if a jug was used in a fire, the alpha numeric sequence would help them locate what store it was purchased in. Remember, the gas fumes are what burned, so the cool liquid kept the bottom of those containers from incinerating...leaving a candle like disk behind, and the etched in numbers could remain.

Tijuana Klass:

And I mean, you know, criminal investigators and that's what they're doing and they did it. You know what I mean? So when I say that people were willing to do whatever it was that we needed done, they did it,

Kara:

They were so committed to solving this crime, they were willing to try anything. Luckily, the intact device wrapped in the plastic bag from the Anacostia scene, helped them narrow down the convenience stores. Tom Daley.

Tom Daley: And the remnants of the black bag were recovered from the porch, from the fire. When we looked at the bag, I believe it was myself and Scott and it said, made in something for the Cornelia show. And so we Googled it and found that it was ... the only thing we could get was the Cornelias shop in England.

So we sent a request ... secret service had an office in England and it turned out to be a dead end.

Kara:

Later on in another fire, on Yost Place, NE DC, they were able to read more from the black bag..it wasn't Cornelia Show...it was Cornelia Shopping bag company.

Tom Daley:

We found out that the Cornelia shopping bag company was located in Richmond, Virginia.

And right there, Scott and I just looked at a member of the task force and said, "This is an address, drive to Richmond, Virginia, go to the Cornelia shopping bag company." Which is a hundred and some miles away. We said, "Go down there and interview them." And we said, "What do you want to say?" I said, "You find out everything there is to know about the Cornelia. Don't leave there. Find out everything there is to know about the Cornelia shopping bag company, including where they distributed in the D.C. Area. That's a big part of this." And we determined that there was really only two places, which was big aha moment for us.

<<Kara>>

So they only distributed the black bags to two stores in D.C.?

Tom Daley:

Yeah, that's my recollection.

<<Kara>>

Yeah, that's right

Tom Daley:

It was only one or two. And both of those stores were in areas that were of a lot of concern to us or ones where the task force had linked the number of fires. Specifically the convenience store near 4115 Anacostia Avenue, where three individuals had actually viewed Mr. Sweatt on the front porch of their house and gave varying descriptions of him in a somewhat chance

encounter. But that was a big data point and a big find, and then allowed us to begin additional investigative efforts and techniques relative to that discovery.

Kara:

Now the team can focus their efforts on surveilling just two convenience stores that use the Corneila plastic bags. And one of them is near the Anacostia location where the three boys saw the arsonist. Scott Fulkerson says the task force needed a way to track.

Scott Fulkerson:

Let's come up with a way to mark numerically the order in which these bags leave the store and the day in which these bags leave the store, so then, we will... With that marking, which needs to survive a thermal event, ie a fire, we'll be able to recover it, track it back to one of two stores a particular day of the week and a particular time when it left the store. Therefore, we'd be able to go back to a video surveillance system, which we installed into the store. We review that tape, review that time, review that day to find out who was handed that black plastic bag, and it left the store that blast pack black plastic bag because that's somebody we'd like to talk to.

Kara: Now the team has to come up with a fire proof way to mark individual plastic convenience store bags.

Scott Fulkerson:

That marking system consisted of a stainless steel dime size chip, which is typically used for bird migration, so they would affix those to, I guess, the leg, for lack of a better term, of a bird, and track them from one location to the next to find out where they go through migration. Well, we did some thermal tests on these stainless steel chips. They had an alphanumeric code on them-

They survived the fire. Our theory is, our very trained, specialized evidence team would go to the fire scene. Not only would they find the remnants of the plastic container, but they're looking for a serialized stainless steel chip.

Kara:

Ok so the task force has narrowed down these black plastic bags to two stores in DC. The chips, are alpha numeric....so that means the chips marked with an "A" are one store and "B" another.

Scott Fulkerson:

And so this required every single morning for the taskforce, as we're sitting around drinking coffee, discussing investigative leads, discussing investigative strategies, we're also pulling out plastic bags, then numerically putting in serialized steel chips into the bottom right-hand corner of each one, without them being obvious enough for an average person to detect it and see it. And discard it.

Kara:

In many parts of DC, convenience stores like these are sometimes the only shopping options within walking distance. They carry everything from baby wipes to alcohol and cigarettes to canned tuna. Like the bodegas of New York City, 7-11s and Circle Sevens dotted the neighborhoods. The owner needed to be trained to make this whole thing work. When someone came in and bought a gallon jug of milk, juice, water...the clerk had to bag it in one of the chipped plastic bags. Each morning, an agent would go see what number bag was going to start the day off and which bag ended the day. So for example: It's Monday and bag #1 is labeled A-15. We find a bag at a fire with a chip that says A-16....that tells us it's the first store, and the second gallon jug to be sold there that day. So full cooperation was really important to make this work.

Scott Fulkerson:

But the owner of these stores, we made contact with and built a relationship with, and without telling them exactly what we were there for, that we were there investigating a serial arsonist. We informed him that we needed his cooperation to prevent future violent crime from occurring in and around the region. So I would imagine his mind, he would think that it would be something to do with gun store, store robberies, burglaries or break-ins et cetera. But he provided us full access to his stores, and obviously, thankfully so, and surprisingly enough he didn't have working surveillance equipment, so we had to replace that with working surveillance equipment.

He enjoyed us being in and around his stores cause he realized that when we're there, less criminals were there, so he felt safer because we're there often. We actually had people, for very short periods of time, actually working in the store to help them provide them with this training as to how these bags are to be deployed.

<<Kara>>So that's the next question is, did you find any of these chips at any of the fires?

Scott Fulkerson:

It's funny, you should ask. So we did this for a long period of time. And as you can imagine, it was very labor intensive, resource driven, but we believed in it. We wanted to be left of boom. So while this is happening, and other suspects are being developed and we're looking for these fires, there were no fires that had any of these or that we actually went to that had a fire associated to our serial arsonist.

So to answer your question, we did not recover one of these stainless steel chips from one of the fire scenes.

Kara:

I interviewed quite a few people from this task force. Some were with ATF, others were brought in from different jurisdictions...fire and police departments. They all talked about the ups and downs of this case.

Tony Exline:

Scott Hoaglander or would call me. We had those Nextels, thing would blink and wake me up at 3:00 in the morning. And there was two questions every night that we would go, and the first one was, "Where are we going?" And he would tell me, and then the next one was, "Is anybody hurt or dead?"

Kara:

This is Tony Exline. He was a forensic evidence technician with Prince George's County and worked with Scott Hogander. If you remember Scott was one of the first people to realize there was an arsonist in Prince George's County, and Tony was responsible for most of the evidence collection at the crime scenes. Like the rest of the team, Tony was on call 24/7. He slept with one of those pagers next to his bed.

Tony Exline:

You were always thinking about it. And talking to my son about this, when you called and set this all up was, one morning, we were supposed to go to Great Falls. He was doing a book report on the locks, how the lock system worked. And we got a call at 04:00 in the morning, and that was the one on Anacostia, where the kids had seen.

We were there for 14 hours.

And when I got back, But my wife, my ex-wife, at the time was not happy. And I'm like. "What do you want me to do? I can't not go." So yeah, it was a big strain.

Kara: This impact on the personal lives of the investigators is repeated over and over again. Dozens of people are in the same situation as

Tony...missing school events, kids birthdays, regular meals. This case is now their life...and their family's lives, until the arsonist is caught.

So Tony joins the rest of the team on Anacostia Ave. to begin looking for clues. He has to. Because what could this man have left behind that might reveal his identity?

Tony Exline:

Yeah, we set up a perimeter, basically blocked it off. We ended up doing a grid search on the field across the road and everything. The porch itself, I looked at it and I remember, I said, "I'm smart enough to know when I don't know everything, and I'm also smart enough to know to ask for help. I need some help here. Get me a fingerprint person down here, because I don't want to screw this up. We've got a hell of an opportunity." And in the end, we built a hood out of plastic and two-by-fours. I mean, I think somebody ran up to Home Depot or something and got lumber. And we built basically a big tent around the porch.

We had these things called hot shots. So, you'd have a, it was a super glue thing, but you would put whatever you wanted fumed inside of a cardboard box and fire up one of these hot shots and throw that in there and wait a few minutes. And it would fume within the box, and then you'd just take the item out. And all that does is preserves the fingerprints that are on the item.

Me and Brian [Radensky 00:45:00], I think we still got lung damage from this. Because we were setting them off inside as we were backing down the stairs. Like, "All right, we need to get out of this my eyes are getting glued shut. So, we fumed that entire railing, and then we had, I don't remember who had the rescue tool, essentially what you would use to cut a car apart. And we cut the railing off of the porch, and wrapped it up and took it up to, they transported it up to the ATF lab.

There was a guy there that did their fingerprints. And he ended up finding a bunch of different prints on there, but he had to get the rule out, the prints from the kids, and from the mom, But that was the frustrating thing too, is you put all this time and hoping, hoping, hoping, and then we would just come up with a dead end here, and a dead end there.

Kara: So three eyewitnesses and an intact incendiary device. No fingerprints, no name, no serial arsonist.

Coming up... on Arson

Scott Fulkerson:

So again, was he in hiding? Was he playing cat and mouse with us? What did that again, a theory with somebody within the task force, telling the person what we were doing? Was somebody in the task force actually the arsonist?

Kara:

Frustrations mount and suspicions settle in as the task force begins to wonder if the arsonist was one of their own.

Scott Fulkerson: At this point later on when it was the 18 of us at core, we were very comfortable and confident that that was not the case, but there's always that lingering in the back of your mind, who could have possibly be.

Credits.

Arson is brought to you by the international association of arson investigators in cooperation with the bureau of alcohol tobacco firearms and explosives. Our executive producer is scott stephens, our editor is Tracy Wahl. arson is produced by platform media with help from Emily Vaughn, and Mariah Dennis. Engineering support from Andrew Chadwick. Our theme music is by the last knife fighter
And I'm Kara McQuirk-Allison.