

# The Ann Arbor News

**Youth convicted of arson takes new turn in life. Now Sean McEvoy is trying to help other people.**

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By Tom Tolen News Staff Reporter

A lot has happened in the last three years.

Today McEvoy, takes a day off each month from his job as a restaurant cook to talk to youth about the dangers of starting fires. He is a regular speaker in a program called Straight Talk at the University of Michigan Medical Center Trauma-Burn Center in Ann Arbor.

The young people in the program ages 8-17, are most often referred by the juvenile court but may be enrolled by parents who think their child has an abnormal curiosity about fire.

(Sean McEvoy) voluntarily takes a day off work every month and spends an entire day at the center he's now basically part of the "says Pamela Pucci nurse educator at the U-M trauma-burn center and program coordinator for Straight Talk. "He's incredible," Pucci says.

Until this story, McEvoy has not been identified by in the Livingston Community News or The Ann Arbor News because he was a juvenile when charged and convicted. Now he has agreed to talk about how his life has changed over the last three years. McEvoy's parents declined to be interviewed for the story.

Pucci says McEvoy has done a 180-degree turnaround with his life. "He made a mistake and fortunately, nobody was hurt; the out come could have been devastating," she says.

McEvoy became involved in the program after taking part in it himself as a convicted arsonist a couple of years ago. "We asked him to come back (because) we thought he had a great message for the kids, speaking about the legal consequences of his actions, and how many people it affected, how it changed his life," Pucci said.

McEvoy lives in Ypsilanti and works as a cook in a local restaurant. He earned his high school diploma while at the Arbor Heights juvenile center in Ann Arbor. He says he plans to enroll at Washtenaw Community College in the fall with dreams of becoming a psychologist.

"My experiences could help (people)," McEvoy says. I've confronted a lot. I have some pretty good first-hand experience on issues."

Talking to McEvoy, who will be 19 in September, makes it apparent he is deeply remorseful about setting fire to the high school library April 8, 2002, which resulted in then \$700,000 in damage. He pleaded guilty to arson and malicious destruction of property and spent two years at Arbor Heights.

The latest legal proceeding in his case is a Michigan Court of Appeals ruling, the upshot of which is that a \$715,581 restitution bill owed by McEvoy's parents could be reduced.

McEvoy has been giving the voluntary monthly presentations since November 2002 in the Straight Talk program. Pucci says the formerly shy young man has become a good public speaker and gained self-confidence as a result of his talks. "He's come a long way," Pucci says. McEvoy who went through the one-day Straight Talk course himself, decided he would like to help others kids by relating his experiences.

McEvoy believes he can help others by relating his experience, and urges others to seek help if they are thinking about doing something destructive. "They should talk to somebody about it, and express (their anger) appropriately," he says. McEvoy also has addressed a regional fire chiefs conference in Flint about his experiences. McEvoy says a presentation by a fire official when he was in the Straight Talk program helped him recognize the seriousness of his actions. "That (program) helped give me a better understanding of how much danger your put people through," he says.

In its ruling last week, the appellate court said restitution to SET-SEG, the district's insurance company, should district's actual loss, rather than on the replacement value of the damaged property, and sent the case back to Livingston County Probate Court. Judge Susan Reck originally ruled that the parents are legally responsible for their son's actions and must pay full restitution but amended her ruling, determining they would not be held personally responsible for repayment. Instead, she ruled that State Farm Fire and Casualty their insurer would have to pay. McEvoy was taking Paxil at the time he committed the arson but refuses to blame the legal prescription drug for his actions. Paxil, prescribed for depression and social anxiety, is a controversial drug that critics say when used by children may lead to suicidal behavior or acting out. "I think every drug has different side effects for different people," McEvoy says, adding he "had a lot of issues back then.

“There were a lot of things going on in my life,” he says. McEvoy says counseling has helped him tremendously, and credits the Arbor Heights staff for much of his turnaround. “(The center) helped a lot, “he says.

“He’s a tremendous kid,” Pucci says. “I think he’s going in the right direction to get his life back.”

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