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By JAMES W. WADE III
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CLEVELAND — A federal jury convicted 27-year-old Antun Lewis of setting a fire that killed nine people, including eight children, during a sleepover. It is the deadliest house fire in Cleveland's history.

After eleven hours of deliberation, jurors found Lewis guilty of one count of federal arson. The jury determined Lewis set a fire in May 2005, that destroyed a home on East 87th Street in

Cleveland, killing 33-year-old Medeia Carter and eight children, four of them were Carter's own, who were having a sleepover marking Moses Williams Jr.'s 14th birthday.

The death of these eight children and one adult touched the entire community. Each year on the date of the fire, the community and family members hold a prayer vigil and bring stuffed animals.

The verdict came nearly six years after the fire, as the investigation took years to put together. Police and fire officials worked with agents from the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. Federal prosecutors took the case using a statute that applied to arsons in federally subsidized homes.

For nearly three weeks, prosecutors built their case on the testimony of more than three dozen witnesses. The prosecution built its case around a felon who recorded a jail conversation with Lewis, Marion Jackson, who said he had served as a lookout when the fire was set at the three-story home.

Prosecutors said Lewis broke in the 99-year-old home and doused the first floor with gasoline, setting a raging fire.

The Federal prosecutors used cell phone records that showed Lewis was within a 16-block radius of Carter's home at the time of the fire, according to investigators. That contradicted statements of his whereabouts that Lewis gave to an ATF agent.

In a statement to investigators, Jackson said he and Lewis met on Superior Avenue near East 85th Street and walked around the neighborhood. Lewis bought $5 of gas and placed it in two containers. Jackson said Lewis received a call on his cell phone about 2:53 a.m. and disappeared with the gas cans into Carter's home.

The defense denounced Jackson as unreliable and a jailhouse snitch. Jackson served six prison terms, totaling 15 years, over a 31-year period. Defense attorneys called seven witnesses, including a woman Lewis dated and a man who spent time with him in prison.

But Janine Chisholm, who dated Lewis at the time of the fire, countered Jackson's story. She said she dropped Lewis off in the area near Union Avenue and East 102nd near midnight. She said she never saw anyone matching Jackson's description with Lewis.

The case had set the stage for a rare death penalty trial in federal court, but U.S. District Court Judge Solomon Oliver ruled out the death penalty in December. He cited defense evidence that Lewis has an I.Q. of about 70 or less, meaning he falls within the range of mild mental retardation.

No motive was specified, but the prosecution suggested that Lewis was upset about a drug debt and wanted to get even. The defense repeatedly highlighted the absence of a motive, but the prosecution said it wasn't required to identify one.

The jury began deliberating Friday afternoon in Lewis' case. It took the weekend off and finished deliberating Monday.

"Justice may be delayed, but justice is not denied," said U.S. Attorney Steve Dettelbach.

"On behalf of the City of Cleveland, I would like to thank the U.S. Attorney, his staff, the County Prosecutors Office, the Cleveland Division of Police and the Cleveland Division of Fire for their diligence in bringing this case to justice. While nothing can erase the grief caused by the tragedy so many years ago, today's verdict can allow healing to begin for the families and friends of the victims."

Lewis' attorneys say they plan to appeal the verdict. Lewis could get life in prison when he is sentenced on May 10, 2011.

Cutline;

Family members console one another outside the home on East 87th street, where eight children and 1 adult died tragically. (File photo by Mychal Lilly)