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Mercer County Homicide Task Force Investigation Leads to Homicide and Arson Charges in Hamilton Fire

Mercer County Prosecutor Angelo J. Onofri announced today that the Mercer County Homicide Task Force has arrested Michael Sanders for setting the July 9, 2021, Hamilton Township fire that killed three people.

Sanders, 23, of Trenton, is charged with three counts of first-degree murder, three counts of first-degree felony murder, three counts of second-degree aggravated assault, two counts of second-degree aggravated arson and one count of causing widespread injury or damage. He was taken into custody early this morning at a hotel in Plainsboro. The prosecutor's office has filed a motion to detain Sanders pending trial.

The murder charges are the result of an investigation by the Mercer County Homicide Task Force and the Arson Unit.

On July 9, 2021, at approximately 3:40 a.m., a fire started at 213 Woodlawn Avenue which quickly engulfed both sides of the two and a half story, wood frame duplex, causing a partial roof collapse. A nine-month-old baby girl, identified as Malani Sanders, and a 42-year-old female, identified as Tiffany Abrams-Jones, were found deceased at the scene.

Three additional individuals were transported to the hospital with critical burn injuries. One of those individuals, 50-year-old Prince Jones, succumbed to his injuries on July 11, 2021. Jones and Abrams-Jones were the grandparents of the baby.

Detectives were able to retrieve video from numerous cameras in the area and speak to witnesses. One witness told detectives that during the night leading up to the fire, one of the residents of 213 Woodlawn Avenue, who is the mother of the deceased baby, received a text message from the baby's father, Michael Sanders, telling her to get their baby out of the house.

Detectives determined that Sanders took a taxi from an area near his residence in Trenton and was dropped off approximately one block from 213 Woodlawn Avenue shortly after 3:00 a.m. Sanders, wearing a dark colored hooded sweatshirt with the hood over his head, a mask, and white gloves, walked past the residence towards Greenwood Avenue approximately 15 minutes before the fire started. Detectives were also able to obtain surveillance video from the Fast Trac Gas Station on Greenwood Avenue from July 9, approximately 10 minutes before the fire, which showed Sanders making a purchase of what appears to be a dark colored torch lighter and cigars. During this purchase, he removed the mask covering his face. Sanders left the store and was observed walking on Woodlawn Avenue back in the direction of 213 Woodlawn. Approximately four minutes after Sanders passed that camera, the reflection of light from the fire at 213 Woodlawn can be seen on the video.

Additional video captured Sanders walking back to his residence on Bayard Street in Trenton. When he arrived on Bayard, he was no longer wearing a mask or gloves. Additionally, he was no longer wearing the dark hooded sweatshirt. After reviewing this video, detectives canvassed that area and recovered a dark hooded sweatshirt a few doors down from Sanders' residence in the bottom of a basement stairway.

The investigation is ongoing. Anyone with information is asked to call HTF Detective Jennifer Eyster at (609) 989-6406. Information can also be emailed to mchtftips@mercercounty.org.

Despite having been charged, every defendant is presumed innocent until found guilty beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law.

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