

Fatal Easter fire shocks defense attorney

He represented man who later set blaze that killed six

By **Laura McVicker**

Thursday, April 28, 2011

A defense attorney for Tuan Dao remembered his former client Thursday as a man who seemed concerned for the welfare of his children.

On Easter Sunday, Dao snapped. Authorities say he set fire to his Vancouver home, killing five of his children and himself.

Only a month ago, Dao was in jail on suspicion of assaulting his wife and wanted to be released as soon as he could — for his six children's sake, recalled Andrew Lawhon, an attorney for Vancouver Defenders.

"He needed to be released because the kids needed to be taken care of," Lawhon said, adding that Dao also wanted to get back to his job as an assistant manager at FedEx/Kinko's in Portland.

Investigators say Dao used a liquid fuel such as gasoline to start the early Easter morning blaze at his home at 15304 N.E. 13th Circle. The children, ages ranging from 6 to 12, suffered fire-induced skull fractures, indicating that they died from exposure to the sudden inferno. Arson experts are still piecing together exactly how Dao — whom they say was distraught over marriage and fiance troubles — started the fire.

Lawhon, who was briefly appointed to represent Dao, aimed to shed light on his client, but admitted that the whole case would likely remain a mystery.

He expressed shock over the fire.

"I just couldn't believe it," Lawhon said. "I was appalled. It was really, really sad. It's a horrible tragedy."

The attorney said he never suspected that Dao was emotionally unstable or capable of murder. A defense attorney for indigent clients, Lawhon has seen his fair share of mentally ill people who come through the court system.

"As far as I could tell, there were no indications anything was wrong," besides the crime he was charged with, Lawhon said.

Dao, 37, was charged with fourth-degree assault and reckless endangerment for allegedly throwing a clothes iron, a packed duffle bag and a water bottle at his wife, Lori Dao, during a March 29 argument.

"We didn't really talk about the case very much," the attorney said. Shortly after Dao's first appearance, Dao retained his own Vancouver attorney, Matthew Hoff.

Hoff declined comment Thursday.

Lawhon recalled that Dao seemed anxious about the criminal charge and the ensuing legal process, but Lawhon said that's normal among criminal defendants.

Dao was released from the Clark County Jail on March 31 after posting a bail bond to his \$2,000 bail. A representative of Regan Bail Bonds would not release the name of the person who fronted the bond.

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