

ROMAN SYDOR/FILE PHOTO

Mark French left his Stouffville apartment, near Walmart, before it caught fire Jan. 31.

JUSTICE: Man jailed over charges from fire

# Drug lab operator wrecked lives: judge

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A Whitchurch-Stouffville man has been jailed after pleading guilty in the explosion of a cannabis oil lab in the basement of a home last winter.

Mark Edward French pleaded guilty Tuesday to producing a controlled substance and arson endangering human life in connection with the fire, which destroyed 55 Merdock Ct. Jan. 31.

After crediting him two months for delay in the case, Justice Howard Chisvin ordered Mr. French, who stood shackled in the prisoner's dock showing no emotion and clad in dark blue jeans and a light blue and white short-sleeved collared shirt, to serve another 10 months in jail.

Five people, including an elderly couple who were at home when the lab burst into flames, lived in the Stouffville home. Mr. French lived in the basement.

## BADLY BURNED

Two others, East Gwillimbury resident Lawrence Easton Bungaro and Whitchurch-Stouffville resident Justin Alexander Barber, were also at the home when the lab exploded, York Regional Police say. Mr. Bungaro was badly burned, the court was told.

Many lives were destroyed as a result of Mr. French's behaviour, Justice Chisvin said in passing sentence.

"It really doesn't matter what I do today, I can't fix it, you can't fix it," he told Mr. French. "The most I can do is put you in jail and that doesn't fix issues these people will have for the rest of their lives."

Justice Chisvin also sentenced Mr. French to two years probation, banned him from possessing controlled drugs and weapons and ordered him to provide a DNA sample.

A few new details about what was going on inside the home when it caught fire emerged Tuesday in an agreed statement of facts read by federal Crown Kirk Dickson.

Emergency crews were called to the home, near Hoover Park and Sandiford drives just east of the Walmart shopping complex, at about 1 p.m.

A large column of black smoke could be seen rising from the home and two men were seen fleeing.

The home was completely destroyed and 117 cans of butane gas, along with six bags of marijuana, cannabis resin and a scale, were found after the fire was extinguished, Mr.

Dickson said.

Mr. French left the basement lab before it blew up and while it's not clear exactly what sparked the blaze, there were several possible sources, including a hot water tank and a stove range hood, Mr. Dickson said, referencing a fire investigation report.

The elderly couple was rescued from the home and treated for minor injuries, police said.

The fire, which caused \$450,000 damage, was extinguished in three hours.

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Mr. French, Mr. Bungaro and Mr. Barber were all charged in the lab's explosion but a source told yorkregion.com while investigators could put Mr. Bungaro and Mr. Barber in the home, following consultations with the Crown, the authorities determined there was no reasonable prospect of convicting them for drug lab activity.

Charges of arson causing disregard for human life, producing drugs, possession of drugs for the purpose of trafficking and mischief were withdrawn against Mr. Bungaro and Mr. Barber.

Meanwhile, more information emerged about Mr. French Tuesday, when his lawyer, Ken Murray, addressed Justice Chisvin.

## WAVED TO FATHER

Adopted at age four, Mr. French has two older siblings, enjoyed a positive childhood in the Goodwood and Stouffville area and worked in construction.

His father, Bob, who was in the court Tuesday, suffered a stroke and Mr. French spent a great deal of time serving as a caregiver to both parents and has had a good relationship with his family, Mr. Murray said.

Justice Chisvin told Mr. French the situation is tragic because he has the capacity to be a good person.

Following the hearing, as he was being led away, Mr. French turned back to the courtroom and waved at his father, who waved back.

Find reporter Joe Fantauzzi on Twitter @yorkcnme

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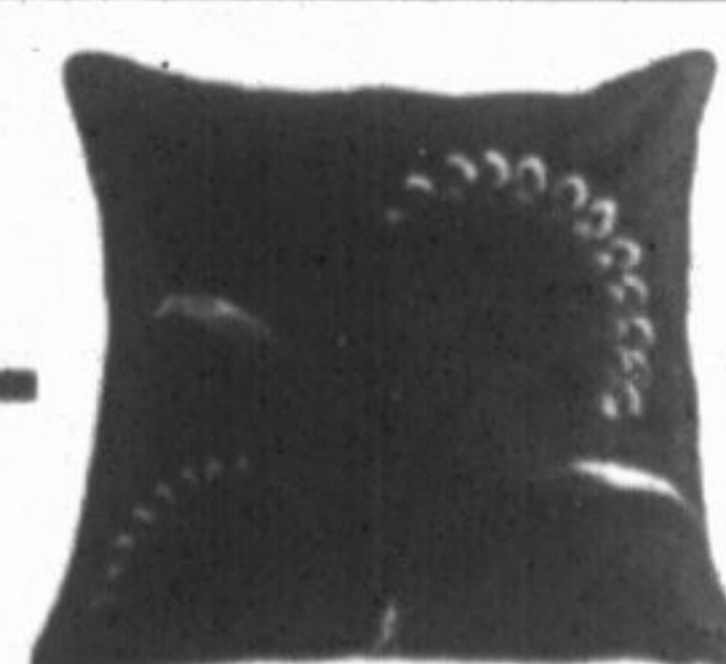
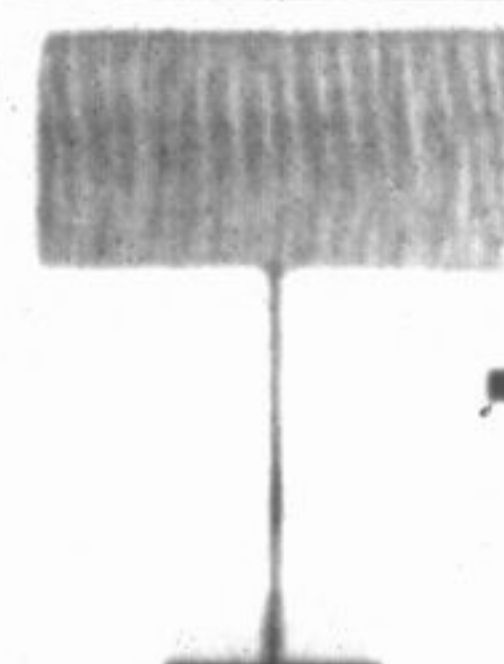
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