

# ASTORIA *Times*

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## Queensbridge woman set on fire: Police

BY JEREMY WALSH

A Brooklyn man was arrested in his hospital bed after allegedly dousing his girlfriend with gasoline and setting her on fire in her Queensbridge Houses apartment Sunday morning, police said.

Khenan Clarke, 25, of 555 Ocean Ave. in Brooklyn, was charged by police with attempted murder, assault, arson, reckless endangerment, endangering

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# Synagogue in Astoria landmarked

Building known for gold paintings added to national, state historic places lists

BY JEREMY WALSH

After more than eight decades of operation, an Astoria synagogue known for its lush interior has earned a spot on the state and national Register of Historic Places.

But while the congregation is proud of the recognition, its members seemed determined to look to the future as much as the past during a celebration at the temple Sunday.

Rabbi Jonathan Pearl, who just finished his first year leading the congregation, set the theme for the evening.

"Historic status, it is nothing if it is about nothing but looking back," he said. "Building does not stop when the last brick is put in. It goes on always unless we're lazy."

The congregation, which currently numbers around 100, was founded in 1925 by Rabbi Joshua Goldberg, who three years later recruited muralist Louis Pierre Rigal to paint the interior according to a quotation from rabbinic literature: "Be bold as a leopard, light as an eagle, swift as a gazelle, and strong as a lion."

Rigal painted golden representations of these animals on the front wall on both sides of the pulpit. Above the pulpit he painted the scene of a dove

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Astoria Center of Israel member Mitchell Blas speaks to the congregation about the temple's famous murals during a celebration of the building's landmarking. Blas said the Art Deco paintings embodying the four ideals of Jewish behavior were a source of constant inspiration.

Photo by Christina Santucci

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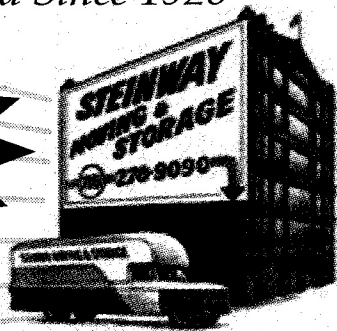
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## Synagogue

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with the freshly plucked olive branch in its mouth from the story of Noah.

The impressive paintings made an impression on successive generations of Astorians, including Mitchell Blas, who recalled how they amplified his experience of a childhood Yom Kippur fast.

"Those animals just seemed to come alive to us at that time, and always seemed to emit a golden energy that helped me through the final moments of the day," he said.

The landmarking is a success for the synagogue, but also for the New York

Landmarks Conservancy, which hopes to parlay the achievement into a fund for synagogues. The group currently can offer matching grants of up to \$75,000 for the restoration of churches but only \$10,000 for synagogues.

"Not only do you have a beautiful space and people, but you have the best records of any church or synagogue I've ever visited," said Ann-Isabel Friedman, director of the Sacred Sites program for the New York Landmarks Conservancy.

Congregants at the Astoria Center of Israel would certainly agree a restoration grant would be helpful. The ornate murals decorat-

ing the temple's interior walls have been faded by eight decades and were damaged by smoke from a fire in a neighboring synagogue in the 1980s.

But again and again the temple's leadership emphasized the importance of keeping the congregation vital and engaged with the neighborhood. To reach out to younger residents, the shul boasts a page on the social networking Web site Facebook and updates on twitter.com.

"A building, even one as beautiful and tasteful as this one, is just a building," said the congregation's previous rabbi, Alvin Kass. "It's the people that make it special."

## 911 hearing

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to a fire dispatcher.

Leroy McGinnis, Queens Trustee for the Uniformed Firefighters Association, said the new system puts pressure on the dispatchers to keep response times low.

"The caller on the 911 tape gave the correct address to the dispatcher. The dispatcher then missed a keystroke," he said of the Woodside blaze. "It's a human error, but the error is really based on the need of these dispatchers to get units out."

Vacca said fire response times in the city have continued to decline since the policy went into effect.

Other elected officials focused on the perils of illegal conversions in the aftermath of the fire. Immediately after the fire, Councilman Eric Gioia (D-Sunnyside) criticized the city for not pushing harder to curtail the trend.

"To prevent tragedies like this from happening again, identifying illegal conversions and holding landlords accountable needs to be a priority for

the city," he said.

An audit released in July by city Comptroller William Thompson's office found that of 8,345 properties reported for illegal conversions to the Queens Quality of Life Unit of the city Department of Buildings during the 2008 fiscal year, inspectors could not gain access to 39 percent of them.

In 23,410 inspection attempts that year, 67 percent resulted in the DOB staff failing to gain access and inspectors requested warrants to access property without the owner's permission for less than 1 percent of the inaccessible addresses, the audit found.

## Rotary announces one-month free trip to Taiwan

Kevin O'Mealy, president of the Rockaway Rotary, announced the group is seeking applicants for the 2010 Group Study Exchange Program.

The local Rotary District of Brooklyn, Queens and Nassau County No. 7250 will send a team of one Rotary member leader and four young non-Rotarians to spend a month in a partner district in a foreign country, which will send a team to this district. This year, the country is Taiwan.

The trip is free and the Rotary Foundation provides the tickets.

Each of the participating districts will house and feed the team members — a lot of it will be in Rotary homes.

In addition, team members will see how their trade or profession is practiced in a foreign country.

The trip dates are March 28 to April 27, 2010.

To qualify, you must:

- reside or be employed in Brooklyn, Queens or Nassau County
- not be a spouse, child or grandchild of a Rotary member
- be two years in his or her trade or profession
- a U.S. citizen

For applications, please contact O'Mealy at 718-634-0800 or Barbara Morris at 718-634-2820.