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Fire investigator who helped nab arsonists retires

By Nick Marnell



ConFire investigator Vic Massenkoff. Photo provided

Vic Massenkoff, the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District investigator who sleuthed down the origin and cause of thousands of fires and helped prepare the criminal cases against two serial arsonists in Lafayette, put away his gun, badge and turnout gear in early January after more than 40 years in fire and law enforcement.

Cal Fire

Massenkoff was studying electronics and computer technology at a junior college when a classmate said he was signing up for a summer job with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection. He badgered Massenkoff to sign up with him. "I had no idea what they did, but I took the test. I was intrigued," Massenkoff said. He passed the test and joined Cal Fire in 1976.

He loved the instant camaraderie and being part of a team, but one failing was soon exposed. Massenkoff had no idea what to do when it was his turn to feed 15 firefighters. "Mom, you gotta teach me how to cook," he

said and she bailed him out of kitchen duty embarrassment.

Massenkoff later joined the Cal Fire investigation unit, for which he studied at its police academy. "I ate it up. I graduated at the top of my class. Got a perfect score in shooting. I loved it," he said. He loved both fire and law enforcement, but Massenkoff discovered he was having more fun in law enforcement. At 39, he took a job with the Vallejo Police Department.

Vallejo PD

"Are you crazy? You're going to a place where they have to drive around at night with their lights off?" asked one of Massenkoff's peers when he heard the news. But it was the highest paying police department in the state at the time, and Massenkoff was married with two young children.

Massenkoff brought a trusting firefighter mentality to the job. "I got lied to so many times on the street. Finally one cop talked to me. 'You're not a fireman any more. You're a cop. People are going to lie to you. They're going to try to get away from you. They're not going to like you as you were liked as a fireman. And they will turn on you.' He was right. I was naive."

What Massenkoff saw people do to each other and to themselves, he could never have imagined. But the hunt, the chase after the bad guy - he thrived on it. "We cleaned up chronic problems in that city," he said.

Massenkoff dismissed the pop culture representation of police officers. "Less than 5 percent are bad. Cops don't wake up thinking, 'Whose civil rights can I violate today?' Cops don't like cops who are like that. They have every intention of doing a good job, but especially today, it's a stigma that has to be overcome."

ConFire

The 2008 Vallejo bankruptcy resulted in major cuts to city personnel, and Massenkoff moved to ConFire, where he was able to meld his fire and law enforcement backgrounds as a district fire investigator. "I knew how active the district was from my days at Cal Fire," he said.

With his experience tracking serial arsonists at Cal Fire, Massenkoff made an immediate impact in the district. "We weren't identifying the trends and patterns," he said. "We needed to start looking at everything. Every dumpster, every trash can, every vehicle, every grass fire. That's how these cases start out. We see a pattern, then we act on it."

Contra Costa County Deputy District Attorney Devon Bell praised Massenkoff as a knowledgeable, professional partner. "We worked four or five cases together. Between what we could charge and what we could prove, Vic made it simple for me," said Bell, explaining that it is difficult for the state to secure a conviction in an arson case because evidence is often circumstantial.

Bell successfully prosecuted a high-profile case in 2015 when ConFire, together with Cal Fire and the county Sheriff's Office, nabbed James Wilson, a serial arsonist suspected of setting more than 30 fires, including activity in Lafayette and Orinda. As Massenkoff explained, the agencies looked at small fires, and similar incidents began to recur. Officials tracked and mapped the pattern. Once investigators suspected Wilson they followed him, got a search warrant to put a tracker on his car, and set up cameras in the area where they saw his vehicle. "We found traceable DNA evidence on an item left at a fire scene, which was a one-in-a-million shot," Massenkoff said. Wilson pleaded no contest and accepted the court's offer of nine years in state prison.

Massenkoff also aided in the prosecution of James Bishop, a serial arsonist whose crime spree spilled into Lafayette in 2018. According to Andrea Tavernier, deputy district attorney, Massenkoff canvassed a neighborhood during an investigation, found surveillance video of the suspect's car, and was able to connect that car to activity in other areas, including Lafayette. Bishop was convicted of 31 arson-related felonies and awaits sentencing in late January.

"Vic breaks down science in such an uncomplicated way," Tavernier said. "In the Bishop case, he made things so understandable and accessible for the jurors. Sometimes experts are so uptight; it's rare to find

someone like Vic who has so much knowledge and is so approachable. He has complete command of his subject."

Massenkoff walked away from ConFire on Jan. 2 "When I hit 60, I felt old. I thought, maybe I shouldn't push my luck. I also caught myself being the crusty veteran," said Massenkoff, who has not decided what he will do next.

"Vic Massenkoff has contributed immensely to our fire investigation program, significantly moving the bar on how we investigate fires today," ConFire Chief Jeff Carman said. "He has been one of the principal forces behind the success of our fire investigation unit and will be sorely missed by every member of our team and our law enforcement partners across the county."

"I'm sad for us but I'm happy for Vic," Tavernier said.

Massenkoff shared a message with residents of Lafayette, which considered secession from ConFire six years ago over the closure of a fire station. "This is one of the best run organizations I have ever been with. Everything is a positive. You've got the best deal around. You won't find a better, more cost-effective fire service. It's something to value and protect."

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