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Teenager cleared in stable fire

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A teen accused of setting a Brooklyn barn fire that burned 20 horses to death was acquitted yesterday of arson and other charges.

Frank Esposito, 18, was indicted on 57 counts of arson, criminal mischief, cruelty to animals and other crimes in the June 10, 2000, fire that sent shock waves through Bergen Beach.

Residents charged the teen, then 16, had destroyed a beloved, nearly century-old fixture of their community.

Brooklyn District Attorney Charles Hynes branded the crime "a vicious and twisted act that boggles the mind."

But, after a nearly month-long trial and a day of deliberations, a six-man, six-woman Brooklyn Supreme Court jury acquitted Esposito, who said he was never at the barn and that a police confession was coerced.

Esposito, a student at James Madison High School when the fire occurred, feels vindicated, said his attorney, Nicholas Gravante.

"He was facing five to 15 years in jail today," said Gravante. "He has been telling people for 14 months he had nothing to do with arson. He finally told his story. Obviously, the jury listened."

Esposito was convicted only of misdemeanor marijuana possession. Hynes said he would not second-guess the jury and thanked the panel for its commitment to a case dragged out for weeks due to the World Trade Center tragedy.

In fact, Esposito's trial was one of only three jury trials conducted in Brooklyn since the Sept. 11 attack on the twin towers, with exhausted cops alternating between testifying and joining rescue efforts at Ground Zero.

In a videotaped statement, Esposito told police that he stopped by the stables to smoke a marijuana cigarette, lit a clump of hay and "watched it burn for his amusement." He said he then threw the hay into the 46-stall barn, smoked a regular cigarette and then tossed that in as well, according to the statement.

But this week, the 18-year-old told jurors police coerced the confession after he spent 18 hours under duress. He said he was never near the stables. Three friends testified he was with them driving around in Bay Ridge.

The acquittal disturbed Sen. Carl Kruger (D-Bergen Beach), who said he would demand Hynes immediately reopen the case.

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