

# Sunland Man Acquitted of Trying to Have Home of In-Laws Burned

By THERESA WALKER, *Times Staff Writer*

A man accused of hiring two other men to set fire to the \$270,000 Glendale home of his in-laws in an alleged attempt to get back his estranged wife has been found not guilty by a Pasadena Superior Court jury.

Steven Kimo Miya of Sunland said he was glad it was over but that he was still "in shock" hours after the decision was announced Tuesday by the 12-member jury after 3½ days of deliberation.

"I'm very happy that it finally came to light that I had nothing to do with this thing," Miya said in an interview. "There's no way you're going to set fire to somebody's house and expect them to come home to you."

James Martin Keeler, Miya's co-defendant in the four-week trial, also was cleared of any involvement in the March, 1984, fire that destroyed the home of Katherine and Jakob Gassen at 2639 Kennington Drive in Chevy Chase Canyon. Keeler, who was arrested March 18 at his home in Sunland on a separate charge of grand theft auto, is being held in Los Angeles County Jail and was unavailable for comment.

The Gassens are the parents of Connie Miya, the estranged wife of

Steven Miya. Tamia Hope, the deputy district attorney who prosecuted the arson case, failed to convince the jury that Steven Miya had paid to have a clothing business run from the Gassen house destroyed. Hope had contended that Steven Miya calculated that ruining the Gassens' business would leave them unable to support Connie Miya and force her to return to him.

Lawyers for the two defendants contended that the fire had been set by a drug dealer to whom Connie Miya owed money. The defense depicted Connie Miya as a woman with an expensive drug habit.

The alleged drug dealer, Danny Jay Michaels, had testified for the prosecution that he and Keeler committed the arson on instruction from Steven Miya.

Michaels pleaded guilty to one count of arson in Glendale Municipal Court last year. An accompanying burglary charge was dropped in exchange for his testimony against Miya and Keeler. He was sentenced to one year in Los Angeles County Jail. Michaels also faces other burglary charges in Wisconsin.

Hope said she was disappointed at the outcome of the trial before

Judge Sally Disco. "It's a very difficult case when so much rests on the testimony of an accomplice," she said.

Both Miya, 31, and Keeler, 20, had been charged with arson and burglary in connection with the fire. Miya also had been charged with solicitation for allegedly offering to pay Michaels and Keeler \$500 to burglarize the Gassen home and set fire to the clothing business.

The Gassen home was unoccupied on the morning of the fire and no one was injured. The house has since been rebuilt. The Miyas were involved in divorce proceedings at the time of the fire. They have a 3-year old son, Cody, whom Miya said he has not seen since October.

Cody was made a ward of the court and placed in the care of the Gassens several months ago after Connie Miya was involved in a traffic accident, said Louise B. Gulartie, Steven Miya's attorney.

The Miyas' divorce proceedings have been held up because of the arson trial, Miya said. Miya, a wholesale produce seller who said he has earned up to \$100,000 a year, claimed that he hasn't worked for six months and that the arson trial has cost him "a fortune."