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Oakland: Ghost Ship fire victim families allege multiple people to blame in lawsuits



(Courtesy of Dan Vega)

Alex Vega, left, of San Bruno and his girlfriend Michela Gregory, right, of South San Francisco, were confirmed among the revelers who died in a fire in the Ghost Ship artist's collective live/work warehouse in east Oakland on Dec. 2, 2016.

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OAKLAND — From the building owner to the concert promoter, the master tenant to the city and the county, everyone bears some responsibility in the Dec. 2 warehouse fire that killed 36 people, according to the first lawsuits and claims filed Friday over the deadly Ghost Ship blaze by two grieving sets of parents.

The families of 20-year-old San Francisco State student [Michela Gregory](#) and 23-year-old UC Berkeley graduate [Griffin Madden](#) sued eight people associated with the Fruitvale warehouse-turned-art collective for negligence and other failures. They also filed claims against the city of Oakland and Alameda County.

“This was some of the grossest forms of carelessness and negligence,” said attorney Mary Alexander on Friday, standing outside Alameda County Superior Court in Oakland during a news conference. “They all contributed, they all were a cause, and they all were responsible in bringing this tragedy about.”

The lawsuits further illustrated the cluttered, overstuffed interior of the venue and the grim final moments for the three dozen deceased victims who attended the underground music party that Friday night.

“Patrons and invitees, including Michela, tried to exit the warehouse, but were unable to exit due to the unsafe conditions and configuration of the warehouse,” according to the Gregory lawsuit, which was similar to Madden’s. “Michela was trapped in the inferno inside.”

Clutching his crying wife Friday, David Gregory spoke lovingly about his daughter.

“There’s not a day that goes by that we don’t miss her. She was a good kid. Her and Alex (her boyfriend) loved each other, they wanted to have a good time,” Gregory said. “Now we just want justice, we just want justice.”



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fire in the Ghost Ship artistâ€™s collective live/work warehouse in east Oakland on Dec. 2, 2016. (Courtesy of Dan Vega)

The suit named Chor Ng, the building owner, and her daughter Eva Ng; Derick Almena and Micah Allison, the husband and wife couple who operated the Satya Yuga arts collective inside the Ghost Ship warehouse; Joel Shanahan, who goes by the name Golden Donna and who hosted the concert; John Hrabko, the promoter; and two neighbors of the Ghost Ship. The claims filed Friday with the city of Oakland and Alameda County are the first steps in filing a lawsuit against public agencies.

Representatives for Ng and Almena did not immediately respond to requests for comment. Erica Terry Derryck, the spokeswoman for Oakland Mayor Libby Schaaf, and the city attorney’s office said the city does not comment on pending litigation.

Gregory and Madden did not die quickly, their families allege in the lawsuits, instead suffering “many minutes before dying.” The lawsuits did not list a cause of death, but said their injuries included smoke inhalation.

The lawsuits characterized the well-publicized Ghost Ship interior as a “maze of makeshift rooms, alcoves and partitions,” calling it a “death trap.”

The electrical system, the suits alleged, often sparked and circuit breakers would frequently blow out. On Dec. 1, the day before the deadly blaze, a refrigerator caught fire and tenants extinguished it, the families alleged.

The lawsuits also named the neighboring businesses to Ghost Ship, leased from Ng by Daniel Lopez and Omar Vega, saying they “provided utilities and services to the Ghost Ship, including supply of electricity” through a hole in the wall.

In the city and county claims, the families allege government officials failed to investigate and protect the public against the dangers of the property. They claim agencies also failed to report child abuse or neglect as mandated by law when they learned that Almena’s three children lived in the warehouse.

In the claim against the city, the families alleged that Oakland firefighters knew about the dangers of the Ghost Ship and that “employees, agents and/or representatives of the Oakland Fire Department attended and held a music event at the Ghost Ship before Dec. 2.” That claim mirrors what Almena’s attorneys said earlier this week in a statement that the fire department hosted a music event at the Ghost Ship.

An Oakland firefighter doubted the claim. “That is beyond belief to me,” said the source who requested anonymity because the employee was not authorized to speak to the media.

Gregory, an honor roll student in her junior year, was studying child development while balancing part-time jobs at Duggan’s Serra Mortuary in Daly City and Urban Outfitters on Fillmore Street in San Francisco. She was dating Alex Vega, 22, who [also died in the blaze](#).

The Gregory lawsuit described how Michela was found in the arms of Vega, who was “trying to protect her from the fire.”

Meanwhile, Alexander described Madden as a “brilliant” graduate of UC Berkeley, where he studied philosophy, Slavic languages and literature.

Mark Gergen, UC Berkeley law professor, said the government agencies may not be liable after all “because of a California statute that shields public entities from this sort of claim for failure to inspect.”

Almena would have civil liability, including negligence, however he may have no assets, said noted trial attorney Daniel Horowitz. He said that might also apply to the promoter. Ng, who owns a number of properties including the Ghost Ship warehouse, and an insurance company, is liable, even if she didn’t know anyone was living in the building, Horowitz said.

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David DeBolt, Oakland city hall reporter for the Bay Area News Group, is photographed for a Wordpress profile in Oakland, Calif., on Wednesday, July 27, 2016. (Anda Chu/Bay Area News Group)	<p>David DeBolt David DeBolt covers Oakland. DeBolt grew up in the Bay Area and has worked for daily newspapers in Palo Alto, Fairfield and Walnut Creek. He joined the Bay Area News Group in 2012.</p> <p>Follow David DeBolt @daviddebolt</p>
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