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First Lawsuits Filed in Response to Oakland Warehouse Fire



By **Devin Katayama** (<https://ww2.kqed.org/news/author/dkatayama/>)

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The first in what could be a long series of lawsuits prompted by the Ghost Ship warehouse fire were filed Friday on behalf of the families of two victims of the Dec. 2 blaze, which killed 36 people.

The lawsuits name eight individuals, including building owner Chor Nar Siu Ng, master tenant Derick Ion Almena and his partner Micah Allison, party promoter John Hrabko, musician Joel Shanahan and the proprietors of an adjacent auto body shop that are said to have supplied electricity and a restroom when events were held at the Ghost Ship.

The warehouse, on 31st Avenue in Oakland's Fruitvale District, was home to as many as 25 people and periodically hosted music events despite having no city permits for those uses. Those familiar with the Ghost Ship have described the interior as a maze of highly flammable art and decorations. The main path from the ground floor to the second-floor performance space in use the night of the fire was a rickety stairway built partly from wooden pallets. The building was not equipped with sprinklers or fire alarms.

“It was a trap for people who were there,” said attorney Mary Alexander, who is representing the families.

The defendants failed to provide a safe space or failed to manage the property itself, the lawsuits say.

One lawsuit was filed in Alameda Superior Court on behalf of the family of Griffin Madden (<https://www.kqed.org/arts/2016/12/14/griffin-madden-extremely-smart-gifted-student-and-broad-minded-dj/>), 23, who was a recent UC Berkeley graduate. Another lawsuit was filed on behalf of the parents of Michela Gregory (<https://www.kqed.org/arts/2016/12/13/michela-angelina-gregory/>), 20, who was attending the show with her boyfriend, Alex Vega (<https://www.kqed.org/arts/2016/12/14/alex-vega-artist-and-hip-hop-promoter-with-so-much-more-to-share/>), who also died in the fire.

“What this case is about is these beautiful young people who were killed in a fire where an event was held in a dangerous and really horrific building,” Alexander said.

She added she also plans to file claims against the city of Oakland and Alameda County. A spokesman for the Oakland City Attorney said the office can’t comment on lawsuits until it has been served and reviewed. Attempts to reach other defendants were unsuccessful.

The city’s Planning and Building Department said earlier this month that it has no records of its inspectors having been inside the warehouse for at least 30 years. Both the warehouse and an adjacent lot owned by Chor Ng had been the subject of blight and housing habitability complaints. The city says two complaints filed less than three weeks before the fire focused on conditions at the lot, not the building.

The Fire Department, whose Fire Prevention Bureau is charged with inspecting commercial spaces, also has no record of inspecting the building. The East Bay Times has reported that Ng registered the building as a commercial warehouse and had maintained a current business license for the past 20 years.

The federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives investigated the scene but has not yet issued a cause for the blaze.

The Alameda County District Attorney’s office has opened a criminal investigation into the fire.

Update Saturday 8 a.m.:

KQED has received a comment from the music label 100% Silk:

We are still grieving from this awful tragedy like everyone else. I can only imagine how Michela and Griffin’s families must be feeling, our hearts ache them for them.

In the small, tight-knit community of music we’re involved in it’s very common for artists to mention their record labels on flyers for shows they are playing – whether or not the label has anything to do with it. In the case of the Ghost Ship event, 100% Silk did not book, organize, promote, or have any involvement with it, beyond the fact that a few artists we’ve worked with were performing on the bill. We’d never even heard of that space before Saturday, December 3rd.

We tried to explain this in our various statements to the press but clearly there’s still confusion.



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Oakland Warehouse Manager on 'Today': 'I Am Incredibly Sorry'

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Chief: Fire Department Unaware of Oakland Warehouse Concerns

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Former Tenant: Oakland 'Ghost Ship' Warehouse Was Unsafe, Makeshift Space

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Recovery Effort Ends at Oakland Warehouse Fire; More Victims Identified

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Devin Katayama is a reporter covering the East Bay for KQED News. Previously, he was the education reporter for WFPL in Louisville and worked as a producer with radio stations in Chicago and Portland, OR. His work has appeared on NPR's *Morning Edition*, *All Things Considered*, *The Takeaway* and *Here and Now*.

Devin earned his MA in Journalism from Columbia College Chicago, where he was a Follett Fellow and the recipient of the 2011 Studs Terkel Community Media Workshop Scholarship for his story on Chicago's homeless youth. He won WBUR's 2014 Daniel

Schorr award and a regional RTNDA Edward R. Murrow Award for his documentary "At Risk" that looked at issues facing some of Louisville's students. Devin has also received numerous local awards from the Associated Press and the Society of Professional Journalists.

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