San Francisco Chronicle

“There’s a lot of family in there. People in that place were very loved.”
Terry String, boyfriend of missing woman

Warehouse fire kills Oakland partygoers

Survivors: Luck, panic credited as dozens flee Fruitvale district chaos
By Kimberly Vektenow and Kevin Fagan
A trip to the liquor store at the right moment, working the door when flames burst out. Rummaging frantically through falling smoke and stumbling out just in time.
A combination of pure luck, quick action and panic spared the lives of dozens of those who went to what was supposed to be a happy music party in Oakland on Friday night but turned into a fiery scene of agony and chaos.
The worst spot to be was on the second floor of the Ghost Ship warehouse-turned-artist’s echos at 362 31st Ave. — that’s where many people were when the flames erupted. The single-file staircase to get downtown, Survivors continue on A40

“Terrible tragedy”: 9 found dead in initial search, but officials expect toll to rise
By Hamed Aleaziz, Michael Capputo and Kevin Fagan
At least nine people were killed and more than a dozen others were unaccounted for after the worst fires in decades in Oakland tore through a makeshift collection of artists’ spaces packed with reviews at an all-night music party, authorities said.

The blaze ignited shortly before 10:40 p.m. Friday in the two-story converted warehouse at 315 31st Ave., at International Boulevard, in the Fruitvale neighborhood, while as many as 100 people were inside for a performance by the Golden Donna.

Complaints: Neighbors told of illegal occupancy and blight, city confirms
By Jill Tucker, Rachel Swan, Erin Allday and J.K. Dineen
It was known as the Ghost Ship, a large, gray-walled warehouse with a skull and crossbones, work painted on the outside and thick walls of hand-built spaces filled for musicians and artists.
But over the past decade, the 4,000-square-foot structure at 315 31st Ave. was better known as a party space and free official as a source of complaints about illegal residential use, all-night dance parties and general blight.

The complaint came to light Saturday as Oakland officials scrambled to answer questions about a blaze that took at least nine lives. The building is zoned as a warehouse, which doesn’t

CHRONICLE INVESTIGATION

Fashionable charity belies ugly reality
Venerable nonprofit Helpers appears to have given little away while raising millions, enriching director
By Caroline Zirino, Karen de Sá and Cynthia Oszust
San Francisco socialite Joy Bianchi has long been a striking presence among the city’s elite, adorning fashion shows and earning accolades from fashion icons, philanthropists and publications for the cause she says propels her helping people with developmental disabilities.
At a recent VIP fundraiser at Galleria Square, Rancho, Calif., bystanders in a silver sequined dress and her signature oversized eyeglasses was the subject of a surprise luncheon and “outstanding community service” and “High Business Chicness.”

Volunteers delivering to Bianchi’s 60-year-old charity have struggled with concerns that their donations were removed, raising doubts they said were never resolved.

A Chronicle examination of the public financial records of Helpers Community Inc., — Helpers continues on A6

Renee Vagano/The Chronicle

Joy Bianchi’s Helpers Community Inc., aides funds through the retail of luxury clothing.
Industrial enclaves hubs of artistic life

Partygoers describe harrowing escape

Missing include vibrant members of creative scene

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OAKLAND WAREHOUSE FIRE

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At least nine people were killed and more than a dozen others were unaccounted for after the worst fire in decades in Oakland tore through a makeshift collection of artists’ spaces packed with revelers attending a late-night music party, authorities said Saturday.

The blaze ignited shortly before 11:30 p.m. Friday in the two-story converted warehouse at 1305 31st Ave. at International Boulevard, in the Fruitvale neighborhood, while as many as 100 people were inside for a performance by the Golden Donna 100 Percent Silk touring electronic dance music show.

Authorities said they expected the death toll to rise, perhaps to as high as 24.

The building had permits for use only as a warehouse, not as a living or entertainment space, and there was no evidence the structure had fire sprinklers, officials said. Known as the Ghost Ship, the complex was under investigation by city officials for allegedly unpermitted construction and blight.

Firefighters said some victims were apparently trapped when they couldn't flee down a narrow, ramshackle stairwell leading to the second floor that was nailed together out of pallets and other bits of
wood. Some victims’ bodies were believed to be in hard-to-reach corners of the unstable building, and recovering all of them could take days, authorities said.

“There’s still a lot of the building that needs to be searched,” Fire Chief Teresa Deloach Reed said at the scene.

The cause of the fire was not immediately known.

Sgt. Ray Kelly, a spokesman for the Alameda County Sheriff’s Office, said most of the victims were in their 20s or 30s. “We did not have a lot of victims go to hospitals,” he said. “It appeared they made it out, or didn’t make it out.”

The Sheriff’s Office flew heat-seeking drones over the rubble early Saturday searching for survivors, Kelly said, but didn’t find any. He said the coroner’s office was prepared to handle as many as 40 bodies.

As the fire engulfed the building north of Interstate 880, people streamed into the street outside. Scores of firefighters attacked the blaze, but when teams pushed into the building, the flames were so intense they had to back out again, said Deputy Fire Chief Mark Hoffmann.

“We went in about 20 yards on the ground floor” but were repulsed by the heat, smoke and danger from the indoor hodgepodge of hand-built furniture and artist work spaces, Hoffmann said. “It was a labyrinth.”

When the roof collapsed all the way to the first floor, all hope of quickly getting deep inside was lost. Seven corpses were found on the building’s second level and two on the ground floor. By evening, all nine known victims had been removed from the building, and crews were carefully picking through the debris with excavators and other heavy equipment to search for more. None of the victims’ names was released.

Al Garcia, owner of Reed Supply Co. across the street from the burned building, said his sister lives near the warehouse and called him around midnight to tell him about the inferno. When he arrived, he said, flames were shooting out of the windows and roof.

“I knew people were dead,” he said. “There was no way anyone could get out.”

He found two young men, ages 17 and 18, sitting in the doorway of his business, dazed and clearly in shock. They told him they had heard about the party online and believed they were the last two people to escape the flames. They recalled rushing through thick black smoke, with the building caving in behind them.

One of the teens “heard screaming, and he followed the voices” outside, Garcia said. The businessman added, “I couldn’t sleep after hearing that.”

Terry Ewing, whose girlfriend was at the electronic dance music show and was still missing Saturday, stood stone-faced outside the Alameda County Sheriff’s Office on East 12th Street, which had been converted into an assistance center for survivors and families searching for missing loved ones.
“Some friends came to my house this morning and told me there was a fire, and that we were missing some people,” he said, shaking his head. “That’s all we know so far.

“There’s a lot of family in there. People in that place were very loved.”

Joel Shanahan, the electronic musician from Madison, Wis., who performs as Golden Donna, the party’s headline act, was confirmed to be safe by associates who posted the news on social media. Local musicians also performed on the bill, and some of them were still being sought by friends Saturday.

Mayor Libby Schaaf went to the scene and, between heavy sighs, called the fire “a terrible tragedy” and promised a “thorough and methodical investigation.” She said the main focus for now was on recovering victims and consoling survivors.

“I met with a roomful of people who had loved ones that are missing,” Schaaf said. “It is painful to tell them it will be a considerable amount of time before we get the information they deserve.”

Gov. Jerry Brown, a former Oakland mayor, said he and his wife “were saddened to learn of last night’s tragic fire in Oakland. Our thoughts are with the entire city in this difficult time, and we extend our condolences to the family and friends of those lost.”

By early afternoon, a makeshift memorial with flowers appeared nearby on a fence at 12th Street and 31st Avenue, near the fire scene. Monica Rocha, 25, lives nearby and came to hang flowers. She said she had visited the building a year ago with a friend.

“It was weird because we were walking through it with my friend and we were like, ‘This is a tinderbox.’ ... We were like, ‘This isn’t safe. This could go down so easily,’” Rocha said.

She described the building as a “maze of wooden things and mannequins — it looked like a madhouse.”

A large, gray-walled warehouse with a skull and other ornate artwork painted outside, the Ghost Ship was filled with personalized, hand-built spaces tailored for musicians and artisans. Witnesses described a fantastical interior of tapestries, instruments and ornately carved ceiling and room structures.

Garcia, the neighboring businessman, said he had worried the place was a fire hazard because of the junk and debris around. The people who lived there, he said, had been trying to clean it up, painting the facade and adding the words “Ghost Ship” across the front.

City Councilman Noel Gallo, who represents the Fruitvale district and lives a block from where the fire occurred, said the building “has been an issue for a number of years.”

“People have been living inside, and the neighbors have complained about it,” he said. “Some of these young people that were in there were underage. They frequently had parties there.”

Darin Ranelletti, Oakland’s planning and building director, said officials “had received recent complaints about blight and unpermitted construction” at the warehouse and had opened an investigation Nov. 13.

North of the warehouse at Eli’s Mile High Club, a dozen musicians who were friends of performers at the show or members of the audience gathered Saturday to wait and mourn. They paced, staring at their phones and wiping tears, hoping to hear from people they believed had been at the Ghost Ship event.

“There are people unaccounted for; they’re just not responding,” said Billy Agan, owner of Eli’s. He heard of the fire soon after it broke out and said he hadn’t slept all night.
Agan said the music scene of young people in Oakland is so small that everyone knows each other. “We’re all going to know them intimately,” Agan said of the possible victims. “It’s going to affect culture in Oakland.”

On social media, friends of the victims and the many missing partygoers desperately sought information, particularly on the Golden Donna tour site, asking for people to confirm who got out of the building - and in some cases expressing grief for those believed to be dead. Many posted descriptions of piercings and tattoos to help identify people.

“Love and strength to all. Our thoughts and hearts are with you,” posted one. “Tragic loss for our community,” posted another. Others listed names of possible victims.

Chief Deloach Reed said it was unclear how many of the more than a dozen people known to be missing might be dead. “We’re not sure if they have already self-transported to the hospital or they have gone to a friend’s home,” she said. “We’re not sure.”

The music party was scheduled from 9 p.m. Friday to 4 a.m. Saturday. A party listing detailed musical acts and DJs. It said a “secret East Oakland location” was to be announced on the day of the event. Tickets were $10 before 11 p.m. and $15 after that.

It was not immediately clear what ignited the fire or where exactly it started, Deloach Reed said. The chief said a multiagency task force was gathering to investigate the fire and take up the task of recovering victims.

“The building is a huge building,” Deloach Reed said. “There’s going to have to be a methodical way we go about body recovery, and then also trying to find out where the fire started and how the fire’s spread took place. ... We have not done a complete search of the building.”

Even with the nine confirmed deaths, the blaze was Oakland’s worst in many years. The toll could exceed that of the Oakland hills fire of October 1991, in which 25 people died.

The fire chief said the scope of Friday night’s fire was just beginning to be fathomed and that it represented a tragedy for many families.

“It’s going to hit the city, it’s going to hit our organization, to have an incident of this type, of this magnitude,” she said. “It’s just going to be hard on everyone.”

Chronicle staff writers Jill Tucker, Erin Allday, Rachel Swan and Jenna Lyons contributed to this report.
It was known as the Ghost Ship, a large, gray-walled warehouse with a skull and other artwork painted on the outside and chock-full of hand-built spaces tailored for musicians and artisans.

But over the past decade, the 4,000-square-foot structure at 1305 31st Ave. was better known to city zoning and fire officials as a source of complaints about illegal residential uses, all-night dance parties and general blight.

The complaints came to light Saturday as Oakland officials grappled to answer questions about a blaze that took at least 30 lives. The building is zoned as a warehouse, which does not allow for residential uses. Darin Ranelletti, interim director of the city Planning and Building Department, said the warehouse was under investigation to determine whether it was being illegally used for housing.

“We had reports that people were living there, but we’re still trying to confirm them,” said Ranelletti, who also said the party that took place Friday required a permit, which was not obtained.

The most recent complaint of illegal residential occupancy and blight was on Nov. 13, Ranelletti said. Inspectors confirmed that there was garbage in the outside area on the property but were not able to gain entry to the building to confirm that people were living there. An inspector went to the property
Nov. 17 to investigate rogue interior construction but was not able to gain entry.

Witnesses described the interior of the building as having an eclectic mix of tapestries, instruments and an ornately carved ceiling. A makeshift staircase fashioned in part out of wooden pallets provided a tenuous connection between the ground floor and a second story.

“It was just a labyrinth of little areas,” said Deputy Fire Chief Mark Hoffmann, explaining that sculptors, painters and other artists had partitioned spaces off for studios.

The building, assessed at $86,000, is owned by Chor Ng, who purchased the property in 2007. Ng’s daughter, Eva Ng, told media outlets that the building was an art collective and that “nobody lived there.”

The building has been the source of blight complaints. On April 4, 2014, the Planning and Building Department received a complaint that “a large structure had been built at (the) property that had not been strapped down or stable.” No further information is available on the city’s complaint enforcement database, except that the issues had been abated.

In 2008, the city received a complaint of “trash debris and overgrowth” at the site. That, too, was cleaned up, according to city records.

The space, which was also known as Satya Yuga, was run by Derick Ion, who lived there on the second floor with his wife, Micah Allison, and children, who were staying at a hotel during the Friday event. In a Facebook post Friday night, Ion wrote, “Everything I worked so hard for is gone. Blessed that my children and Micah were at a hotel safe and sound.”

Ion added, “It’s as if I have awoken from a dream filled with opulence and hope ... to be standing now in poverty of self worth.”

The Facebook post was heavily criticized. Several people wrote that they had cautioned Ion that the building was unsafe. One Facebook user wrote: “Derick you were warned. Every time I came to your house I warned you and you just laughed.”

Officer Johnna Watson, a spokeswoman for the Oakland Police Department, said detectives are combing through the building’s history.

Watson emphasized that the site “is not deemed a crime scene,” but said police personnel were on hand in case the investigation takes a turn.

Danielle Boudreaux, who lives near the warehouse, said she has known the Ions for eight years, having met the family through the Oakland art community and a school her children attended with the Ions’ children. She said she and other parents became increasingly alarmed over the past three years about the living conditions in the warehouse.

She described seeing pieces of wood with rusty nails sticking out and said the building lacked hot water, central heating and a kitchen. Subtenants lived in a half-dozen recreational vehicles parked on the first floor of the building, she said.

Parents also tipped off the Fire Department about the lack of sprinklers, exits and signs, she said.

“The police and Fire Department were there on more than one occasion,” Boudreaux said. “Multiple people warned Derick that it was a death trap. He would laugh it off. This tragedy could have been avoided if it were not for his arrogance.”

In early 2015, Boudreaux said, she and other friends contacted both Micah Allison’s parents and the county Child Protective Services. The children were sent to live in Southern California with relatives for about six months, she said.

In May 2015, Ion posted a note on Facebook saying that he and his wife had been “unable to see the kids for one month as we have been working and looking for the right lawyer as well as fighting extreme depression and an overwhelming longing for our children.”

Eventually the parents regained custody and returned to the warehouse. In July, Ion posted that the family was “back together.”

City Councilman Noel Gallo, who represents the Fruitvale district and lives a block from where the fire occurred, said the building “has been an issue for a number of years.”

“People have been living inside, and the neighbors have complained about it,” he said. “Some of these young people that were in there were underage. They frequently had parties there.”

Firefighters said some of the victims of the Friday night blaze were apparently trapped when they couldn’t escape down the makeshift staircase. There was no evidence that the building had a sprinkler system and there were only two exits, Hoffmann said.

Taylor Selby, 25, said she had been to the Ghost Ship a few times and had friends at the party Friday night. Some had escaped safely, but she was still waiting to hear from others. Selby, a welding student at Laney College, said the house drew artists of all kinds. “It was so welcoming, just a good vibe,” she said.

“It kind of felt like a pirate ship,” Selby said. “It was almost like walking into a flea market. Persian rugs on the walls, Buddhist statues everywhere. It was really, really cool.”
When Aaron Gundy, a 2016 graduate of California College of the Arts, returned to Oakland in July after a monthlong road trip, he didn't have a place to live. Gundy, 24, is a visual artist who creates illustrations, comics, sculptures and performance costumes, so he was looking for a place where he could live and work.

A friend offered Gundy the perfect situation — the couch in his downstairs room in a West Oakland warehouse.

In Oakland, several warehouses have become artistic hubs where artists collaborate, exhibit, perform and live. The culture found within many of the warehouses in Oakland is attractive to young people like Gundy because the large, open spaces offer freedom to create in a supportive environment.

“It’s always helpful to be able to have people who I can share ideas with and talk through creative problems with,” Gundy said. “And also be able to see their work and bounce off their creative minds.”

Many of the warehouses have been converted into live/work spaces, which are often used for entertainment events, like the electronic dance music party at a two-story artists collective in the city’s Fruitvale district that was the scene of the deadly fire late Friday night. City officials said the warehouse, known to artists as the Ghost Ship, was permitted to be only a warehouse.

Such warehouses frequently host live events, with dozens of people freely streaming in and out. “That’s why these places draw so many young artists,” Gundy said.
Evan Tracy was in his 20s in 2005 when he came to Oakland with only a backpack and $200, looking for a place to stay. He discovered an industrial arts warehouse called NIMBY that allowed him to live there and create large-scale metal and machine art.

Tracy, 33, who now builds and designs prototypes of electric cars and trucks, said he honed his professional skills at NIMBY.

“It was my school, it was college,” Tracy said. “It was a place where I could both play and work and build myself and my life into the person I wanted to be.”

Living and working arrangements vary from warehouse to warehouse. Some run similarly to co-op housing and have a hierarchy with designated duties and assignments. Others are more fluid with a transient group of artists and roommates.

But, at each place, there’s always someone who collects the rent, Tracy said.

And the rent is affordable.

“There’s just a lot of constant changing creative, inventive energy,” said Tracy. “For me, it was a way to get more out of a time of my life when I was willing to sacrifice some of the amenities of living in a house.”

Tracy had moved out of NIMBY before a September 2008 fire forced it to relocate to East Oakland, where it still operates.

The tragedy of the Ghost Ship fire is reverberating through the dance music and performance art scene in Oakland. Unlike genres like hip-hop and rock, where shows at local clubs are standard, electronic dance music relies on warehouse venues for parties known as raves.

The Ghost Ship was known for electronic dance music.

“That’s the beauty of the Oakland music scene, it’s a beautiful mosaic of electric music,” said Michelle Campbell of the artist management company Mixtape.

She was sitting at the bar at Eli’s Mile High Club on Saturday waiting for news on the three people she knew who were missing, artists she represents at Mixtape. They were not performing.

“It’s a great community,” Campbell said. “I think it’s a community that helps each other. We’re all artists.”

She said there is a deep bond in the Oakland music scene with a foundation and rich history. She sat, staring at her phone, willing it to provide news.

Warehouses like Ghost Ship are more than homes, studios and venues. They are also gathering places for performers to connect with fans who crave eclectic presentations.

“Spaces like this are the only way we have any sort of viable scene where anyone is making any money,” Juliet Gordon, who fronts The Classical, an art-pop band, said. “Every proper bar or venue has an overhead, of course. Given all that, there is virtually no option for a truly thriving performance space in this city without occupying these spaces.”

The spaces, with their come-as-you-are environments, “offer the most support to trans and gender-queer folks,” she said.

“That’s in large part what last night should have been about, what it started out about,” Gordon, 26, added. “That group of people is totally sidelined in the dominant nightlife culture of a gentrifying Oakland.”
They're artists. They're musicians. They're performers. And they were among the missing on Saturday, the day after a deadly fire ripped through an Oakland warehouse filled with partygoers.

Tied together through the Bay Area’s close-knit techno arts community, dozens had converged for a night of drinking and dancing at an underground rave inside a converted warehouse that served as an artists live-in wonderland.

Many were students and service workers holding restaurant and retail jobs while trying to break through as entertainers, sustaining a creative culture that’s become scarce in the Bay Area as economic prosperity increasingly prices out the arts scene.

“These were not drugged-out, raving kids, They were talented. They worked hard,” said Dylan Galagher, part of Berkeley-based synth pop duo vverevvolf, who had performed with some of the musicians at Friday’s event, like Nicole “Denalda” Renae and Ben Runnels of Introflirt. “This is more than just a loss. It’s frustrating, as weird as that sounds. They had so much potential.”

Thirty people were confirmed dead in the blaze, though their names were yet to be released. The death toll was expected to grow.

Micah Danemayer, 28, was doing a light show for the party and he and his girlfriend, Alana “Jen”
Kane, were among the missing late Saturday afternoon, according to Danemayer’s friend and bandleader Devyn Fordyce, 26.

“I’ve never met anybody so passionate, not only for his own art and music but for everyone else’s,” Fordyce said by phone Saturday afternoon after trying to go to work but leaving early because he was distressed. “I just really, really hope he’s just asleep somewhere.”

Danemayer and Fordyce had recently started an electronic music band, Red Cellar, playing synthesizers to create improvised rhythmic noises. Their first real gig is supposed to be in January.

Jason McCarty, 36, also hadn’t been heard from by late Saturday afternoon.

The sound artist, whose stage name is Dilatedears, came to California from Iowa in 2005 to get his master’s degree at San Francisco Art Institute and never looked back, according to his girlfriend, Grace Lovio.

“He’s really connected to the Bay Area art scene,” she said by phone Saturday afternoon, before boarding her flight to the Bay Area from France, where she is studying at the Paris Institute of Political Studies.

The two spoke Friday, but McCarty didn’t mention that he was going to the show. On Saturday, Lovio saw his name on a list of people who were unaccounted for being circulated online. McCarty didn’t return her calls.

“I just feel kind of hollowed out. I just really love him and just can’t imagine — I’m just kind of scared,” she said.

Michela Gregory, among the missing Saturday afternoon as well, is a student at San Francisco State University studying child development, while holding a job at Urban Outfitters on Fillmore Street in San Francisco.

She went to Friday’s show with her boyfriend, Alex Vega, something the two often do together, according to her parents.

“I’m in shock,” said her father, David Gregory, who was in Oakland on Saturday to try to learn the whereabouts of his daughter at the sheriff’s substation where the Red Cross was set up. “I’m hoping for a miracle.”

Pete Wadsworth, 38, was another who couldn’t be located Saturday, according to friends. He was among a dozen or so people who lived at the burned-out arts space, known as the Ghost Ship.

“He was like my big brother. He took very good care of me. He was a sweetheart,” said Tammy Tasoff, a 29-year-old student at UCSF.

Wadsworth was the entrepreneurial type, Tasoff said, and his latest venture was trying to start a cannabis salsa company. He previously worked with drones.

Since moving from Boston about three years ago, Wadsworth had taken an interest in art, making sculptures at the warehouse, Tasoff said.

Vanessa Plotkin, a third-year sociology student at UC Berkeley, went with her roommate to downtown Oakland and likely stopped at the rave, too, said family members who had been texting her about her plans to go to a party and hadn’t heard from her since 11 p.m. Friday.

“We’re beside ourselves,” said Gary Plotkin on Saturday night from their home in Lakehood (Los Angeles County). “This is just like a nightmare. I can’t believe this.”

Alex Ghassan was also unaccounted for, according to his friend Vikram Babu. The noted video and music producer, who has recently done work for KQED and the Oakland Museum, is considered a driving force in Oakland’s arts scene.

“He would attend parties like this because that’s how you network as a creative,” said Babu, reached by phone late Saturday afternoon. “That’s how you find interesting people who are sticking it out here despite expensive housing and sky-high rent.”

Much of Ghassan’s work reflects upon the economic and artistic struggles of the black community. He has come to know many longtime Oakland residents, Babu said, and has supported those trying to preserve the city’s culture and diversity amid gentrification, like several at Saturday’s show.

“These were musicians and artists trying to give more meaning to their life than what this economic climate has designed for them,” Babu said. “It’s a small creative community here.”

Chronicle staff writers Erin Allday and Rachel Swan contributed to this report.
A trip to the liquor store at the right moment. Working the door when the flames burst out. Running blindly through billowing smoke and stumbling out just in time.

A combination of pure luck, quick action and panic spared the lives of dozens of those who went to what was supposed to be a happy music party in Oakland on Friday night but turned into a fiery scene of agony and chaos.

The worst spot to be was on the second floor of the Ghost Ship warehouse-turned-artists-enclave at 1305 31st Ave. — that’s where many people were when the flames erupted. The single-file staircase to get downstairs, survivors said, was a steep ramp with pegs sticking out as makeshift footholds that turned 90 degrees into a series of rickety wooden stairs.

There were no sprinklers in the building, officials said, and there were no permits for any use other than a warehouse.

Adrian Lee, 25, was about 10 feet from the staircase on the second floor, sitting on a bed with two friends, when the flames broke out. “We didn’t see much smoke,” he said. “It was just a plastic-ey, toxic, chemical-type smell.”
They went down the stairs single file, with one of Lee’s friends in front of him and another behind. Halfway down, the smoke obscured everything, Lee said.

“People started panicking,” he said. “But for the first half, people didn’t know what was going on. It didn’t seem like anything drastic had happened yet.”

As they got to the front door, one of two ways out of the building, several people were yelling, “The entrance is over here!”

Lee and the friend who was in front got out, but the other friend was still unaccounted for Saturday. “We were all coming out together,” Lee said. “We didn’t see him come out with us.”

Al Garcia, who owns a neighboring business, said two teenage boys huddled in his doorway after fleeing the scene, crying.

“They said they couldn’t see anything — it was pitch-black,” Garcia said. “They said they were the last two to get out. The only reason they got out was they heard voices and followed them.”

Alastair Boone, 22, had just stepped outside the party into a storage lot with friends when the fire started.

A voice inside yelled, “Fire!” and it was quickly followed by screams, Boone said.

She and her friends had a choice. They could either run back inside the building and through the first floor to get out, or squeeze their way through a gate that separated the lot from the street. They chose the gate opening.

“We sort of reasoned that nobody was stuck because there weren’t that many people,” Boone said. “It’s so sad to think that as we were squeezing through the gate, there were people stuck upstairs.”

Robert Klyce, 26, who lives in another Oakland artists warehouse and knew some people in the Ghost Ship, rushed to the fire scene at 1:30 a.m. and found a friend among 20 others who narrowly escaped. That friend had a horrifying story to tell.

The young man, who lived in the building, was trying to escape the flames with another person when his companion tripped. He tried to help his companion up, but left him when the smoke thickened and his own clothes began to catch fire. That man almost certainly perished, Klyce said.

An organizer of the event, who gave his name only as Jon, said he had been working at the door when the blaze erupted. The only reason he got out was that he was at the exit, he said.

“I watched that building burn for five hours,” he said. Too shaken to speak further as he huddled with musician friends to mourn, he called the fire “a tragedy, a loss of vibrant musicians and artists.”

Seung Y. Lee, 24, got to the party at 11:09 p.m. — about 15 minutes before the fire began. He went up the rickety stairs and twisted his ankle on wooden pallets that formed some of the staircase.

The second floor, he said, was “the social hub” of the evening. “That’s where it was happening.” It looked fun, with people bobbing and swaying to the electronic dance music, he said, so he went out to buy some liquor to bring back to the scene.

A woman cries while talking on her phone near the fire site. Nine bodies were found, and more than a dozen others were still unaccounted for late Saturday.
He walked two blocks, bought the drinks — no alcohol was being served inside, attendees said — and when he returned, flames and smoke were shooting out the back of the second floor. He dialed 911 at 11:24 p.m.

“The front windows were just billowing thick, black smoke at such a furious pace,” Seung Lee said. Others said they had little idea how many people remained inside the building they had escaped.

“The building itself was an art piece. The walls were completely covered with makeshift pieces of wood, so finding the staircase if you’d never been there before was difficult because they had built it into the wall in a certain way,” said Laura Hobbs, 24, who went to the party with five friends.

“I can’t imagine how long it’d take 40 people to get out,” she said, “even in a calm situation.”

She had joined Seung Lee on the liquor run and returned to find the building in flames. A woman was on her knees, wailing. Another had apparently broken her ankle as she escaped.

But mostly everyone was quiet, talking among themselves as they called and texted their friends. The idea that at least 30 people were dead didn’t immediately sink in. Some people in the gathered crowd were joking about the art burning without realizing how many people were trapped on the second floor.

Some people may have had their lives saved by a typo.

One man who had planned to attend Friday’s show, who asked that his name not be used, said friends he intended to meet there didn’t make it because of a mapping error on a Facebook listing. The map on the Facebook event page marked the site on 31st Street instead of 31st Avenue, sending the friends to the wrong place.

“There’s a bunch of people who didn’t show,” he said. “There could have been a lot more casualties.”

*Chronicle staff writers Otis Taylor, Kurtis Alexander, Rachel Swan and Erin Allday contributed to this report.*