

Family of pier victim files suit



By Gloria Campisi
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Debra White Roberts was running late that night.

She had just stepped onto Pier 34 to meet her sister, DeAnn White, and some friends at Club Heat to celebrate her sister's upcoming birthday.

Suddenly, the pier collapsed into the Delaware River, sending dozens of people into the water. Hours later, DeAnn's body was pulled from the rubble in the water. The baby of the family, DeAnn lived in Germantown and had worked for the New Jersey State Aquarium in Camden.

The memories of the May 18 tragedy were still raw yesterday as Roberts and DeAnn's parents, Clyde Toole and Blanche White Toole, filed a wrongful-death suit against the club's owners, the owner of the pier and an engineering firm that had inspected the pier before it collapsed.

The disaster claimed the life of DeAnn White and two of her colleagues from the aquarium. More than two dozen others were injured.

A Philadelphia grand jury is investigating the collapse.

The lawsuit contends carelessness and negligence led to White's death.

It names the nightclub's owners, Eli Karetny and Dorrance "DoDo" Hamilton; their corporation, HMS Ventures; pier owner Michael Asbell and his company; and Commerce Construction Corp., a marine engineering firm that examined cracks in the pier May 15 and the morning of the collapse.

Efforts by the Daily News yesterday to reach Karetny, Asbell and Terry Zettle, president of the marine firm, were unsuccessful.

Commerce has said it warned the owners the pier was in "imminent danger" of collapse, but Karetny has denied receiving such a warning.

"This lawsuit will sort out who knew what and when they knew it," said the White family's lawyer, [Tom Kline](#).

Kline, the attorney who won a huge settlement recently on behalf of a 7-year-old boy whose right foot was severed in a SEPTA escalator, said the family wants answers and accountability.

"This tragedy should never have happened," Kline said. "This is a family who's committed to finding the truth and seeking justice."

The suit did not set a damage amount above a \$50,000 figure required to file such an action.

Earlier this month, the father of another victim, Jean Marie Ferraro, filed suit, for similar reasons. Others who survived the pier collapse also have filed suit.

In addition to White, 25, and Ferraro, 27, Monica Kristina Rodriguez, 21, was also killed. Rodriguez was the aquarium's new special-events coordinator. It was her first day on the job.

Kline said White was a graduate of Little Flower High School and Temple University School of Journalism and had written for the Philadelphia Tribune before taking the aquarium job last fall.