

Father sues over death in Pier 34 collapse

His daughter was one of three nightclub patrons who died May 18. He is suing the club owners and an inspection firm.

The Philadelphia Inquirer

By Linda Loyd
Inquirer Staff Writer
JULY 4, 2000

The father of a woman who died in the collapse of Pier 34 has filed a lawsuit against the nightclub owners and the construction company that inspected the pier on the day it fell into the Delaware River.

John Ferraro, of Cherry Hill, filed a wrongful-death suit on behalf of his daughter, Jean Marie Ferraro, 27, who went to the Heat nightclub on May 18 with five coworkers from the New Jersey State Aquarium to celebrate a friend's birthday. They were sipping drinks at the club when the floor collapsed and dropped more than three dozen people into the river. Ferraro and two coworkers perished.

John Ferraro alleges that carelessness and negligence of the pier and club owners, and of the construction company that inspected the pier, caused his daughter physical and mental anguish, deprived her of future earnings and life's pleasures - and killed her.

The suit, filed June 26 in Philadelphia Common Pleas Court, is the first wrongful-death suit filed by the estate of one of the young women who died. Four other lawsuits have been filed by survivors of the accident.

In response to the deadly collapse of Pier 34, Mayor Street had asked all pier owners to submit underwater structural assessments to the city by Friday. City officials said there are approximately 180 piers along the city's waterfront.

Deputy Commissioner David J. Perri of the city Department of Licenses and Inspections said yesterday he was sorting through the assessments and did not know the findings, or if all pier owners had complied.

The safety of the pier is a key point in John Ferraro's suit.

Reached at his home yesterday, Ferraro said that his daughter, who had worked at the aquarium for eight years, recently had been promoted to marketing manager. Ferraro said his daughter began as a part-time employee while a student at Camden County College. After graduating from the University of West Virginia, Ferraro returned full time to the aquarium and later became special-events coordinator in the marketing department.

"After her boss left, she became the marketing manager," her father said. "She loved the aquarium."

The night that Jean Ferraro and her coworkers visited the Heat nightclub on Columbus Boulevard, four of the six young women traveled in his daughter's car, John Ferraro said. Among them were DeAnn White, 26, of Germantown, and Monica Rodriguez, 21, of Cherry Hill, who also died that night.

Ferraro's lawsuit names the Heat nightclub owners, Eli Karetny and Dorrance "Dodo" Hamilton, and their corporation, HMS Ventures Inc. Ferraro is also suing pier owner Michael Asbell and his company and Commerce Construction Corp., a marine construction company that examined cracks on the outer end of the pier on May 15 and again on May 18, the morning of the collapse.

The lawsuit alleges that Commerce Construction failed to sufficiently inspect the pier to discover the structurally dangerous conditions, failed to instruct the club and pier owners not to open for business, and failed to notify proper city authorities that it was unsafe for the pier to remain open to the public.

According to the lawsuit, the construction company sent "untrained, inadequate employees" to inspect the pier, and the Commerce workers "failed to make adequate recommendations" and "provide recommendations in writing" prior to the collapse.

The lawsuit also alleges the pier and club owners "recklessly filled in holes in the pier with concrete in an attempt to cover up the hazard" and kept the pier "open for money" in order to save "costs of repairing it." The suit seeks unspecified punitive damages.

Commerce, which was closed yesterday for the July Fourth holiday, has said the company warned Karetny and Asbell of imminent danger just hours before the collapse. Karetny, through his lawyer, has said he was given no such warning. Neither Karetny nor Asbell could be reached yesterday.