



## They all got out alive

**There was a concert. There were pyrotechnics. There was a fire. But there was one big difference.**

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BURNSVILLE, Minn. -- With bratwurst sizzling on the grill, Leinenkugel beer chilling in the fridge and a patch of gooseberries ripening out back, Linda Chlecq and Larry Lysaght are happy here in their corner of Minnesota.

"I grew up in a shanty, very poor," Chlecq said last week, recalling the sage brush and rugged South Dakota ranch land of her childhood. "This house is my dream," she said as she picked rhubarb in the back yard.

Her husband's dream sits in the garage, gleaming. It's a 1993 Anniversary Edition Harley-Davidson Wide Glide. He has dubbed it "Dolly."

Just three years ago, Lysaght was partially paralyzed with Guillain-Barre, a neurological disorder. Today he is walking. And he is looking ahead, longing to bomb down the back roads with Linda and Dolly -- past the jagged mountains, hot springs and red canyons of Wyoming.

But those dreams were nearly dashed earlier this year when the couple headed 20 minutes north to a nightclub in Minneapolis.

For Rhode Islanders still reeling from the state's deadliest fire, the details are eerily familiar: a rock band set off pyrotechnics inside the nightclub. The fireworks ignited the ceiling and the flames rolled rapidly to the back of the club, followed by thick black smoke. At first, some patrons thought the flames were part of the show. Others sat transfixed. Many headed out the door they'd come in.

But the outcome could not have been more different.

On Feb. 20, when the band Great White began its show with a burst of pyrotechnics at The Station nightclub in West Warwick, the fire that followed killed 100 people and injured more than 200.

On Feb. 17 -- just three days earlier -- when the band Jet City Fix concluded its show with a burst of pyrotechnics at The Fine Line Music Cafe in Minneapolis, no one died. No one was even injured. Patrons stood outside as a staff member returned their coats.

More than four months later, many of those who were in The Station fire are still unable to work, facing pain and anguish, physical therapy, counseling and burn treatments.

But those who were in The Fine Line Cafe when the fire broke out are making plans for the future, dealing with daily hassles and savoring simple pleasures -- continuing with the normal lives that Rhode Island victims have lost.

WHY DID the people at The Fine Line emerge unscathed?

One of the main factors, according to fire officials, was that, unlike The Station, The Fine Line had sprinklers. Minneapolis Fire Marshal Thomas M. Deegan said the flames triggered seven sprinkler heads in the club; while that didn't put the fire out, it did contain the blaze.

"[The fire] had nowhere to go because everything was wet down by the sprinkler heads that tripped," Deegan said. "Sprinklers played a huge role."

"Fire sprinklers save lives," said Kristi Rollwagen, spokeswoman for the Minneapolis Fire Department. "They really do."

But some patrons said they got out before the sprinklers went off, and fire officials agreed that other factors were at play.

For example, while The Station had highly flammable polyurethane packing foam on its ceiling and walls as soundproofing, The Fine Line's ceiling was covered with a flame-retardant cellulose product that looks like dried oatmeal. Fire officials say that when the pyrotechnics hit the ceiling, flames spread and fed on years of dust and grime. But it didn't burn with the ferocity of The Station's cheap packing foam, which has been compared to solid gasoline.

While survivors of The Station fire talk about how hard it was to find or use exits, The Fine Line had more than the required number of exits. All four were unobstructed and clearly marked, fire officials said.

While The Station was packed with more than 350 people -- close to or above maximum capacity depending on which calculations are used -- about 135 people were in The Fine Line, well below its legal capacity of 720, fire officials said.

Also, while The Station was made of wood, The Fine Line is in a century-old warehouse with brick walls and a metal roof installed in 1987 renovations.

Preparation was another factor.

Minneapolis has promoted fire safety among the nightclubs that dot the city's Warehouse District. Fire and police officials hold monthly meetings with business owners as part of the Downtown Entertainment Task Force, reviewing topics ranging from detecting fake IDs to evacuating burning buildings.

And at The Fine Line, workers were ready to respond. The fire broke out one day after 21 people died in a stampede at a Chicago nightclub. Reacting to that tragedy, staff members held an informal meeting just hours before the show, discussing how to handle an emergency. Afterward, patrons praised members of the staff, saying they acted quickly -- squirting the flames with a fire extinguisher and calmly directing people to the exits.

In the end, the Minneapolis club underscores what the West Warwick club lacked. The Station fire would not have been nearly as disastrous if the club had adopted some of the basic safety measures found at The Fine Line.

BUT THAT'S NOT to say The Fine Line was immune from disaster that night.

The fire broke out shortly after 7 on a Monday night when Jet City Fix, a little-known Seattle band, was wrapping up its opening set. The main attraction that night was guitarist Link Wray, a 74-year-old founding father of heavy metal and punk rock. And the Vibro Champs, a Minneapolis-based rockabilly band, was scheduled to follow Wray.

So things might not have turned out so well if the fire had begun later in the night, Vibro Champs lead singer Dave Wolfe said.

"The brass tacks are that 100 to 200 more people were coming to the show," Wolfe said. "No one knew who the opening band was, and no one showed up. But if they did [the pyrotechnics] at the end of the night when there were another 100 to 150 people in there, it could have totally turned out differently."

Dario Anselmo, owner of The Fine Line, said his staff took note of The Station death toll.

"It could have been us, in a different way," he said. "Maybe 100 people wouldn't have died, but there could have been tragedies, there could have been deaths -- if not for the sprinklers, if not for the staff, if not for a good dose of luck. We are humbled by that."

"It is a fine line," said Kim King, the club's music director. "With one minor turn of events, it could have been devastating. Don't think we don't think about it all the time. We mention how lucky we are."

"We are very, very lucky," agreed Rollwagen, the fire department spokeswoman. But she emphasized that her definition of luck involves planning and effort: "It's when hard work meets opportunity. I'm a hockey mom, and that's what the coach says."

CERTAINLY, the Minnesota case included some of the same problems that played a role in the Rhode Island catastrophe.

As in the West Warwick blaze, the Minneapolis fire involved a dispute over whether the band had permission to set off the pyrotechnics.

Anselmo said members of Jet City Fix say they told the club's sound technician that they planned to use pyrotechnics. But he said managers at The Fine Line never allow pyrotechnics and never gave Jet City Fix permission. In any case, he said, the band never received the required permits.

In the future, Anselmo said he will add contract language forbidding bands from using pyrotechnics in the club.

After The Station catastrophe, fire inspectors in Rhode Island talked about being hamstrung by staffing shortages, budget cuts and convoluted codes. Minnesota officials cite similar problems.

Deegan said Minnesota cut aid to cities this year because it faced a \$4.5-million state deficit; Minneapolis, in turn, slashed its budget. As a result, Deegan's office was cut from 11 to 8 positions -- losing one inspector and two public educators.

So now Minneapolis has 12,000 inspectable businesses but just four fire inspectors, Deegan said. "Part of the struggle is when budget cuts come, the first thing to go is prevention and education," he said. "That's true across the country."

Minnesota's fire safety laws are not all that different from Rhode Island's. And in both states, the difficult part is applying the law to old buildings.

In Minneapolis, the building had sprinklers before The Fine Line opened, and the club was not allowed to reduce that level of fire protection, Deegan said. In fact, more extensive sprinkler coverage was required as part of the "change of use," he said.

In West Warwick, state and local officials at first said sprinklers weren't required in The Station because of the "grandfather clause" exempting older buildings. But the state building code commissioner later said that when there was a change of use -- from restaurant to nightclub -- modern building codes should have applied, which would have meant restricting the club's size or requiring the installation of sprinklers.

LINDA CHLECQ bought the Link Wray tickets for her husband as a Valentine's Day present.

Larry Lysaght's love of the music was evident last week when he got down on his knees to search for his autographed Link Wray album. The old turntable wasn't working, but the LP's value was clear as he slid it from its sleeve, touching only the middle hole and edge of the album with his thumb and middle finger.

"He's just so cool," Lysaght said of Wray. "He's a one-lunged Korean War vet who's tough as nails, and that man can play the guitar. Without Link Wray, there would have been no Jimi Hendrix, no heavy metal, no Metallica, no White Snake or Great White."

At The Fine Line, Lysaght and Chlecq sat in the mezzanine area overlooking the stage. He ordered an O'Doul's. She ordered a Pepsi.

The club's general manager, Robert Colasanti, said Jet City Fix's drummer triggered the pyrotechnics on the last drum beat of their last song. One of the bursts shot straight up into the 26-foot-high ceiling, and the other took off at an angle.

The stray shot landed 78 feet away, above the mezzanine bar -- but not before grazing the bass player and setting his hair on fire, Colasanti said. A bandmate doused the bass player's hair with a Leinenkugel beer, he said.

Lysaght said he realized that something was wrong when he saw the guitar player looking up at the ceiling. Chlecq said her husband grabbed her arm, stood her up and said, "We have to get out of here -- the place is on fire."

Chlecq saw the flames, too. "Pyro was new to me -- I thought maybe this is part of the show," she said. "I was looking at the fire, but it didn't register. Your brain doesn't get it. If we had been drinking, it would have been worse. We got it before other people did."

Chlecq recalled seeing a staff member climb into the rafters and shoot a fire extinguisher at the flames while firmly but calmly telling people to leave. She thought it was a woman, but Colisanti said it was club operations manager George Milberg, who has long hair.

"The staff handled it really well," she said. Aside from sprinklers, she said, "the other thing that really made a difference was voices saying, 'It's going to be OK, just take your time, let's do this safely.' Being social animals, we respond to that."

There wasn't a big panic, Lysaght said. It might have been different, he said, had the club been packed or if the fire was roaring, as it was at The Station.

But in general, Minnesotans are not an excitable people, Lysaght said, citing a scene from Garrison Keillor's "Lake Wobegon Days" in which Norway's King Olaf visits and the people get so excited they have to sit down.

As she turned to leave The Fine Line, Chlecq said she instinctively headed toward the front door. "I wouldn't have known to go anywhere else," she said. "I hadn't been there before, and that's the way I came in."

By the time they got down the stairs, the whole ceiling was on fire, Chlecq said. "You could feel the heat on the back of your neck," she said.

SITTING NEARBY on the mezzanine were Timothy C. Kane, Brenda Lee Langton and their daughter, Celina. The couple owns Cafe Brenda, two doors down from The Fine Line. It's a vegetarian and seafood restaurant that serves free-range chicken and "mock duck" tacos.

Kane, 50, is a jazz musician. His daughter, 12, is taking piano and violin lessons. He thought she'd enjoy seeing Link Wray.

When the pyrotechnics went off with a bang, Kane was surprised. He thought that the display was "inordinately out of scale" for the club. "It seemed like a dumb thing to do," he said.

Kane didn't notice anything wrong at first, but then the singer gestured upward.

Kane offered a chilling description of the blaze: "The fire was on the ceiling, seeking oxygen, billowing, almost like a hallucination, spreading out, blue and colored, looking for fuel. I was watching it creep out from its source. It was a living thing, looking to consume."

And it was coming for his daughter.

The family jumped up, a stool fell over, they stepped over the stool. "I was bringing my daughter, so if I sense any danger, I'm out," said Langton, 46. "I think I was one of the first ones to move." But not everyone was rushing out, she said.

"People were dumbstruck," Kane said. He remembered one man standing near the mezzanine stairs, putting on his jacket, looking back at the stage. "I had to physically move him out of the way," he said.

STEVEN R. WOLF, a freelance photographer, was at The Fine Line to take shots of Link Wray and the Vibro Champs. He said he was hanging out at the back of the club, near the merchandise table. He started chatting with a Jet City Fix roadie who told him: "At the end of this song, there's pyro." They headed up to the mezzanine to get a better view.

After taking shots of the pyrotechnics, Wolf went back downstairs, retrieving the Summit beer he'd left on the merchandise table. He said he didn't realize anything was amiss until people starting heading for the exits. "We were pressed together and I looked up and saw the flames overhead," he said. He snapped a few more shots and then he was out the door.

Wolf, 33, is best friends with Dave Wolfe, 35, lead singer for the Vibro Champs. Because their last names sound the same, people ask if they're brothers, but they're not related.

Wolfe was up in the mezzanine when the pyrotechnics went off. He said he watched a thin line of flame spread down a crossbeam. "It looked like a vintage oven," he said. "It looked like someone had just turned on the gas."

Wolfe heard staff members urging people to leave and saw "fire globs" falling from the ceiling. He headed down the stairs and as he went out the front door, he touched the back of his head. "It was hot enough to put my hand back there to make sure it wasn't singed," he said.

When people got outside, it was cold. But coat-checker Paul Belfour grabbed everyone's jackets and returned them, Anselmo said.

A staff member also returned Lysaght's driver's license, which he'd turned in at the door. "That was Minnesota nice," Chlecq said.

As firefighters and television crews arrived, some people in the crowd were laughing. The media coverage reflected the light-hearted tone -- a tone that's unthinkable regarding The Station fire. A Feb. 18 story in the Minneapolis Star Tribune began this way: "The Fine Line Music Cafe in downtown Minneapolis would have been smokin' Monday with the guitar wailing of Link Wray, but the warm-up band got things hot a little early."

The response of state government also differed sharply.

In Rhode Island, the House and Senate have voted for fire-safety legislation that would eliminate the "grandfather" exemption from modern fire codes, require more sprinklers, ban most indoor pyrotechnics and give fire inspectors additional powers. The bills are expected to become law soon.

In Minnesota, a state legislator did introduce a bill in response to the Minneapolis and Rhode Island fires. The state now requires sprinklers in places of assembly larger than 5,000 square feet; the bill would have lowered that threshold to 3,500 square feet. But the legislator later withdrew the proposal, Deegan said.

On the night of The Fine Line fire, the Vibro Champs ended up going to a bar down the street to have some drinks and talk over the turn of events.

Wolfe was upset that he hadn't been able to play with Wray, his hero. But no one had died, so the main concern was monetary. With no insurance, the band had lost at least \$3,000 in equipment, and they ended up canceling a show. "I live hand to hand-to-mouth," he said, adding that he just sold three guitars to make a mortgage payment.

To be sure, the episode gave Wolfe and Wolf some notoriety. "It gave the Vibro Champs another 15 minutes," Wolfe cracked. Band members were interviewed by local television stations and National Public Radio, and Wolf's photos appeared on 60 Minutes II and in the Star Tribune.

But other than that, Wolfe said, "Nothing much has changed. We've been going through life, doing our thing."

IN THE FIVE MONTHS since the fire, the Vibro Champs have recorded a new CD.

In May, Kane went to New York City for his best friend's wedding. And on June 6, he watched his daughter graduate from sixth grade.

In Burnsville, the past five months have been "great" for Lysaght and Chlecq. "We just do the suburban family thing," Chlecq said. "Gardening, being with the kids, going to work."

Their lives are as full as their home, which teems with two teenage children, three cats, a rottweiler and an African gray parrot named Jenny. The bird is moody but talkative. She can cluck like a chicken, bark like a dog and say "supper" in Lysaght's deep voice. Also, their 16-year-old daughter, Meghan, has taught Jenny a new phrase, which is unprintable.

Lysaght, 59, and Chlecq, 53, are content. Both are social workers who find meaning in their jobs. And they value each other. They met at a conference. He first noticed her when she tripped over a chair. And it wasn't long before he fell for her.

"I found my soul mate," she said.

THOSE WHO ESCAPED from The Fine Line say they didn't fully realize how lucky they were -- or how much they could have lost -- until they heard about The Station.

Chlecq clipped newspaper articles about the fire. It was an interesting story, an adventure, a scrapbook memory. But it wasn't life changing or traumatic. At first, she didn't even bother to tell co-workers.

"I was more traumatized by Rhode Island than by what we went through," Chlecq said. "Then it dawned on me what could have happened. Then it got scary."

Lysaght said, "We watched the Rhode Island thing on the news for days. You know how fortunate you are."

Wolfe said he cried when he saw The Station fire footage on television. "It was just shock and awe," he said. "I was flipping channels and I saw it and just sat there slack-jawed. I couldn't believe it happened three days after what happened here."

"It could have been us," Wolf said.

THE FINE LINE is now a construction site. Last week, the club smelled of sawdust as workers milled amid scaffolding, lumber and ladders.

At first, Anselmo estimated the damage at \$100,000 and vowed to reopen in a month. But in the end, he said, a band that was paid \$150 caused more than \$1.5 million in damage, and now the club is scrambling to reopen by July 9.

"It's taking longer than we thought," Anselmo said. "If the fire doesn't burn you down, the water will flood you out." Between the fire hoses and sprinklers, 10,000 gallons were pumped into the club, he said.

Insurance will cover about 90 percent of the costs, but Anselmo expects to lose up to \$150,000. "We can open for business and hopefully make money," he said. But, he added, "We do want consequences for the band."

Deegan said, "We have a year. We are still evaluating whether to charge anyone." But, he added, "At the end of the day, who got hurt? Nobody. Who lost a life? Nobody. It would be a petty misdemeanor, with a \$1,000 fine."

In Rhode Island, a grand jury has been investigating The Station fire. No one has been charged with any crimes so far.

The Fine Line is planning a July 24 "grand reopening" that will raise money for one of The Station fire funds, Anselmo said. Employees plan to donate half of their tips, and the club will match that total. Musicians also will be asked to contribute to the cause.

"Offer our best wishes to the people there," Anselmo said. "We feel like sister clubs or sister cities because of that experience."

Anselmo said The Fine Line will be even safer when it reopens. He said the club will have more emergency lights, the side door will be wider, and the ceiling will be covered with hard-surfaced, flame-retardant acoustical tiles.

And so, in Minneapolis, hammers are pounding and circular saws whirring, heralding new life at The Fine Line.

But in West Warwick the site of The Station is barren and still. The club's charred remains are gone. The land is filled and leveled. Yesterday, American flags and bouquets of flowers dotted the site, paying silent tribute, while a series of small purple candles formed the shape of a heart and the number of the dead: 100.

Look back at coverage of The Station fire and its aftermath, view a memorial to its victims, photo slideshows and more, at:

<http://projo.com/extra/2003/stationfire/>

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Online at:

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