

METPRO

Reporting Test

Class of 2017-18

NAME _____

DATE _____

Instructions:

Assume the following four stories contain feeds from reporters in the field. Your job is to write as quickly as possible the best stories you can. There is no time limit, but bear in mind that in an actual situation each story would be posted immediately to the Web, so speed and accuracy are important.

Use a separate sheet for each story and analysis. For each story, please consider the following:

- What is the most important news of the day? Write the story, then tell us why you constructed it that way.
- Note any discrepancies, factual errors and legal or ethical issues.
- What further reporting, if any, do you think is needed?

These stories are fictitious, created only for this test. The sources quoted and the events presented should not be taken as real.

Story 1, Friday night

CLEAR LAKE -- It was supposed to have been a fun night for Lesley Cummings who was with three friends Friday night to celebrate her 21st birthday at The Warehouse on the Lake, the aging nightclub that has somehow managed to elude the massive redevelopment that is occurring at the city's waterfront.

Lesley and her friends were among a standing-room-only crowd that turned out to enjoy the music of the Daisy Chain Conspiracy, a local alternative rock band that was being featured at The Warehouse and was Lesley's favorite band.

At approximately 11 p.m., Alexi Baxter, the lead singer of the band, was in the midst of one of Cummings' favorite songs when someone on stage allegedly set off a pyrotechnic display behind the band, according to witnesses.

Baxter later said the band had permission from The Warehouse management to use the pyrotechnic show.

Fire officials at the scene surmised that flames from the fireworks must have ignited a stage curtain, then quickly spread to the acoustic tile lining nearby walls to soundproof the club.

At first the crowd thought the fire was part of the show, Theodore Bradley, 25, a witness, said. But the flammable tile burned quickly, the Clear Lake resident said, sending coils of thick black smoke through the club, and panic ensued. The club has approximately four exits, and Bradley said he grabbed his girlfriend and headed toward one of them. But they were rebuffed by crowds of panicky patrons who were also trying to escape. Theodore said that in the eerie, smoky darkness of the club, he and his girlfriend managed to find another exit and exited just as flames engulfed the entire club.

"It was mass chaos," he said, his face blackened by soot. "I've never seen anything like it."

More than 120 firefighters have turned out to battle the conflagration, which is sending flames so high into the night sky that the blaze can be seen for miles around. Word has quickly spread through the community that something terrible is happening at The Warehouse. Crowds of onlookers are gathering near the club, impeding fire trucks arriving at the scene to help battle the blaze.

As of press time, 20 people are confirmed dead, with the casualty list expected to grow, Fire Chief William R. Williams said.

Fire rescue teams are trying to reach fire victims but are being hampered by fierce flames that have engulfed the club. "We can hear screams coming from just past the main entrance, but we can't reach them," a weary firefighter says. "It's horrible." Among the missing was Todd Splanghetti, drummer for the Daisy Chain Conspiracy, Baxter said.

Scores of wounded victims were being rushed to area hospitals, Fire Chief Williams said.

Wilson Sutley, the owner of The Warehouse on the Lake, said in a telephone interview that the band definitely did not have permission to put on a pyrotechnics show. "It never came up," he said. "They never asked." He referred further questions to his attorney.

Joey de Stepheno, 22, a witness to the fire, said he was ejected from the club for rowdy behavior just before the fire broke out. "People were screaming as they stampeded from the club," he said. "I seen one girl fall and people just like trampled all over her. It was terrible."

de Stepheno said he had been trying to sneak back into the club, but then the mishap occurred. "It's the best thing that ever happened to me," he said about being kicked out of the club.

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Story 2, Saturday morning

CLEAR LAKE -- "The bodies were stacked like cord wood by the main entrance," an exhausted Fire Chief William R. Williams says.

Dawn is breaking Saturday over Clear Lake, a pale, smoky sunlight sparkling off the lake. The waterfront has yet to begin stirring, but there is a lot of activity at The Warehouse by the Lake nightclub, which burned practically to the ground late Friday night. The block on which the burned building sits has been cordoned off, with grim-faced police officers keeping the public at bay as fire investigators continue their fire investigation.

This much is known, according to fire investigators: The fire began at approximately 11 p.m. as the alt rock band the Daisy Chain Conspiracy was winding up its first set. Someone, possibly band manager Rudolph St. James, lit a cluster of pinwheel fans filled with sparklers on the stage behind the band. The so-called gerbs create a fountain of sparks that can last anywhere from 15 to 60 seconds, according to pyrotechnics experts.

Fire investigators surmise that sparks from the pyrotechnic show first ignited a nearby curtain. Flames then raced up to the ceiling and along the wall behind the stage which was covered with combustible foam soundproofing material. It was only a matter of minutes before the nightclub was fully engulfed in fire, fire investigators say. Despite a city ordinance, there were no fire sprinklers in the club. Williams, the fire chief said the club was exempted from the ordinance because it was built in the 1950s, long before sprinklers were required, and was granted a variance.

Widespread panic spread through the capacity crowd of an estimated 200 in the nightclub within seconds. Most stampeded toward the main entrance, even though there were three other fire exits. An anonymous caller claimed that two of those exits were chained shut to prevent anyone from sneaking into the club. Wilson Sutley, owner of the nightclub, this morning vehemently denied that any exits were locked. "That would be stupid and unlawful," he said. Sutley refused to answer further questions on advice of his attorney.

Video of the fire, taken by a freelance videographer and broadcast repeatedly across a horrified nation, show patrons on fire, fleeing from the inferno. Garry Grand, the videographer, says his tape also shows people heroically helping each other and smashing windows with bare fists, not caring about injuries to themselves.

Meanwhile, the death toll from the mishap has risen to 105, making it among the most deadly nightclub fires in U.S. history but far short of the record of 492 deaths at the Coconut Grove in Boston on Nov. 28, 1952.

More than 150 persons were treated at various area hospitals, the bulk of them at Clear Lake Memorial Hospital, where at least five are in very critical condition, authorities say.

"In this day and age, with all the fire regulations we have, it's inconceivable that a tragedy like this can happen," Mayor Christina Michaels says. "I promise the citizens of Clear Lake that we will get to the bottom of this horrendous incident and bring to justice the person or persons responsible." Michaels is up for reelection this year.

Among the confirmed dead is Todd Splanghetti, drummer for the Daisy Chain Conspiracy. "The band wishes to express its sincerest condolences to Todd's extended family and to all the families of all the victims of this tragedy," the band said in a press release.

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Story 3, Sunday

CLEAR LAKE -- In an exclusive interview Sunday, the lead singer for the band that was playing at The Warehouse on the Lake that burned to the ground late Friday night squarely laid the blame for the fire on the owner of the aging nightclub.

"That building was substandard in so many ways," says Alexi Baxter of the Daisy Chain Conspiracy, a popular local band. Speaking from Clear Lake Memorial Hospital where he was visiting some of the victims from the fire tragedy, Lexi said the band received assurances from the nightclub management that their planned pyrotechnics show would be OK and that the required fire permits would be obtained from the proper city authorities.

But no permits were ever sought or received. "They duped us. Not only did they not get the fire permits, there were no fire sprinklers, no fire extinguishers, no nothing," an obviously angry Lexi says.

Lexi expressed deep sorrow for those who perished in the conflagration. "I'm from Clear Lake, man. So are the other members of the band. I know a lot of the people that perished in this totally unnecessary tragedy. They were our fans, our friends. "

Among the confirmed dead was Todd Splanghetti, the band's drummer.

Lexi recalls the pyrotechnics being set off by band manager Rudy St. John. He says he remembers that he was in the middle of a song when he noticed the curtain behind the stage catching fire. He says Splanghetti tried to douse the flames with a bottle of water but must've quickly realized that the fire was quickly getting out of control. He remembers Splanghetti shouting "Fire!" That's when chaos broke out in the club. "I managed to get the hell out of there," Lexi says. "I thought for sure the other band members did too. But Todd didn't. He died a hero."

Wilson Sutley, the owner of the Warehouse night club, denied any responsibility for the fire, saying, "The band set off the fireworks that caused the fire. Had I known they were going to do something that reckless and stupid, I never would've let them go on stage."

Meanwhile, the Coroner's Office officially set the death toll at 105 persons, making The Warehouse fire one of the deadliest in U.S. history. Bodies of the victims are being warehoused in an abandoned building in the waterfront district till they are positively identified.

A makeshift memorial has appeared near the charred remains of the nightclub which was totally destroyed in Friday night's fire. Hundreds of flower bouquets, hand-painted signs, stuffed animals and other personal items are being brought to the scene. Parents and friends of those still listed as missing say they are losing hope that their loved ones are among the survivors.

A scuffle broke out at the memorial Sunday morning as tempers flared among anxious parents. A man who wanted to search the destroyed nightclub for any signs of his missing daughter, who worked there as a part-time waitress, was arrested by police as he tried to get past the still-cordoned-off scene. "All I wanted to do is see where my daughter died," Ralph Alarcon, 56, sobbed outside the police station where he was held briefly, then released. Alarcon said his daughter, Mary Anne Ortiz, 25, a single mom who was just trying to earn some extra money for herself and her 5-year-old son. Alarcon says he hasn't told his grandson that his mother is probably dead. "How do you hold that conversation?" he says.

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Story 4, Monday

CLEAR LAKE – The death toll of the tragic fire at The Warehouse on the Lake was increased by one more Monday to 106, as a victim who was in very critical condition succumbed to wounds sustained in the raging inferno, officials say.

The latest victim was identified as Debra Veronica Simons, 23, of nearby Lake View. She had sustained burns over 70% of her body, officials say. The Coroner is expected to release a complete list of the deceaseds later today.

Meanwhile, the police finally have removed the yellow tape surrounding the block containing the remains of the nightclub, which burned practically to the ground in a fierce fire Friday night. Hundreds of mourners are congregating at the scene to pay homage to the fallen. Mayor Christina Michaels, who is running for reelection this year, declared a no-fly zone surrounding the burn site to give grieving families privacy from news helicopters.

Many were overcome with emotion, the mayor said, adding that at least one woman collapsed and was transported away from the scene by an ambulance.

“Their agony is beyond belief,” Michaels said of the mourners. “It’s a very sad day for all.”

Rudolph “Rudy” St. James, manager of the alt rock band the Daisy Chain Conspiracy, which was playing at The Warehouse when the fire started, says he has been receiving death threats by phone and emails and has asked police for protection.

St. James said that he became persona non grata in his hometown after it was revealed that he was the one who allegedly set off the pyrotechnics show during the band’s performance Friday night. Fire authorities believe sparks from the pyro display set off the raging blaze that ultimately injured as many as 150 club-goers and killed at least 105.

“It was an accident,” St. James said. “People will hold this against me for as long as I live.”

According to a well-placed source, St. James and the four surviving members of the band are being subpoenaed to appear before the County Grand Jury, which will determine, among other things, whether criminal charges should be filed in connection with The Warehouse inferno. The Grand Jury is expected to convene Tuesday, the source said. Other likely targets of the Grand Jury probe are likely to include the owner of the nightclub, Wilson Sutley, who has steadfastly denied any wrongdoing.

The president of a national organization said that The Warehouse fire was not only tragic it was preventable. In a televised interview, James D. Burston, president of the Fire Marshals Assn. of America, said that if the nightclub had been in compliance with national fire safety codes, “none of this would have happened.”

“I’m not trying to play the blame game,” Burston said, “but clearly fire sprinklers would have ameliorated most of the problems. There shouldn’t have been exposed plastic foam soundproofing on the walls. Fire exits should have been clearly visible.

“There was no call for this tragedy to happen,” he said.

According to city officials, The Warehouse on the Lake, which was constructed in the 1950s, was not required to have fire sprinklers because it was granted a grandfather exemption when the fire sprinkler ordinance was enacted in 1988.

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