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MONDAY
JANUARY 28, 2008

M

Fire claims artists' father figure

LAVA House blaze's cause still unknown

By Laura Ungar

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The Courier-Journal

Aron Conaway and his wife bought a home five doors down from the art space he helped found, a warehouse

full of creativity that fire reduced to ruins late Saturday, killing a man who was a father figure to him and a community of young artists.

"Now I'll look down the street and see a blank space and know our friend has passed away," said Conaway, who started LAVA House in 2001 with Bart Herre.

The friend they lost was Bill Christie, a 65-year-old retired engineer and Navy officer turned contractor who

BENEFIT CONCERT

A benefit for the fire victims will be held at 10 tonight at Third Street Dive, 440 S. Third St. The bands are Downtown Brown and Bu Hau Ting, and the cost is \$3.

died about noon yesterday at University Hospital.

Christie suffered severe injuries in

See **BLAZE**, B2, col. 1



Bill Christie, 65, died about noon yesterday at University Hospital. He was remembered as a "gentle, very loving person."

Photo courtesy of Aron Conaway

BLAZE | Fire at LAVA House claims father figure to community artists

Continued from B1

the three-alarm fire at 927 Shelby Parkway, which destroyed the warehouse and an adjacent residential building and damaged almost a dozen other structures, melting siding and causing smoke damage.

Five people in the two-story residential building were safely evacuated, but Christie was rescued by a mechanic renting space at the complex.

Conaway said Scott Belcher ran into the burning building to reach Christie, using a fire extinguisher to put out the flames on his body, then pulling him out of the building before firefighters arrived.

Christie "stuck around long enough for us to say goodbye.... He called my wife 'girlfriend,'" said Conaway, 29. "Bill was a really gentle, very loving person with a sassy personality. I think he kind of considered the artists in the LAVA House his kids, really."

Conaway said Christie did woodworking, cabinet-making, laminated the veneer on countertops and was "an artist in his own right."

Glenn Herre, Bart Herre's father and the owner of the 13,000-square-foot building, said Christie was one of his first tenants and had lived there for eight to 10 years.

"He was around all the time," said Herre, 57, who lives in the Highlands. "He was always there to help everybody. He was like everybody's older father."

Herre and Conaway said Christie was part of a close-knit group connected with LAVA, which stands for the Louisville Assembly of Vanguard Artists. In studios there, about a half-dozen artists, including Conaway and his wife, Hallie Jones, worked in all sorts of mediums, from glass to metal to photography and video.

Five residents lived at the complex, Conaway said. Residents

ON THE WEB

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dents and artists traded art, fixed each other's cars, even cut each other's hair, he said.

"This was our little community," Conaway said.

Herre and his wife purchased the building, which was more than 135 years old, in 1999 for \$117,500, according to records from the Jefferson County property valuation administrator.

Herre said the building contained several hundred thousand dollars worth of art and equipment, including torches, woodworking tools, and supplies for photography and ceramics.

He said there were 35-foot-high ceilings framed by massive wooden beams.

Officials are investigating the cause of the fire. Firefighters were on the scene yesterday afternoon, along with five arson investigators. Maj. Henry Ott, who heads the Louisville department's arson squad, said their research is routine for a large blaze.

"It was an old building. It had



Investigators looked over the site yesterday of a fire at 927 Shelby Parkway. A man critically injured in the Saturday night fire died yesterday at University Hospital.

By Michael Hayman, The Courier-Journal

a lot of stuff in it," Ott said last night. "That's probably what led to the fire's spread."

Brian Quail, CEO of the Louisville chapter of the American Red Cross, said it helped four people who lost their homes in the fire. One couple stayed at a hotel, while others stayed with family and friends.

Conaway said the fire left some LAVA House members with nothing. Not only did some of the artists lose their homes, they also lost much of

their work. Several also saw their cars damaged.

"Everything we've made and created is all at the bottom of the heap," Glenn Herre said.

Conaway said the future is murky for members of LAVA, but he and his wife are working to buy a warehouse of their own. He said he is also creating an archive of LAVA House for a master's thesis at the University of Louisville.

Two local bands will play at a benefit tonight at Third Street

Dive to help those who lost their homes buy clothes, furniture and art supplies.

"I'm really gonna miss the LAVA House," Conaway said. "It's really a huge loss. Louisville has seen several alternative spaces come and go. This was just a tragic instant that stopped a wonderful thing."

Reporter Laura Ungar can be reached at (502) 582-7190. Darryn Simmons, Alex Davis and James Bruggers contributed to this story.

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BLAZE

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ON THE WEB

Investigators

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