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Max Miechowski for BuzzFeed News

This Is What It's Like To Have Lost Your School Friends In The Grenfell Tower Fire

"There's so much stuff to deal with. Just coming back to school and seeing that someone is not there, someone is not in the line, or there's an empty chair. Just the everyday reality of going to school...everything comes back to you."

Posted on December 24, 2017, at 1:31 p.m.

**Fiona Rutherford**

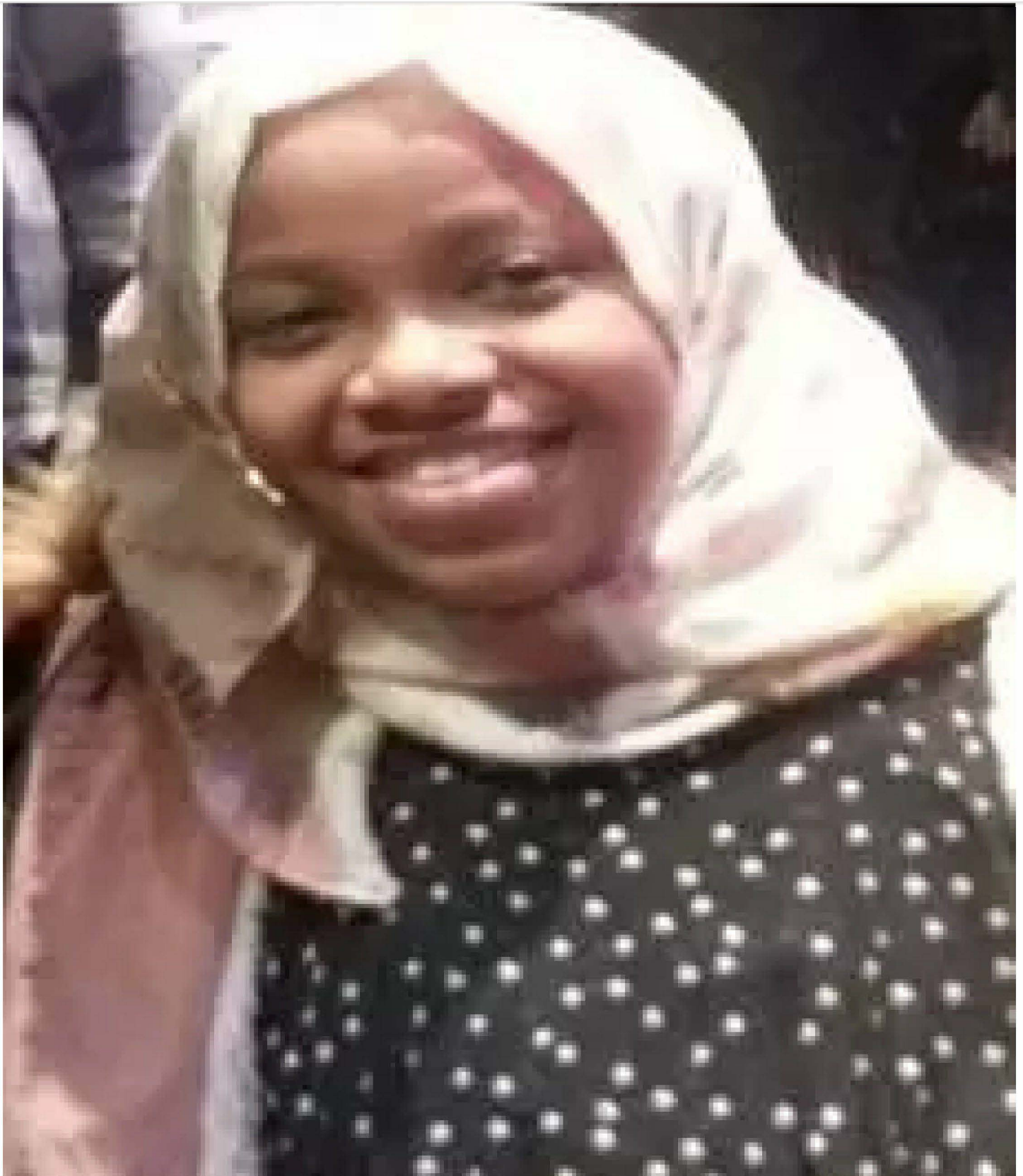
BuzzFeed News Reporter

Nestled away in one of the wealthiest boroughs in London, a family of five are crammed into a single hotel room. Since their flat was destroyed six months ago in the Grenfell Tower fire, which claimed the lives of 71 people, the hotel in Kensington and Chelsea has been the closest thing the Cherbika family have had to a home.

It's a four-star hotel, but the situation is far from luxury. The family, who lived in Grenfell Walk, just underneath Grenfell Tower,

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Firdaws Hashim



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“When the fire happened, to express my thoughts, I just wrote it all down,” said Yousra. “Three days after the fire happened me and [Johara] came in, and I said, ‘Should we write a song about it?’, while it was fresh in our memory.

“We thought, how about we do it for Firdaws Hashim, one of our friends that had died. We didn’t start to write the song at first, we just wrote down topics that we wanted to sing about, like firefighters and friends. It was so quick – everything was so emotional at the time, so everything just came out.”

The girls downloaded a backing track from the song “Read All About It” by Professor Green and Emeli Sandé. They chose it because Firdaws had sung the track at a school talent contest, finishing second.

Yousra’s mum, Hanan Cherbika, told BuzzFeed News that she broke down in tears when she first heard the song. “It was so raw at that time...and then hearing them make that song I was like, *These are just kids*. I’m trying to concentrate on the housing, [my husband] is trying to concentrate on keeping us all together, and we’re not really thinking about the kids,” she said.



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Yousra Cherbika.



“When you actually sit down and hear that song, it’s from the heart. If you don’t cry for that song, you haven’t got any heart. It’s the children who are the ones who have got to live with it – they’re living with the trauma, and I think often that gets ignored.”

The girls agree that young people are often ignored in conversations about Grenfell. Even children who are not from the area are experiencing trauma. “Our friend, she lost her cousin, and other relatives, and it’s really hard for her because anytime someone mentions the word Grenfell she starts crying,” Johara said.

“Our song touched so many people because it’s from a child’s point of view. It’s not from a famous person’s point of view. It was from our point, what we felt, and what was going through our minds at the time. No one really knows what the children are going through.”

“There’s so much stuff to deal with,” said Yousra. “Just coming back to school and seeing that someone is not there, someone is not in the line, or there’s an empty chair. Just the everyday reality of going to school...everything comes back to you.

“Everything that’s being said is just based on the adults. On the news all you see is just ‘adults this, adults that’. But it’s the children that are affected just as much as the adults, or if anything even worse.”



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Hasan Bitirim

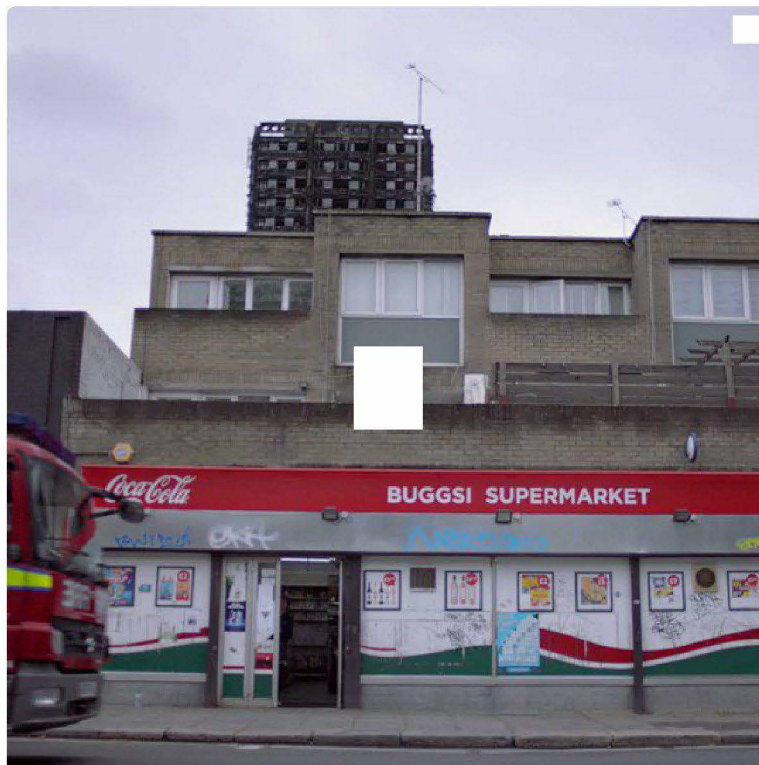
Johara Menacer and Yousra Cherbika during the making of the "Fire in Grenfell" music video.



Yousra and Johara have since performed "Fire in Grenfell" live at the Tabernacle, a cinema and exhibition centre in Notting Hill. Neither had ever performed live in front of an audience before, but they put their nerves aside in order to share their important message.

"For me, when I'm on stage, I tell myself that I'm doing this for the people who have lost their homes and the people that have lost their lives. I need to get my words out so that people understand and know what happened. I want to share the truth – that's what I think about when I'm on stage," Yousra said. "I think about the people I'm doing it for, and the visual behind it, and why we actually wrote the song in the first place."

The two girls have worked closely with SE1 Productions – a London-based theatre, film, television, and music video production company – to create a video as well.



Grenfell Voices
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Please SHARE/RT our 1st sneak peek! Films premiere on Dec 13th.

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When BuzzFeed News was invited into the Cherbika family's hotel room, Yousra's 1-year-old baby brother, Soufian, was sleeping peacefully on the double bed. In a room of clutter, he was completely oblivious to what is going on around him. His mother described the extreme difficulties of looking after such a young child in a hotel: "He learned how to walk here, he's got no place to play around in. It's horrible, and it's not a place for a child to be living in. I know there are other children probably in worse conditions, but you just don't expect that in London."



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Johara Menacer.



The family have been offered a home by the council, but the process of moving in has been delayed on multiple occasions. “We’re just living for today, aren’t we?” Yousra’s mother Hanan said, turning to her husband, Hachim. “Because we’re just giving up on tomorrow.”

For Yousra’s nine-year-old brother Belal, the worst part of being displaced from your home and living in a hotel is a lack of space – there’s hardly any, and there’s nothing to do. The last time Belal played in the hotel’s corridors, complaints were made by other guests and security was called. “You can understand it, though, because if someone is on holiday they want peace and quiet,” Hanan said.

It’s clear that life in the hotel has been disruptive. “We’ve been in the eighth floor, seventh, ninth, second, and on the mezzanine floor,” 9-year-old Belal told BuzzFeed News. His dad, Hachim Cherbika, added that on each occasion they’ve had no help with moving their belongings from one hotel room to another.

There used to be a lot of people from Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk in this particular hotel, but now many people have left. “They don’t want to be here for Christmas, so they’ve taken temporary accommodation,” Yousra said.

“As Muslims we don’t celebrate Christmas, but I feel sorry for the people who celebrate Christmas, I really do, because we spent Eid here. It’s really horrible – it didn’t feel like Eid,” she added.

Yousra and Johara don’t quite know how to feel about the future. It’s clear that they are still grieving and trying to adapt to the rapid changes to their lives and community since the fire.

“I used to hate school, but now I actually miss it,” Johara said. “After school everyone used to go to the park under Grenfell Tower, but now everyone goes to Chicken Cottage just to socialise, because there’s nowhere to go anymore – the park brings back bad memories. Nothing is the same. Before Grenfell happened everyone was happy. Now everything is gloomy.”

For these two friends their “Fire in Grenfell” song is bittersweet – it’s an expression of pain and grief, but also a way of demanding change and justice. “I hope that we get can rebuild our lives – but I don’t think it’s going happen too soon,” Yousra said. “I want to write more songs and just let out everything, not just about Grenfell but life in general.”



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Vladimir Enlow

Thank you for publishing this... and my thanks to Yousra and Johara for writing this song. You never hear about what happened in Grenfell in the news anymore (at least in the US), and it needs to stay in the public consciousness so that what happened there doesn't happen again.

I find it intriguing that these families are being boarded in luxury hotels, but being treated like interlopers by the staff and guests. The symbolism is hard to ignore.

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