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Grenfell was our family: Teenage girls release single in tribute to friends who died in the fire

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Yousra Cherbika and Johara Menacer who have recorded a song in memory of their friend Nur Huda el-Wahabi (*Matt Writtle*)

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Yousra Cherbika, aged 13, is wearing a T-shirt with a photograph of her friend Nur Huda el-Wahabi printed on it. In the picture they are standing outside **Grenfell Tower, where el-Wahabi lived, grinning at el-Wahabi's cousin, who was taking the photo.**

Tomorrow marks a year since el-Wahabi died in the Grenfell Tower fire, aged 15. Cherbika and their friend Johara Menacer, also aged 13, have released a song in her memory. It's a cover of Emeli Sandé and Professor Green's Read All About It, with lyrics by the girls and a video they made that already has more than 15,000 hits on YouTube.

They met Sandé this week: "She told us she was happy we'd used her song," says Cherbika, proudly.

"You can't get the night of the fire out of your mind," continues Cherbika, who is sitting on a single bed in the cramped hotel room her family has been living in for the past year. "It's always there, with images and flashbacks. But remembering the good things helps. To know that even though people passed away in such a tragic way they lived a good life. That's what keeps us going: for them to be known for their personalities, not just as victims who died."

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Emeli Sandé who has supported the girls (PA)

Cherbika was one of the first people to see the fire, which killed 71 people, from her home across the way in Grenfell Walk. “I was staying up waiting for my dad to come back from the mosque, because it was Ramadan. He came in and told me there was a fire in the tower. There had been fires before so I didn’t think anything of it.

“I went downstairs to look, in trainers without socks, and my mum’s jacket because it was a bit chilly outside. It was a weird fire, the firefighters were trying to put it out, so you’d see it die down, and then it would just rise up again inside the cladding. It kept going higher and higher.”

Her family's first thought was of el-Wahabi, and Cherbika's mother phoned her to tell her to get out. "She was sleeping so she didn't pick up. I called again and eventually she answered, when the fire was around the fifth floor. She asked if we were alright. I told her I'd never seen a fire like this before and she had to get out. She said, 'OK, cool, say nothing of it, I'm going to come out. I'll see you later.' That was the last I heard from her."

Cherbika's mother woke up her brothers and told the family they had to leave and go to her grandmother's house. "I was getting scared," says Cherbika. "Debris from the tower was falling down and the trees were getting burnt. We were shouting to people in the tower who didn't know about the fire that they had to get out."

Menacer sits silently next to Cherbika, plaiting and replaiting her hair; occasionally fidgeting with her phone case, which has pictures of peaches on it. She still lives around the corner from Grenfell, "so there is no way to avoid it. My brother lived in the tower, so when we heard about the fire my mum went round to see if he was OK. I was crying and telling my sister not to go too close because it wasn't going to be nice.



Nur Huda el-Wahabi on the far left

"I remember turning on the TV, when my brother ran through the door. I could smell smoke on his jacket, he was damp from the water coming through the building. He sat down because he was struggling to breathe. My sister looked after him and I went outside with my mum to see if I could find any of my friends."

She and her family went to the Harrow Club to help with the relief that night: "We didn't sleep for four days straight because we were supporting people who had lost everything."

In the disjointed days after the fire Menacer went to visit Cherbika in the hotel. That's when they wrote their song. "We didn't have any other way to express ourselves," says Cherbika. "Everything was so fresh, it just came out by itself." They chose Read all About It because their friend Firdaws Hashim, 12, who died in the fire, sang it in their school talent contest.

She appears in their music video, a small girl with a shy smile. "She was well-behaved, a top student — her hand always shot up in class to answer questions," says Cherbika. "Anyone would have been happy to meet her."





Professor Green, whose song Read All About It was covered by the girls with new lyrics and a video they made that already has more than 15,000 hits on YouTube (Ian West/PA)

The lyrics are for el-Wahabi. “She would wait for us to play after school,” continues Cherbika. “Grenfell was like a big family. You didn’t have to text to see someone; you’d just knock on their door and ask if they wanted to play out. I’d get home from school and do my homework as quickly as I could so that I could go play football with Nur Huda. I remember the cheeky stuff, the jokes we made together. She was the sort of person you could trust and talk about personal stuff to without feeling you’d be judged.”

Cherbika and Menacer go to Kensington Aldridge Academy School, which was damaged by the fire. “We’ve been going to school in a Portakabin,” says Menacer. “That’s a constant reminder of the fire. There are a lot of survivors in the school. It’s really hard. We had exams that summer but it was hard to concentrate on them.”

“My friends died in a tragic way but remembering they had a good life is what keeps us going. I don’t want them to be only known as victims”

Yousra Cherbika

The fire has both “brought people closer and further away from each other,” says Cherbika. “There is constant arguing about what happened. Some want to distance themselves from others to cope. The spirit of community has brought some of us closer but physically we have been separated.”

What do they make of Theresa May’s apology this week, where she said her behaviour after Grenfell was not good enough? “Sorry is not enough,” says Cherbika. “They say they are sorry but who is to blame? They say they are sorry but that’s not going to bring back our friends, that’s not going to bring back our area, that’s not going to bring back our house. That’s not going to help with everyone’s pain. Sorry is just a word that people use to get out of trouble.”

Still, they are determined “not to let something like this control our lives”, says Cherbika. “We’ve got to be positive, even though it is hard.” Writing the song has helped. They transform into giggly girls at the mention of Stormzy, who FaceTimed them to offer his support for the single. “He was nice,” says Cherbika, playing with her glittery blue and pink phone case.





Stormzy FaceTimed the girls to offer his support for the single (PA)

The song has been released on a Grenfell Voices video channel. It is also hosting a song by Ricky Nuttall, a firefighter at Grenfell.

They'd like to write more. Menacer's mother, who has just come in, says she had no idea her daughter could sing. In the meantime, they're looking forward to the World Cup and will be supporting Morocco. Cherbika tells her mother, who is looking on and doubts Morocco's chances, "We beat Ivory Coast and they are a good team, you know."

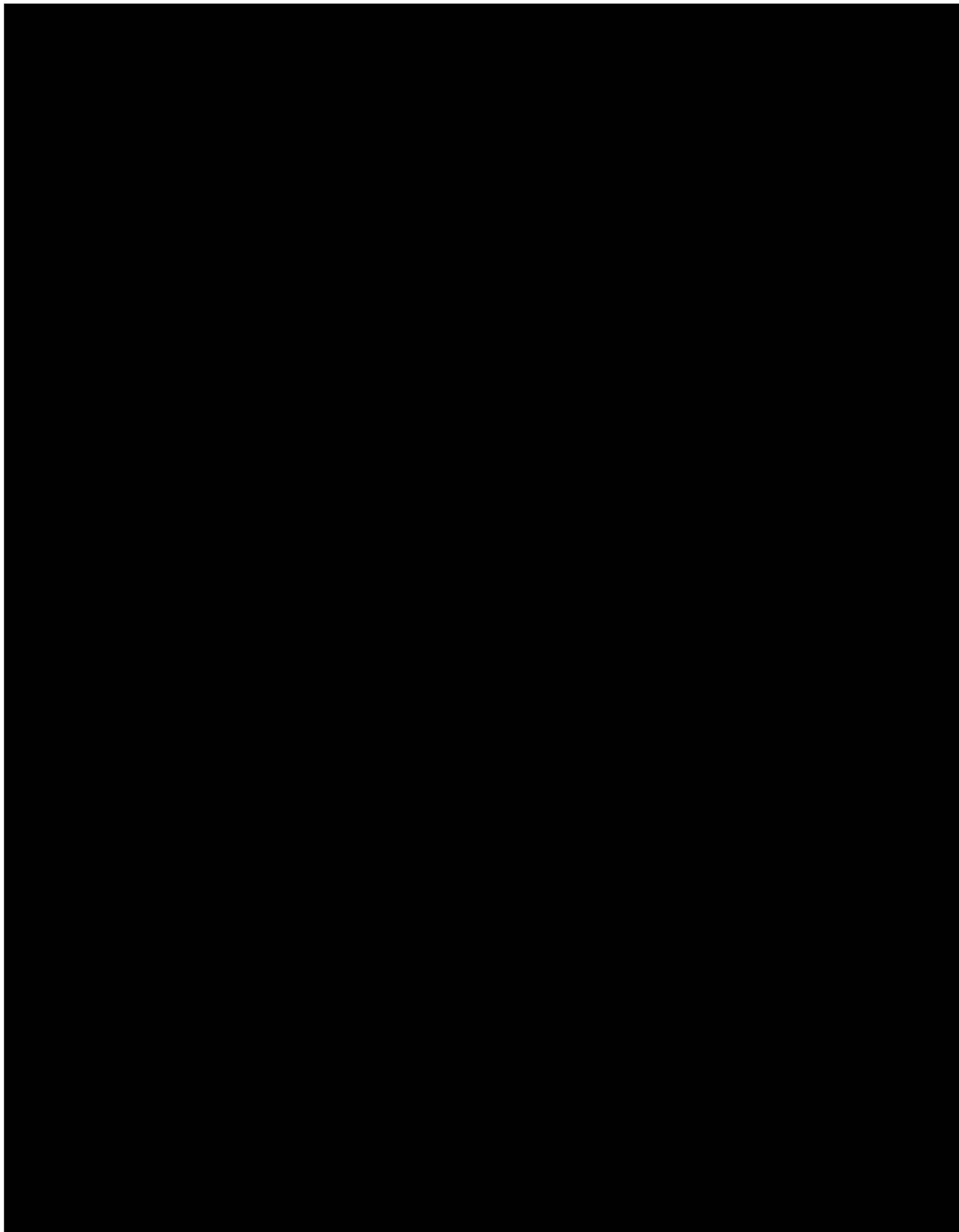
Cherbika's family have been allocated a new house in North Kensington. "Not a tower block," her mother says. "We're planning to move, it's more the mental move that's hard." Cherbika adds: "It's about missing your old home and getting used to it. I want people to know what happened that night and why. We wanted to put the song out there to understand how the youth were feeling. I don't want anyone to have to go through what we've been through. I don't want this to happen ever again.

"People said the song has touched their hearts and they appreciate we've done it. They feel our song has been a way for them to get their voices heard."

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