

THE GRENFELL TOWER INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF HELEN GEBREMESKEL FLAT 186, 21ST FLOOR

I, HELEN GEBREMESKEL, of [REDACTED] formerly a resident of Flat 186 Grenfell Tower, will say as follows:-

INTRODUCTION

1. I was born on [REDACTED] 1972]. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] I have made a statement to the Metropolitan Police and I confirm that I consent to any police statement I have made being disclosed to the Grenfell Tower Public Inquiry.
2. I am a core participant in the Grenfell Tower Inquiry and a survivor from the dreadful fire on the 14th June 2017.
3. I was previously a resident of the Grenfell Tower, first moving there in 1997, into flat 191 on the 22nd floor, which was a one bedroom flat, where I lived alone. Approximately three years ago, I moved address within the Tower from flat 191 on the 22nd floor to flat 186 on the 21st floor. The move was as a result of a three way move between me and members of two other flats.
4. I have a daughter, L [REDACTED], who was born in [REDACTED] and she has lived with me her whole life. We lived at flat 186 with our dog, Simba.
5. Prior to the fire we had a normal life with me working in my own hairdressing salon and L [REDACTED] going to school and both of us enjoying life with each other and the people

around us. L [REDACTED] enjoyed school, her friends and the Choucair family who were like an extended family living on the floor below close to us on the 22nd floor.

6. The Choucair family lived at Flats 191 and 193 on the 22nd floor. Six members of that family were lost and only one who lived in the Tower was not killed, because she was out on the night of the fire. As will be seen below, the Choucair family were like an extension of our family and tragically my daughter and I have lost them.
7. I make this statement on behalf of myself and my minor daughter, L [REDACTED] This statement is mainly about our experiences on 14 June 2017 and deals with what the Inquiry have called 'Phase 1' matters, setting out what happened to us when the fire broke out and consumed Grenfell Tower, my family's home. I will provide greater detail of 'Phase 2' matters as the Inquiry progresses.
8. If I were to give evidence before the Inquiry, I would need the Inquiry to take into account that both myself and my daughter [REDACTED] would like to give evidence. I have spoken to my daughter and she is adamant that she wants to give evidence. I believe that she wants to give evidence in order to be provided with an opportunity to tell her story, and for there to be justice for what has happened to us and for her friends who were lost in the fire. As will be noted from this statement, my daughter is only a child, and this would need to be taken into consideration when arranging for her to give evidence. She does want her voice to be heard.
9. The 14th June 2017 is a day my daughter and I will never forget. We lost everything that we owned including our beloved family pet and our home. More importantly, I nearly lost the most precious thing to me in the world, my lovely daughter. We genuinely believed that we would die in that fire. This is a terror no child should ever experience. As a result, my daughter is traumatised, and she will have to cope for the rest of her life with the consequences of this fire. We are mentally scarred, and my daughter is physically scarred from her burn injury.
10. We were devastated and continue to try and rebuild our lives. This is our story in my words.

The evening of the 13 June 2017

11. On Tuesday 13 June 2017, the evening before the fire, my daughter and I arrived home from my workplace at about 8:30 pm. I had collected my daughter from school and taken her with me to my work. We had both returned home from my salon which is only ten minutes away by train. [REDACTED] We took the lift to the 21st floor and did not notice anything out of the ordinary.
12. My daughter and I went to bed at about 11:30 pm that night, as we had got in late and we had to cook dinner later than normal. After dinner, we both went to bed and my daughter slept with me that night in my bedroom. We both fell asleep quickly with Simba (our dog) asleep on the bed with us.

The morning of the 14 June 2017

13. I understand now that fire started at 12:54 am in the morning of 14 June 2017. It was about 1:20 am when I knew about the fire. I was woken up by the sound of our smoke alarm in the kitchen going off. One smoke alarm was in the hallway of our flat and the other in our kitchen. I woke up first and I could smell smoke and went straight to the kitchen. I could see that there was a fire in the kitchen and I ran and grabbed my daughter and left the flat. As I stepped outside of the flat it was about 1:26 am, as I have subsequently discovered that I called the fire brigade by dialling 999 at 1:26am. I could smell smoke.

My experience of the fire

14. I recall that upon entering the kitchen, I saw the extractor fan in the kitchen window had broken away and disintegrated due to fire. I think that the kitchen window may have been open but I am not sure. The fire had burnt away at the extractor fan in the kitchen window, as it was made of a type of plastic. The fire was licking through the gap where the extractor fan had been, and was coming into the kitchen. The window was still there, and the fire was flicking through the gap where the extractor fan had been. The smoke was starting to build up in my kitchen.

15. I ran from the kitchen to my bedroom to get my daughter but did not close the kitchen door behind me as I never normally do this, and my main concern was to get my daughter and escape. I grabbed her, and she picked up Simba (our dog) and we left our flat. As we stepped outside of our flat that is when I called the fire brigade as set out above. We left with just our nightclothes and no shoes. My nightclothes are actually my gym clothes for the morning that I wear the night before, so I can get up and I am ready to go to the gym. As we were leaving the flat, I called 999 (I know now that this was at 1:26 am). I spoke to a Fire Brigade operator and I told them that there was a fire in my flat. I saw the people opposite and told them there was a fire at flat 186.
16. Having listened to the 999 tape, now, it seems that there was some confusion and the operator I was speaking to believed that we were not inside our flat or the Tower. I believe the confusion was caused when I was talking to the fire operator I said that, "they are out", referring to my neighbours from flat 182, the E[I-Wahabi] family who were on the landing outside their flat. I was not referring to me and my daughter having left the Tower.
17. My daughter, Simba (the dog) and I decided to knock on the door of flat 183 (floor 21) where Marcio Gomes, his partner Andrea (who was heavily pregnant), their two daughters and their dog lived. When we knocked on their door, the family were clearly all fast asleep, as it took them a short time to answer. However, they eventually woke up from me knocking heavily on their front door. Marcio opened the door and I explained hurriedly that there was a fire in the building. Marcio was still half asleep. Marcio could see people going up the stairs from his doorway.
18. Once we had woken Marcio, while he was still at his door, I went to the fire exit door leading to the stairwell on the landing to see about escaping down the stairs. I opened the fire door but did not go down at this point. I think it was about 1.30am and there was smoke but not so much that we couldn't see each other. Lots of people, on the other side of the door were coming up the stairs from the lower levels and they were heading up the Tower, via the stairs. I saw lots of people coming up from the lower floors, but I couldn't say how many. There were enough to make it hard to go downstairs at that time. They told us to go back to our flat. It appeared to us that they were trying to escape from fire below. However, we did not initially want to follow their advice as common sense indicated to me not to go upwards into a tower where there was no way of escaping from the top.

19. At this time , I noticed that other residents on the floor went into flat 182. This was where a Moroccan family lived (made up of a husband, wife and three children, but I do not know their names).
20. Marcio called to us to return back to him and go into his flat.
21. L [REDACTED] and I went into Marcio's flat with Simba. We closed the door behind us. It was about 1:30 am when we went into their home.
22. Around this time, I received calls from various people including friends and family from outside the Tower. They were all telling me that we needed to get out of Grenfell Tower. They were crying on the phone and telling us we had to get out as they said it 'looked really bad'. My cousin Kay Karidan, was on the phone to me as well telling us to get out.
23. Around the same time Marcio was on the phone to the emergency services who were telling him that we should stay in the flat and that someone would come and rescue us.
24. In the flat, Marcio's girls were woken up by their parents and we were all sitting in the living room. In the living room with me were L [REDACTED] (my daughter), Simba (our dog), Marcio and Andrea (husband and wife), and their two children [REDACTED] and Lilly the dog belonging to Marcio and Andrea. Andrea was also pregnant with their baby who they were going to call "Logan".
25. As stated above we were sitting in the living room trying to decide what to do. There was smoke coming under the front door of the flat. The living room and kitchen were open plan and as such the smoke was coming into the living room area, where we were. The smoke was getting thicker but we could still see each other. It was not black, black.
26. At about 2:00 am Marcio said that he was going to knock on the door of the old, Filipino lady in the flat opposite. He went to her front door and opened it, and this was when we realised how bad the conditions were outside the flat. The smoke outside the front door at this time had become really thick and black. There was a strong smokey smell and it was getting worse. We were all coughing due to the smoke and it was getting harder to breathe and the heat was increasing. The kids were finding it particularly bad. Marcio came back to us in the living room and told us that it was serious and that he could not get to the flat of the old Filipino lady.

27. It was then that we realised we had to get out of the Tower and that we would die if we remained in the flat. At this point Marcio said we had to escape and so he filled the bath tub with water and soaked towels in the bath and gave us two towels each (one bath towel and one tea towel). Marcio passed me the phone while he was doing this, and I spoke to the emergency services. The Fire Brigade operator told me to remain where we all were, and that someone would come to rescue us.
28. At this point we were still quite calm but as time went on the smoke got thicker inside the flat, even though Marcio had placed a wet towel at the bottom of the front door to prevent the smoke entering.
29. I called various people including Nadia Choucair from Flat 193 on the 22nd floor upstairs and my friend Hime Gishaw from flat 131 on the 16th floor. Somewhere between 2.30 am to 3:00 am the smoke had become very thick in the flat and we were all coughing. We had put wet towels on our faces, which Marcio had prepared to protect us.
30. We all wrapped bath towels over our heads and our bodies, and we used tea towels to cover our faces. We then tried to escape through the front door. Even though we had placed a wet towel by the front door, the smoke was still coming in under the door and getting thicker, to the extent that it was becoming harder to breath. We could still see each other at this stage, though. We were coughing in the flat due to the smoke getting worse.
31. Around this time, somewhere between 2:30 am and 3:00 am Marcio's bedroom caught fire from the outside. The flames had come in from the outside of the Tower into his bedroom, but I did not see this but heard from him. I recall Marcio saying that there was fire in the flat and that, "It's either now or never". Before leaving, Marcio or Andrea, I can't remember which one of the them, had given me some flip flops to put on my feet and had given my daughter trainers and a jacket to wear.
32. As we had decided that we had to escape we all headed to the front door of their flat. When we opened the front door of the flat, we were hit by thick, black smoke. I can't remember whether there was a lot of heat. It was so thick that we could not see our hands in front of our faces. We were already coughing from the smoke inside the flat but it was much worse when we opened the door. As we opened the front door the smoke

bellowed into the flat. It took three attempts of opening the door and then retreating in before we decided to go for it.

33. We left in a line with me at the front followed by Andrea, then [REDACTED] L [REDACTED] and Marcio, in that order. We were not holding hands but were touching each other's backs to see which direction we were going. The children were terrified and were crying as no child normally walks out into thick, black choking smoke.
34. As we stepped out onto the landing outside the flat, it was pitch black with dense smoke. I could not see your hand in front of me it was that dense. As I knew my way to the stairwell door, from the flat, I led the way. On the stairs there was water on the floor, but I couldn't say how much as it was dark and smokey. I found the rail on the side wall which I knew led to the exit. Everyone followed behind me holding the rail. Once I had found the rail, I led us to the fire exit door leading to the stairwell on floor 21. By following the rail along the wall I was able to locate the exit door. I knew the stairs as I would often walk up and down the stairs rather than taking the lift. I think everyone was holding the rail to find their way along, but I was in the front so could not see everything and it was smokey.
35. However, as we made our way to the fire exit and down the stairs, we were walking in water which was all over the floor. I could feel the water as I had taken off my flip flops as we exited the flat, as I did not want to slip as there was water in the landing possibly outside the flat and I was sliding. We were also stepping on what felt like bodies which were on the floor when we got to the stairwell. I do not know how many people I stood on. I believe that some of the people lying on the floor may still have been alive but they were unable to move.
36. We could not help any of the people lying on the floor as it was pitch black with smoke, and we were struggling to keep moving with three children, due to not being able to breathe or see. My main priority was to get us out, including my daughter. If we had stopped at any point, we would risk being overcome by smoke and suffering the same fate as those lying on the floor. We knew that our only hope was to keep moving and not to stop. I could feel that I was suffering the effects of smoke inhalation and I felt it was just a matter of time before we would also have collapsed on the stairwell and that we would surely die there. I was finding it very hard to breathe. All I kept doing was calling my daughter's name as we went down.

37. I was finding it hard to breathe going down the stairs, and the temperature was very hot (like you were in a very hot sauna) all the way as we travelled down the stairs. As I was barefoot I could feel the water on the floor but cannot remember feeling the heat on my feet. As I was struggling to breathe, I took the tea towel from my mouth, but it was still on my head as I felt it was making it harder to breathe properly. I did not remove the tea towel from anyone else behind me (the children), however. I kept the bath towel over my body, even though I had removed the tea towel from my face.
38. As we moved onwards, heading down the stairs of the Tower towards the main exit, we could not speak due to the smoke. However, Marcio managed to keep shouting, "Keep going" to encourage us. I also remember calling out to L [REDACTED] as I was at the front of our chain of people, leading the way. Only Marcio and I were shouting, though.
39. As we went down the stairs, we had to go in a single file as it was too narrow to go any other way. There continued to be bodies on the stairs as we went down the lower levels towards the main exit. I could not see what levels we were on, because the stairwell was pitch black with smoke. I still could not see the collapsed people beneath us, but I could feel and hear them as I stepped on them. However, most of the bodies I stood on were not making any noise when I walked on them, and because of this I believe that these poor people were already dead.
40. Most of the time that we were walking down the stairwell, required us to stand on bodies rather than the steps, which means that there must have been a lot of dead bodies throughout the floors on each level. It was horrendous and an absolute nightmare.
41. The black smoke was very thick all the way down. It was not until I reached the second or first floor that the smoke was clearer.
42. As we were going down, the only person responding to my communications was Marcio. I could not see anyone else. At this point, because of the thick toxic smoke which I had inhaled, along with the effects of exhaustion and heat, I felt that I wanted to give up and collapse. Yet, I kept pushing myself to survive and for my daughter to survive. It was around his point that, luckily, I had gotten to the second or first floor and the smoke was not as thick. I could feel cleaner air in my lungs for the first time. It encouraged me to continue pushing on.

My experience of the fire fighters

43. When I reached the ground floor, I saw a fireman and I looked behind me and saw only Andrea and [REDACTED]. I could not see L [REDACTED], [REDACTED] or Marcio.
44. When the fireman saw me at the bottom of the stairs, he called for help as we reached the bottom. I saw that Andrea was sitting on a bench and [REDACTED] was just looking lost. I told the fireman that Andrea was pregnant, and that [REDACTED] suffered badly from asthma. As Andrea was pregnant she was taken out of the building, along with [REDACTED] by two firemen and away to the area near the main door where all the other emergency services were. It was approximately 4:00 am when I got out.
45. Initially, I felt relieved that I had escaped but then I realised that L [REDACTED] was not in the line anymore and was not following down the stairs behind us. My heart just tore apart, and I felt physically sick, on top of the exhaustion and feeling of nausea from the smoke.
46. I then tried to go back up the stairs to find L [REDACTED] but the fireman would not let me back in. The fireman asked which floor I was on and when I told him that we had come from the 21st floor he was visibly shocked that I had made it down. He then looked at me and promised that he would go back up and save my daughter. I later discovered that Marcio had stopped on the stairwell after he had realised that we had lost the girls, including my daughter. He had met fire fighters on the stairwell coming up and urged them to rescue the stranded girls. My daughter and one of Marcio's daughters were discovered by firemen, unconscious, on the stairs and they were carried down out of the Tower. I owe everything to the brave fire fighter who risked his own life in that inferno to save my daughter. Words can never express my gratitude
47. With regard to the fire fighters, I can only say that without them and their extreme bravery and courage my daughter would not be alive. I am so grateful to the fire fighters and I am grateful to Marcio for everything they all did to save my young child.
48. I could not have lived without her, and I know that she and I are so lucky to be alive.

49. The fire fighter who had met me at the bottom of the Tower picked me up over his shoulder and another fireman covered me with a shield to stop me from being burnt by the molten glass and debris falling from the Tower as they took me outside. He carried me out past the other emergency services outside, and I was taken to Kensington Sports Centre to have a medical check-up.
50. At Kensington Sports Centre they took my blood pressure, tested my breathing and checked my general well-being. I was sitting on the floor and the checks were done outside, in a makeshift emergency area. The nurse who was tending to me, named Simone Williams, at the triage area was not on duty that night but as she lived nearby she had come to the scene of the fire to help people.

Outside Grenfell Tower

51. During this whole time all I could think about was L [REDACTED], my daughter and where she was. The Tower was blocked by the emergency services to stop re-entry. Therefore, I could not go back to see where my child was. I could not see the entrance to the Tower from where I was sitting. I did not have my phone, as it was in Andrea's bag because I had put it in there at the start of our escape from her flat.
52. While I was being checked over at Kensington Sports Centre, a lady called Kay Karidan who lives nearby and is a close friend of mine, came up to me. She said she had been looking for me along with others.
53. I was at the Kensington Sports Centre for about an hour when I was moved by the police to the Christian Centre on Latimer Road, which is where people were taking those that could not find loved ones. At this point I was going crazy, and was distraught as I had lost my daughter and I was beginning to worry whether she had gotten out alive.
54. It was very busy at the Christian Centre and the people taking details took my name and my full details as well as those of I [REDACTED]. I was put on a sofa in a crowded room where other survivors were sitting, many also were waiting for loved ones.
55. Whilst I was there, my friend Kay was looking for L [REDACTED] in both the Christian Centre and the surrounding area. I was in a total state of shock and distress. I just kept calling out my daughter's name and looking everywhere for her. I cannot even explain how I was

feeling, the feeling of loss and fear was beyond words. I felt sick and just wanted to vomit; it was like being in a living nightmare. It is impossible to explain the feelings of pain and horror when you believe that you have lost your young child. The world was just spinning. I also felt guilty for being in front of my daughter rather than behind her. However, I think that if I had not led the way we may never have gotten out of the burning Tower.

56. Whilst in the Christian Centre, Marcio Gomes' sister or sister-in-law found me and told me that L [REDACTED] had been taken to a hospital. I was so relieved that she had been found and seemed to be alive, as now I had hope when it was lost minutes before. However, I was still terrified that there could have been a mistake and that L [REDACTED] had not really survived. Thoughts ran through my mind, and I even started to worry if she was in a bad way and whether she might not survive in hospital. I had no idea how her condition was.
57. I was told that my child was at Kings College Hospital. I believe that I was taken there by my friend's husband, but many parts of the events during the morning of the fire are hard to recall due to the physical and emotional state I was in, especially after I thought I had lost L [REDACTED]. When we arrived at the hospital we went straight to the Accident and Emergency Department, whereupon they told us to wait and that they would investigate whether my daughter had been admitted. I gave my daughter's name, a description of her appearance and the clothes that she was wearing.
58. We waited for some time. I was lying on a chair on my friend's lap, as I had no more energy left. I felt helpless both in relation to my own condition, but more so because of L [REDACTED]'s condition.
59. My friend gave me some milk as I was feeling dizzy. However, I then felt sick and my friend took me to the toilet where I vomited. After about an hour of waiting in the Accident and Emergency Department's waiting room, a member of staff came and told me that L [REDACTED] was not there.
60. When I heard this, I just wanted to give up and collapse in despair. I was completely distraught. This was the worst I have ever felt; all hope flooded from my body. My friends had to physically drag me to move me to the car in order to go to the next hospital taking victims of the fire, which was the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital. The reason we were going there was because my friend had said we should try looking for L [REDACTED] at

that hospital. At this point I was just being taken around by my friends, as I had no energy. I was exhausted, physically and mentally. I was not thinking and I was simply going along with my friends, praying that we would find my daughter and that she was all right.

61. While driving to Chelsea and Westminster Hospital my condition became worse, I just could not move, which my friends could see. They were becoming more and more concerned for my own health. They felt they had no choice but to take me to the nearest Accident and Emergency, which was St Mary's in Paddington. My friend an [REDACTED] lady called Leah Tedros, took me into Accident and Emergency Department. We told the reception at the hospital that we had come from Grenfell Tower fire. We waited for about an hour to be seen by a nurse. She took me into a room and checked me over.
62. I was then seen by a doctor at the hospital. While I was being seen by the doctor I was crying and just kept saying there was nothing wrong with me. I later discovered that I had suffered from the smoke. I am going to go and see the doctor to have a thorough examination.
63. In the hospital I kept saying that I was fine, and that I just wanted to find my daughter. I could not stop crying as I was so distraught about my missing daughter. Also, I believe that shock had kicked in, from everything that I had been through.
64. I also told the doctor who was caring for me, that I was desperate to find my daughter. The doctor that was caring for me told me to give them half an hour and they would see if they could find out where my daughter was. The doctor was a female, but I do not know her name.
65. I was given a drip and intravenous fluids as I was so weak. While lying on the bed in the hospital bay I passed out from exhaustion. My family were around me at this time. I remember someone (a woman) coming up to me and saying that they thought my daughter might be in the hospital but that I needed to identify a picture to see if it was my daughter. I cannot remember who this person was.
66. I looked at the photo and immediately recognised that the photo was of my daughter. In the photo there were lots of tubes coming out of her and she was in a hospital bed. It was

approximately just before 6:00 pm when I saw the photo. I remember hearing the words "brain damage", which made me even more worried.

67. When I saw the photo, I was so happy because I knew L [REDACTED] was alive and safe in hospital. I asked the medical team and my friends to take me straight to her. I was immediately taken to the seventh floor of the hospital which is the Intensive Care Unit. I was wearing a hospital gown at this time.
68. Prior to going in to see L [REDACTED], I do not remember if anyone told me what condition she was in. I was taken straight to her. When I went into the room she was lying in a bed unconscious and being tended to by nurses. My cousin, Rhawia Tekeste, was the main person talking to the staff. However, I do remember some reference brain damage being mentioned. I was also introduced to the police at this stage.
69. Due to her serious condition L [REDACTED] was kept in the Intensive Care Unit for ten days, and she was in an induced coma.
70. I found out a few weeks after the fire that Simba, our dog, had been found dead. I had been told this by a policewoman.
71. When L [REDACTED] woke up, she asked why she was in hospital and why I was not. I do not remember the date when she woke up as everything was a blur at this time, but she remained in hospital for ten days. She also asked for Simba, and I had to tell her that our pet dog had died in the fire. L [REDACTED] was devastated. We had a funeral for Simba which was helpful as part of the grieving process, especially for L [REDACTED] my daughter. L [REDACTED] and Simba were inseparable as she had had him from a few weeks old up until he was two years old. They were always together when L [REDACTED] was not at school.

Injuries suffered

72. After the fire all I cared about was that my daughter was found and had escaped the fire. I did not take any notice about myself although I know I was exhausted and eventually collapsed in the hospital as set out above. At present I do not know what physical injuries I have suffered including from the smoke. Mentally, I was ok immediately after the fire. However, since then I have started to suffer mentally as set out below under Medical Issues.

73. My daughter has suffered both more than me physically and had suffered mentally. In terms of physical injuries, she suffered two main injuries. The first was a burn on her arm. This was probably caused when the Fire Brigade carried her out of the Tower, unconscious, and I believe debris may have fallen from the Tower onto her arm causing the burn injury. Secondly, she was also was in an induced coma for approximately ten days as she suffered smoke damage injuries to her lungs.
74. I know from the medical Discharge Summary dated 23rd June 2017 for my daughter that she was treated for **[cyanide poisoning with hydroxycobalamin]**.
75. In addition to the physical injuries my daughter also suffered psychological trauma. This has been terrible. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Pre-Fire Family Life & Subsequent Life & Injuries [REDACTED]

76. My daughter **[has suffered physical injuries in the form of a burn on her arm and serious problems due to the smoke inhalation, including having to put her in a coma.]** However, her injuries and mine go much further than the physical. We have been seriously damaged emotionally, especially due to the losses we have suffered and the experiences of the fire.
77. In order to convey the extent of this trauma and psychological impact, I feel that I have to set out our life before the fire so that a comparison can be made with what we have lost. For example, as mentioned above, my daughter and I spent a great deal of time with the Choucair family, nearly all of whom died in the fire, including the children who my daughter would spend most of her time with.
78. I described my family before the fire as my daughter, our dog Simba and me. However, we also saw the Choucair family as part of our family and to have lost six members of that family in one night is terrible. As is set out below, my daughter spent a large part of her time with them and she cannot comprehend how they have all just gone. Also, our dog was lost in the fire, and he was part of our little family unit.

79. This means that our family, without the Choucairs, is just us two. We lost our support network, and people we really loved.
80. My daughter and I lived together happily in our flat at Grenfell Tower and we had made it our home. I had decorated it to a high standard and made it exactly how we wanted it. We felt safe, cosy in our flat and it was a place of sanctuary. There was also a strong sense of community within the Grenfell Tower.
81. My weekday routines usually consisted of taking my daughter to school in the morning before going to work, although, sometimes she would go on her own. The school was only ten minutes away from our home, which meant that she could walk there on her own. She had been attending her school for approximately five years. These were friends that she had had for a long time and enjoyed going school.
82. After, I had dropped her off at school (when she had not walked on her own), I would walk to the gym. After finishing in the gym, I would walk to work which is about thirty minutes away. I used to enjoy going to the gym and felt good about myself and my life.
83. Having finished at the gym, I would then go to work which was about half an hour's walk away from my home. I would walk there and get to work for about 11:00 am. I would start to see clients shortly thereafter and would work through to 8:00 pm.
84. My daughter would finish school around 3:30pm and she would normally go to Nadia (one of the Chouchairs and our neighbour) and stay there with her and the children at their flat 193, until I got home.
85. As mentioned above, Nadia lived on floor 22 with her husband Bassem Choucair and their children Mirna (13 years), Fatima (10 years) and Zainab (3 years). Tragically, Nadia, her husband and three children as well as Nadia's mother, Sirria Choucair, who lived on floor 22, in Flat 191, were all lost in the fire.
86. As already mentioned I had previously, I had lived at flat 191 but entered into a three-way flat swap, with my daughter and I moving into flat 186. The loss of Nadia and her family, especially the children, has had a serious impact on my daughter's life. My daughter would stay at Nadia's until I came home from work. Nadia would cook her family and my daughter's dinner.

87. I knew Nadia through her sister, Sawson Choucair, who lived with her mother, Sirria Choucair, on the same floor as Nadia, in flat 191. Sawson survived the fire as she was out on the night of the fire. I believe I first met the family approximately 11 years ago.
88. Nadia, her husband and children were like an extension of my own family and we were all extremely close.
89. The loss of this complete family has had a massive impact on me, but more importantly and most profoundly it has had a terrible impact on my daughter. The family were more than simply neighbours; they were our family. We would in effect live and interact together as one family unit.
90. On Friday evenings, Nadia would take her children and my daughter to the Christian Centre in Latimer Road, to do activities. My daughter would return home with Nadia and her children where she would make them dinner and my daughter would then normally stay there for the night. After work, I would pop in to say goodnight, but she would remain there as we saw Nadia's home as simply an extension of our home and vice versa. On Saturdays I would go to work, and my daughter would spend the day with Nadia and her family.
91. The children would play together, and Nadia would also take them out every Saturday. Nadia always did something with them. In addition to other trips out, Nadia would take all the children swimming. Furthermore, on Saturdays after I finished work I would go to Nadia's, although I would not stay late because she was a teacher and had to prepare for her lessons on Monday. Sometimes my daughter would come back with me and other times she would stay there with Nadia's children. Even though my daughter would stay over, she was in effect just in the next room as our flats were literally minutes away.
92. Sunday is my day off work, which is the time that my daughter and I would spend together. We always had this time as our time. I cherish my time with my daughter and more so since the fire. On Sunday mornings we would get up late or if she was at Nadia's I would get her. We would snuggle up in bed together and chat away to each other, then plan what we were going to do for the day.

93. Before the fire, my daughter and I had a lovely life together. We were both very happy and enjoyed having time together or being surrounded by family and friends.
94. Yet, our lives were torn apart following the fire including tragically losing people that we considered as our own family and whom we loved.
95. I hope that by explaining how much the Chouciar family were part of our lives, that it will be appreciated that the injuries my daughter has suffered extend beyond what she has been through physically or just from the trauma of the fire itself. The bereavement and loss of that family from our lives has also had a great effect on her mentally. They were all a large part of her life and her extended family was torn from her at such a young age.
96. L [REDACTED]'s life is not the same. She is no longer surrounded by the Chouchair family. She does not go swimming with them, and she does not go to the park with them on Saturday. I believe that she now feels alone and hollow. I know that I certainly do, as I miss them so much.

Concerns about fire safety

97. I never had specific concerns about the fire safety of the flats as it never crossed my mind that such a tragedy would occur. I always believed that a council owned property would meet all the necessary fire safety requirements and that they would have in place steps to deal with a fire.

Concerns about renovations to Grenfell Tower

98. When the renovations were undertaken on the Tower, I remember the workmen coming around. They advised me that there was asbestos in our flat and they would remove it. I did not have any specific concerns about the renovations on the flat. I did not know about the exact modifications that were carried out on the Tower, but I believed that the council were making the place look nice and intending to improve the property. This was the first time in twenty years that they had undertaken any refurbishments.
99. With regard to the floor numbering on each level, after the renovations this became incorrect and out of sequence, due to the Tower having additional floors added at a later date. This meant that the flat we lived in had originally been on floor 18 but now it

became floor 21. The lifts therefore indicated that we lived on floor 21, but the council did not change the floor numbers in the stairwell, which still indicated that we were on floor 18.

100. I was aware of the error but up until the fire it had never impacted me. It almost certainly would have caused confusion to fire fighters, however, because people calling from floors were likely referring to the floor number according to the lift, but not the floor number according to the stairs. The fire fighters would have been using the stairs to locate which floor they were coming to.
101. I believe that the concierge desk was removed when the council were undertaking the refurbishments.
102. Also, our front door was changed, and we were given a selection of doors to choose from. We chose one with a glass arch at the top of it.
103. Approximately 2 years ago, I got a new boiler in my kitchen. Initially, TMO advised that they would place the new boilers in the hallways of the flats. They wanted them to be placed above the electric meters which I believed would have been very dangerous. They in effect wanted it placed next to our only exit from the flat. I had concerns about this. Many people complained about this saying that it was a ridiculous idea and eventually TMO conceded. Mine was fitted in the kitchen.
104. Other residents were also having the same dispute with TMO and we argued together against them.
105. During the refurbishments the TMO also placed heaters in the living room. However, the piping forming part of the central heating system was not boxed in and as such was completely visible, meaning that if someone touched the pipes they would be burnt by the heat in them. Smoke alarms were also fitted at the same time, one in the kitchen and one outside L [REDACTED]'s room.
106. The replacement windows that were installed approximately three years ago were double glazed. They had a large ledge whereas the previous windows did not. The ledge was large enough to place a vase on. The quality of the refurbishment was to my mind good, as the windows appeared to be of good quality and looked very nice. However, in

retrospect although the windows looked nice they appear to have had serious defects in terms of the fire.

107. At the same time that the boiler was fitted, a plastic extractor fan was also fitted into the kitchen window.

Housing after the fire

108. After the fire, I was initially housed in a hotel which basically consisted of a bedroom and a bathroom. We had no kitchen and had to eat the food which was provided by the hotel. We remained in a hotel until April 2018, which has been terrible. I complained constantly to RBKC that my daughter couldn't continue to live in a hotel room, especially after everything that she has been through.
109. Prior to the fire we would have cousins and a niece come to stay with us. Previously, they would stay overnight or for a long weekend. However, for the period of almost a year that we were placed in a hotel none of our family could stay, as we were living in one cramped bedroom and bathroom but no kitchen. This added extra stress to an already horrendous situation because it made it hard for us to have family around us at this tragic time and we lost out on another support network. I could not even make my daughter dinner during the time that we were in a hotel. We had to eat prepared food from the hotel or outside.
110. Even though it may sound glamorous living in a hotel, I can assure you that it is not. This is especially true when you are not able to have a home cooked meal around the table as a family. We have been craving a normal stable family life, in a home of our own.
111. Since we have been re-housed, as of April 2018, we now have a family member from [REDACTED] who has come to support us at this terrible time. She is staying with me and my daughter just for a period of time in order help us through the trauma. Even the fact that there is someone else in the house makes a difference, as I am finding it hard not having all the people around me that I used to have in my life. They were all lost in the fire.
112. It was only after continuously complaining by myself and having my solicitor threatening the council, that we were eventually moved out of the hotel into temporary accommodation and we are now waiting for permanent accommodation.

113. In addition to actually trying to get housed, there have been continued problems with our rights under the "Right to Buy Scheme", not least because there are problems such as it being virtually impossible to purchase a property under this scheme due to the increase in the values of properties provided under that scheme.

Initial support

114. In the days following the fire I spent my whole time at the hospital with my daughter so I did not have any contact with RBKC during this time. My priority was my daughter and her health and well being. It was only after my daughter was released from hospital (approximately three weeks after the fire) that I was able to even to start to think about trying to get our lives together in terms of housing, provisions, lost documents etc.

The months following the fire

115. As stated above, we were housed by RBKC initially in a hotel and later in in a house. In terms of the support from RBKC, separate from the housing, we did not receive any support from the council. We were assigned a key worker, called Dara, a couple of days before my daughter left the hospital. He was the person who initially arranged for us to be provided with a room in a hotel. I do not remember any other support provided by RBKC. The hotel room we stayed in was extremely small, especially considering what my daughter and I been through. It felt claustrophobic. The room was upstairs, and you had to go up in a lift and my daughter was very scared of the place as a result of what she had been through in the fire. What might happen in the hotel, during a fire, was always playing on her mind.
116. We received help with taxis when we had to attend appointments. We did not receive any significant help from RBKC. Help with housing and us finally getting suitable accommodation took nearly a year of battling them and pushing by me and my solicitors.
117. Most of the help and support came from charities, volunteers, the church and other such organisations.

Additional Information

118. I would make a number of other comments regarding my knowledge of various matters relating to Grenfell Tower, which I believe may be relevant at this stage.
119. Prior to the fire, I believed that if there was a fire we should just get out, but this was contrary to what we were told by the emergency services on the night of the fire. When I realised that there was a fire, my first reaction was to get out. This was based on common sense. The reason I didn't stay put was due to common sense that it was better to just get out or we would be trapped. However, when the fire had started, I first went out onto the communal landing on our floor. People from the lower floors who had come up told us to go back into our flats. They also told us to shut the door as this is what the fire services had told them. Thankfully, we were lucky, in the end and we escaped.
120. We had two smoke alarms in our flat which were fitted by RBKC. One was in the kitchen and one was outside my daughter's room. in the hallway. I do not remember it being tested but it had gone off by accident while I was cooking, but I cannot remember when it last went off. There was an error at page 4 of my police interview record where I have said that the front door to our flat always shut on its own. To clarify the door did not have an automatic hinge to close the door and you had to close it after you.
121. Our front door had been changed at the time that the modifications were carried out on the flat. I did not notice anything specific about the door as it is not something that I would take much notice of.
122. We had an extractor fan both in the bathroom and the kitchen, both of which were working prior to the fire.
123. Prior to the fire, I had concerns regarding the council wishing to install the boiler in the corridor of my hallway right above the electrical box. I believed that the hallway was not the place for a boiler and I refused to let them do this. I refused them entry into my flat as a result. They eventually conceded and installed the boiler in the kitchen which is where it should have been, in any event.
124. I was also concerned about the pipes which they had installed inside the flat. They were fixed to the ceiling and were visible and they looked horrible. They could easily be

damaged if things were being moved, and bumped against them as they were not enclosed.

125. I raised these concerns mainly through Nadia, Mr Shah (who was on the 18th floor), and a person called Eddie (though I am not sure of his details). These people liaised with the TMO on behalf of the residents.


Conclusion

126. I have endeavoured to set out in my own words what my daughter and I went through as a result of the fire at Grenfell Tower. However, it should be appreciated that without actually experiencing the terrifying incident, as I and my daughter did, I believe that anyone reading this statement will not have a real appreciation of the terror we encountered. I have never been so scared in my life, but worst still was to experience this terror knowing that my daughter was also involved. It pains me to understand the trauma she has been through. No child should have to go through that. My heart aches when I think about her and what she endured and what she continues to suffer. This is something that will never leave her, she is scarred on her arm physically from the burn wound and she is scarred mentally. I feel helpless as I cannot take the pain and suffering away from my child. As a parent, one of the worst feeling is the inability to take away the fear and distress your daughter is suffering.
127. My desire is that such a tragedy never happens again and that no other families have to go through the trauma that the residents of Grenfell Tower had thrown at them, through no fault of their own. People involved in this Inquiry must never forget, when looking at the

128. fire, that underlying all this is a human tragedy that can never be forgotten and must never happen again.

Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I confirm that I am willing that the statement forms part of the evidence before the Inquiry, and may be published on the Inquiry's website, save for redactions indicated in the text, and those applied by the Inquiry.

Signed:  _____

Helen Gebremeskel

20.05.18

Dated: _____