

Witness Statement of: Jean Saalabi

No. of statement: 1

Exhibits: 1

Date of statement: 4/6/18

GRENFELL TOWER PUBLIC INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF JEAN SAALABI

I, JEAN SAALABI, will say as follows:

1. I make this statement about the events of the night of 14th June 2017 for the purposes of Phase 1 of the Grenfell Tower Public Inquiry. I wish to make a further statement as part of Phase 2 of the Inquiry.

Background

2. I live at [REDACTED] Testerton Walk. I have lived here since 1982. On the night of the fire my two sons Darren and Mark lived with me. Darren was [REDACTED] years old and Mark was [REDACTED] years old.

3. [REDACTED]

4. My flat is a maisonette. The two bedrooms are on the bottom floor and the kitchen, living area and my bedroom is on the top floor. You can see Grenfell Tower from the balcony which attaches to the living room. It really isn't very

far away at all. I think maybe 150 metres or so. When you leave the flat, the Tower is at the end of the corridor.

5. I have lived at Testerton Walk for over 30 years and I have many friends and family in the area. My daughter Sasha lives [REDACTED] with her two children. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

14th June 2017

6. On the night of the fire I had my dinner and I went to bed at the usual time. I usually go to bed at about 10pm or 11pm. Mark and Darren were in as well, they weren't in the living room with me though.
7. I didn't wake up because of the fire but because Sasha came knocking on my door. She must have woken up half the Walkway. It must have been about 1.30am. Sasha banged on the door and told us that that there was a fire in the tower block. Sasha said that she thought it was a bomb because it was so bad. She sounded very panicky. She was in a hell of a state. She kept on crying and saying 'those poor people' When I saw her at the door I thought something must have happened to one of the kids. I was worried and I felt panicked. Sasha's daughter [REDACTED] was with her at the door. Sasha's son [REDACTED] had left Sasha's house at the same time as her but didn't stop at mine and carried on around the corner to his friend's house. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
8. Darren and Mark came to the door with me. Mark ran off to go and see if he could help and Darren and I ran back along the walkway with Sasha and [REDACTED] to Barandon Walk. When we got to the end of the Walkway, I could see the Tower clearly. It is literally at the end of the Walkway it is that close. I could see that the fire was already across a couple of floors, maybe three of them. Sasha said that the fire had started around the other side of the Tower,

the side facing the sports centre. By the time I saw it, it was already on the side facing the Walkways. I thought it looked like it was already up to about floor eight. There were other people from the community standing at the top of Barandon Walk as well, I can't remember who exactly. I remember seeing Johnny, a guy I know from the Grenfell Tower. I remember thinking that it was good that he had got out.

9. As soon as I saw it I thought that it was really serious. I remember thinking immediately that lots of people weren't going to make it out alive. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. It was too much to take in. It was shocking.
10. We weren't standing there for very long when it suddenly went up. I can't remember the timing exactly, but it must have been close to 1.45am. It was like a matchbox, a firecracker. I can clearly remember the sound of it going 'click click click' as the fire went up each floor of the tower block. You could see that it was the cladding that was burning, it wasn't like it was burning from the inside out, it was burning from the outside in. Large pieces of burning cladding started falling off the building as well. I was really worried that they would fall on us, the Tower was so close. The burning cladding was falling into the trees in between us and the Tower. The trees were right in front of us, I was really worried that the trees would go up in flames as well. The police weren't even there at this point to move us away.
11. It was terrible. You could hear people screaming from the Tower. I just felt so helpless. Those poor people. There was nothing that I could do though. People standing on the walkway were shouting up at them to stay where they were and get away from the windows. Once I saw the fire go up though, I could tell that lots of people weren't going to make it out. I thought about my friends in the Tower who I knew wouldn't have been able to get out in time.
12. Sacha and [REDACTED] and I went to Sacha's flat to get away from the burning cladding and to see if we could find out what was going on. Darren didn't want to see any more and went back to my flat. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] We stood [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] where we could see into the bottom of the Tower. There were people standing there, the police and loads of fire fighters standing in the open bit at the bottom of the Tower. There was only one fire engine though. From the Walkway I saw loads of fire engines lined up along the road behind the Tower but only one engine could fit in the space at the bottom of the Tower. It didn't used to be like that but since the development of the leisure centre and school, no other fire engines could fit in.

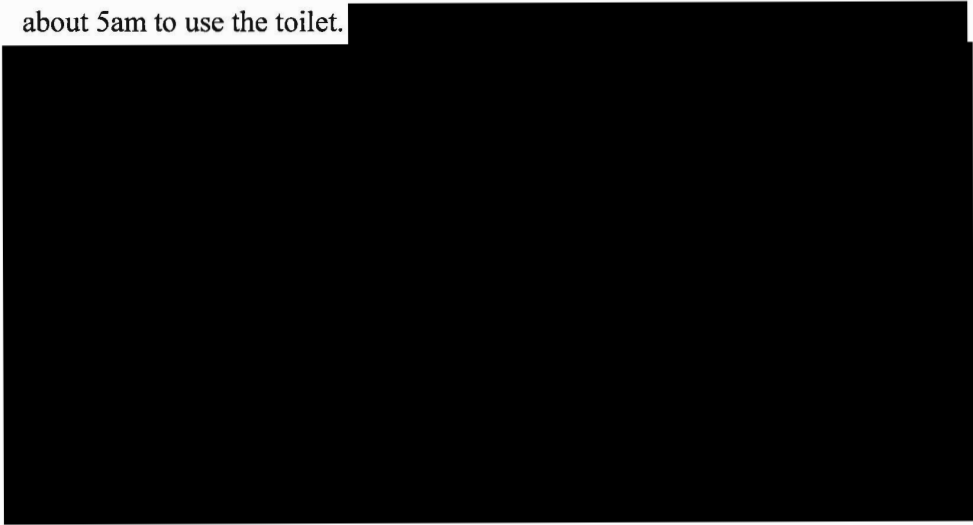
13. It was clear that nobody had seen a fire like it before. You get warehouse fires like that but never a residential fire. I've seen residential fires before but they've always been contained to one flat. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Everybody was in such a panic. I think that the fire fighters did a good job, they risked their lives to go in there, but it was too late though, they couldn't even get in to try and get people out.
14. At this point there was still no cordoned-off areas. I thought that the police and fire brigade should be moving all these people on because it was dangerous with all the burning cladding falling off the building and hitting the ground.
15. Whilst we were outside Sacha's flat, two police officers told me, Sacha and [REDACTED] to go inside. We were only inside the flat for about 10 minutes when some other police officers banged on the front door and told us that we need to leave. The police who spoke to us didn't sound panicky or anything, they were very calm. They were definitely serious though that we had to get out. We saw them banging on Sacha's neighbour's doors and when nobody answered they kicked the door in to check that nobody was in there. This must have been at about 2am.
16. We left and went back to my flat, which is where Darren was, but the police came and told us that we needed to leave there as well. This was at about



2.15am. We didn't have time to grab anything. We just left. I was just in my nightdress.

17. I walked to the ramp between the Walkways and that's where I waited. There were quite a few of us waiting there. I can't remember who exactly. Darren went to go and find Mark and Sasha, and [REDACTED] went and walked around. There are benches on the ramp area so I sat there. The ramp area isn't far from the Tower, maybe 300 metres. There is a green area full of trees right in front of the ramp area and then the Tower is at the end of that. Even with the trees though, you could see the Tower very clearly. The Tower was like a furnace, pure red. It was like somebody had poured gasoline on it, or like a matchbox.
18. I couldn't believe how quickly the fire had gone up. I thought of my friends in the Tower. I have a friend who lives on the 20th floor of the building, Moses. I thought to myself that Moses has bad knees and I knew that he wouldn't have made it out alive. My friend Sue used to live on the 9th floor but she passed away six years ago. I was pleased that she had already passed and that this wasn't happening to her. She would have been stuck like Moses.
19. Looking at the Tower made me sad and angry. It should never have happened. I didn't understand how something like this could have happen. I couldn't believe that it was possible for this kind of thing to happen to a residential tower block.
20. I tried not to watch it. All night I could still hear the people in the Tower screaming. It was horrific. The screaming was the worst part. The sound is something that still haunts me. Sometimes I wake up in the night and I can still hear the screaming. It's a sound that I will never forget. It was so hopeless. There was nothing that anybody could have done for the people trapped in the Tower. I just hoped that the people in there passed out before the flames got to them.

21. I was just in my nightdress but you didn't need anything else because of the heat the Tower was giving off. Smoke was belching out of the top of the building and the air smelt of smoke. I think the wind must have been blowing the other way because there was so much smoke but it wasn't really bad where I was standing. The Tower wasn't blocked by smoke or anything.

22. There were two police officers standing outside Testerton Walk stopping people from getting back into the building. They let me back into my flat at about 5am to use the toilet.



23. As the night went on, people from all the Walkways congregated on the ramp. I don't know how many people there were. Volunteers came by and gave us bottles of water and biscuits. Darren left fairly early because he had work at 5am. At some point, I'm not sure when, St Clement's church opened up and let people in for some food or a cup of tea. I went to the church once to get a bottle of water at about 11am but I didn't stay there. I mainly stayed on the ramp. Sacha and  came and went. Mark carried on helping people and  stayed at his friends house around the corner.

24. I stayed on the ramp for the whole day and most of the evening. I know that some people were offered hotels and temporary accommodation but I wasn't offered anything. I'm not sure what they expected us to do.

25. I'm not sure when they finally got the fire under control. It was light but I have no idea what time. The Tower carried on burning for days afterwards. You could still see the embers and fire flaring up. I don't know how long it was before it finally stopped burning.

The aftermath of the fire

26. The police finally let me back into the flat at about 9pm that evening. I just wanted to be at home though. I've lived here for 36 years and even with the fire, I didn't want to be anywhere else. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

27. When they let us back into my flat there was no hot water, no gas no heating or anything. The flat smelt of smoke but because the windows were shut, it didn't smell too bad.

28. I'm a strong person. Initially I just felt numb. Thinking back to the days after the fire though, I was affected more than I realised. I find it difficult to sleep. I think it's the stress of it all and the impact it's had on my family.

29. I have Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) which affects my breathing. My breathing has been much worse since the fire. I have had to use my inhaler a lot more and I have had to go to the Westway for rescue packs more than usual. I get a rescue pack when my breathing is particularly bad and I normally need one once or twice a year. I have had to use five rescue packs since the fire.

30. My doctor has told me that there is more inflammation in my lungs and that the fire has done permanent damage. I now find it much harder to go outside and I can't walk as far without getting really out of breath.

Friends in the Tower

31. My friend Moses lived on the 24th floor. Moses' real name is Raymond Bernard. I don't know why we called him Moses but everybody did. Moses was a lovely, lovely man. I'd known him for got to be about 30 years. I hadn't seen him as much over the past few years because he'd become bad on his legs. He would always make the effort on my birthday though and he would meet me at the bookies. He used to like the bookies. I remember one time, Moses was refunded some money that he had overpaid the council. He came down to see me and gave me 60 quid. He had no reason to or anything, he was that kind of guy.
32. I heard that on the night of the fire he was supposed to stay at his girlfriend's but for whatever reason he didn't. There was no chance of Moses getting out. He was bad on his legs and he lived at the top of the Tower. I went to Mose's memorial as they hadn't identified his body.
33. My friend Dennis Murphy lived on the 15th floor of the Tower. He didn't make it out in time either. I'd known Dennis for years. He was a jack the lad type. You'd always see him walking around the estate in his flat cap. When Sue was alive, the three of us would meet in Dennis' flat for a laugh and a drink. I miss Dennis and it makes me sad to think that he isn't here any more. We had known each other for years and years – probably about 10 years. We didn't see each other as regularly since Sue had died but I still considered him a good friend. I saw something on Facebook the other day about him, it was an anniversary of some kind. It made me sad to think about him and I had real difficulty sleeping that night. I went to Dennis' funeral.
34. My friend Steve Power lived on the 13th floor. He was another local face on the estate who I had known for years and years. He was one of those faces that you would see around. He was always walking his three dogs. He knew everyone. I couldn't go to his memorial because I only found out about it on the day that it happened.

35. Some of the people who didn't make it out that night were cremated in the Tower.
36. I deal with their deaths in my own way. For about 6 months after the fire I lit three candles every evening in my home, one each for Moses, Dennis and Steve. Now I cross myself every time I walk past the Tower, that is my way of showing my respect to them.

Impact on the community

37. Not many people returned to the Walkway the night after the fire. Over the next couple of days though, people did start to return. All this time later lots of people still haven't been able to move back in and are still in temporary accommodation. The Walkway is much quieter than it used to be.
38. I hate the Tower; it is like a tombstone right in the middle of the estate. How are people supposed to move on when it is just there as a constant reminder. I think it's terrible that the Tower still isn't covered. I think about it every time I see it. I think about the different weather types, if it's raining I think that the ashes are getting wet, if it snows I think that's cold for them, if it's windy I think that they are getting blown away. It makes me sad and I think that it is disrespectful to those who have passed. I just hope that it's covered by the anniversary.
39. I think that the community is stronger now. Everybody is there to support each other. There is a lot of anger in the community though. People want to know why this happened.
40. I am happy for my statement to be made public and read out loud as part of the Public Inquiry. I do not want to give evidence in person. I find it difficult to talk about these things.

41. There is a lot more that I would like to say about they history and background of the fire and the aftermath. I understand that I will be allowed an opportunity to give a further statement about these matters at a later date. I would like to make a further statement as part of Phase 2 to discuss these issues.

Statement of truth

I believe that the facts stated in this statement are true.

I am willing for this statement to form part of the evidence before the Inquiry and for it to be published on the Inquiry's website.

Signed: 

Dated: 4/6/18