

Witness Statement of: Paul Norbert

No. of statement: 1

Exhibits: 0

Date of statement: 02.06.2018

GRENFELL TOWER PUBLIC INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF PAUL NORBERT

I, PAUL NORBERT, will say as follows:

1. This statement is my account of events that took place on 14th June 2017. This statement is for the purposes of Phase 1 of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry. I wish to make a further statement as part of Phase 2 of the Inquiry.

Background

2. I am a self-employed Driving Instructor.
3. I am currently living in temporary accommodation – a one bedroom flat in West London, which I moved into on the 1st January 2018, having spent six months in a hotel because of the fire.
4. I first moved into Flat [REDACTED] on Testerton Walk on the 1st January 1997. I was already familiar with the area and community having grown up on [REDACTED] [REDACTED] where I lived with my mother since 1978. My flat is close to Grenfell Tower and you can see it from the window in my living room.

14th June 2017

5. On the night of the fire I was at home with my girlfriend. I went to sleep at around 12:40am. I had to be up for 7:30am the next morning to go to work. I had taken a sleep aid at around 12:15am to help me sleep.
6. At around 1:30am my girlfriend tried to wake me up but because I was tired and because of the sleeping aid I had taken, I was not compos mentis and I could not understand what she was saying. Although I remember her saying something about people being at the door and a fire, I was too dazed to care and went back to sleep. She tried to wake me several times throughout the night without success.
7. At around 4am, maybe because I had gotten some sleep by then or because the sleeping aid was wearing off, and because she kept on shaking me to wake up, I reluctantly got out of bed to see what was happening. My girlfriend told me that about four or five people had knocked on our door since 1:30am shouting about a fire, she could hear people in the hallways saying that everyone needed to leave the building. I still did not believe that anything was going on but I reluctantly got out of bed.
8. As soon as I got up I could smell something burning; I always leave my bedroom and living room windows slightly open for ventilation. I also have a heightened sense of smell. The smell was not overwhelming but you knew that something was definitely burning. I went to my living room window which faces out onto Hurstway Walk, and I peeked my head outside of the window and looked to my right; I could see the side of the Tower burning from about half-way up to the top of the building. I saw black smoke coming of the Tower and lots of police and firefighters. I knew people who lived in Grenfell Tower. I was in shock but I didn't think that the people I knew would be in any danger.
9. Although I have a balcony I did not go on to it because I was not dressed at this point. It looked like a serious fire, but I believed that it would be put out.

In all of my years in this country I have never seen a fire which has not been put out reasonably quickly and with minimal casualties. Within moments of peaking outside the window and seeing the fire, I threw on some clothes grabbed my mobile phone and rushed outside of my flat with my girlfriend.

10. We went to the main entrance of our building where my neighbours and other Walkway residents were congregated, everyone was looking at the fire and people were telling each other about what they had seen and speculating as to how it started. It became clear from what everyone was saying that we would not be allowed back into our flats. We were stood there for about 20 minutes. The fire did not slow down; it just kept blazing and blazing. I saw a man in a window on one of the middle floors of the Tower waving some material, trying to signal. I smoke cigarettes when I am stressed and in those twenty minutes I had smoked the two cigarettes I had on me and I was very stressed at the time, feeling helpless, confused, tired and frustrated.
11. Because we thought that we wouldn't be allowed back into our flats, I went with my girlfriend to my car which was parked near Grenfell Walk and St Clements's Church, with the intention of going to buy more cigarettes, but I could only move the car one yard, because of all the police cars, ambulances and fire engines that were there, everything was at a standstill.
12. I went in and out of the Church for a cup of tea and to help people. I remember a teenage boy who was in such a state because his mother was in the Tower. I did not know him personally but I tried to comfort him.
13. After an hour, just after 6am, it became clear that we would not be able to move the car anywhere so I reversed and parked it again. We went back to Testerton Walk and saw that people were being allowed back in. I went back to my flat and made tea or something like that. About an hour later at about 7am, we were told, by a police officer I think, who had come into the building and knocked on our doors that we would have to evacuate and find somewhere else to sleep for the night. They suggested that we stay at St Clement's Church or some other emergency accommodation. I knew I had to get some sleep and

I needed some space. I knew I could not stay at either of those places. So, I grabbed a few items, toiletries etc. and the essentials for making a hotel booking, like my wallet. I then called my friend who works in a hotel in Bayswater as I knew he would be able to give me a deal on a room for the night.

14. My girlfriend and I had gotten into a fight about something, and because of all the chaos and how I was mentally feeling, I had to get away from it all, gather my thoughts and calm myself down. I was very stressed at this point. I drove to a coffee shop on Ladbroke Grove. I remember calling work a little after at 9am to let them know what had happened and to tell them that I would not be able to work. I checked into the hotel I had booked in Bayswater, but I cannot remember what I did after this. I have lost those six or seven hours.

15. At 7pm I went back to the Walk to see if I would be allowed to collect some belongings. When I arrived, there was already a queue of other residents. The police were only allowing us in one at a time. The police escorted people quickly to their flats so they could collect some belongings and then get out. I got into my flat in this way, and I packed an over-night bag and went back to the hotel.

16. I saw that the Tower was still burning. There were people and reporters with cameras around. You could just tell that they were waiting for the Tower to collapse, that was what everyone was expecting.

17. As the day went on, I became aware that the fire had brought up a deep sadness in me. [REDACTED].

People who I knew who died

18. I knew several people who lived in the Tower as I have lived in the area for so long. Some of my friends died in the fire.

19. I first met Raymond Bernard, who I knew as 'Moses', when I was 10 years old; I met him at a friend's house. Moses was a couple of years older and his girlfriend at the time was my friend's sister. Over the years we have gone to drinks together and we always used to stop for a chat whenever we saw each other.
20. I also knew Steven Power who had dogs he'd walk around the area; we first met thirty years ago and we have always been friendly.
21. I went to Bevington Primary School near Portobello Rd with Ernie Vital.
22. I used to volunteer at the Harrow Youth Club. I had volunteered for about four years. Yahya Hashim and Jessica Urbano would regularly attend and so I became familiar with them. I'm also good friends with Jessica's uncle Carlos so I also knew Jessica through him.
23. I found out about Jessica's death from her uncle, and about Moses and Steve from other people in the community, I can't remember exactly when this was. I didn't know how to feel. I was very sad to hear that they died that way, it took me a long time to process it.

Impact

24. The following day, on 15th June, I went back to my flat. At some point some people from the council came in to check on me. They took some details from me and I told them about how my mental health was. I told them that I could not stay in the flat. A couple of hours later I received a call telling me that I could stay at a hotel but they didn't tell me for how long I could stay there for. I went to a hotel on the 16th June 2017.
25. The novelty of living in a hotel wore off quickly. It was difficult as I never knew how long I would be able to stay there for. The council would only renew the room at the end of each month, so I had no certainty about where I was living. I could not settle. I wasn't able to establish any routines, which I

needed for my mental health. As time went on, the other Walkway residents staying there began to leave the hotel whilst I was still there. I wasn't able to cook my own food so would end up eating all my meals at a restaurant or getting takeaways which didn't help my health. I gained a lot of weight because I was out of my routine I wasn't attending the gym at the time although its something I enjoy .

26. I only realised in the aftermath of the fire that my flat was a place of safety and stability; it had a positive and comforting feeling because I knew everyone in the community and it was familiar. Being in the hotel and away from my friends and the local community made me feel isolated and alone, but I didn't want to go back to my flat because of all the chaos I knew that it wouldn't be good for my mental state.
27. People within the community and those who were supposed to be representing the community were arguing with each other over everything, the community was not like that before the fire, although the fire brought people together it also kicked up a storm.
28. I didn't return to work for two months and only did so because I still had to make payments to the company I work for, for the cost of the car which I have. I still have not been able to make a full return to work
29. I'm still trying to cope with my own life and all the changes over the last year. I'm trying to establish my routines and to look after my mental health so I have been consciously disengaging with what happened on the night of the fire and the effects it has had on the community. I still come back to the community regularly as I play badminton on a weekly basis at the Kensington Leisure Centre and I know many people who still live here.
30. I know is that the fire has changed my life . I have spoken to a therapist about the fire. There is a lot more I can say about how this fire and what I witnessed has impacted my life and how I feel but I don't wish to go into detail in this statement about this. I'm more anxious and irritable now and my mental state

is very fragile. I feel very stressed. I haven't been able to return to work fully because I still do not feel ready. I'm trying hard to get back into a routine and I'm taking things day by day.

Statement of truth

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

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

Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "P. Norbert", written over a horizontal line.

Dated:

2/6/18