

Witness Statement of: Christine Bonnett

No. of statement: 1

Exhibits: 3

Date of statement: 2 June 2018

GRENFELL TOWER PUBLIC INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF CHRISTINE BONNETT

I, CHRISTINE BONNETT, 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 for Phase 2 of the Inquiry.

Background

2. I have lived at [REDACTED] Hurstway Walk, W11 1WD, since 1979. I moved into the property with my family when I was seven years old. The property is a three bedroom maisonette. I live with my mother, Carmen. Before moving into Hurstway Walk we lived in Grenfell Tower in Flat 95 on the ninth floor for around three years. I have lived in this area my entire life and knew many of the Tower residents as a result.
3. From the balcony of our property you can see Grenfell Tower. From the balcony you can see two sides of Grenfell Tower; one side which looks towards Latimer Road station and one side which faces the community garden. Our home is very close to the Tower. The entrance to Hurstway Walk we always used to use is right by the Tower.

Community

4. I had lived in the Tower as a child. I grew up in there and played there with my friends. After I moved out, I still knew people who lived there. It is a community where everybody knows each other. You would see people every morning when you came out of the same entrance. You would see people at the bus stop or at the train station or at the local shop.
5. When I was a kid I once brought a friend home from school. I remember she said that the estate looked like a prison. It has never looked spectacular but it has always had a real community spirit and it's where I come from. As a child you could go and knock on a friend's door and then go out and play on the whole Estate. Even as an adult if someone was new to the area they would get brought in and made to feel welcome. There was a strong sense of community.
6. I work as a Children's Support Worker for a fostering agency.

14th June

7. On the evening of 13th June, I had come home from work, made dinner for my mum and me and watched TV. At the time I had a cyst on my back and I was not feeling very well. I had gone to bed at around midnight. Just before going to bed, I had been on the phone with my friend Khadine for around two hours. My mum was already asleep in her bed.
8. When I went to bed it was difficult for me to find a comfortable position because of the cyst so I was not in a deep sleep that night. I woke up when I saw my mobile phone screen light up. It had been on silent mode. I checked the phone and I saw that it was Khadine again. The call was at a few minutes after 2am. Sometimes when someone rings you that late, you might decide to ignore it and go back to sleep but Khadine is a good friend and I'd been talking to her earlier so I thought if she was calling me at that time, something must be up and that she could need my help.

9. From where Khadine lives, she can see the opposite side of Grenfell Tower from me. When I answered the phone she asked me if I could do her a favour. At the time I remember thinking 'what is that all about?' but I agreed. Then she told me that she thought that there was a fire in Grenfell Tower and could I go out on our balcony and tell her if I could see a fire. It was very early in the morning and I was tired so at first I was just trying to process what she was saying. Khadine didn't sound alarmed on the phone. We were both talking to each other calmly at that point.
10. Due to the pain from the cyst, I struggled up the stairs to the balcony. From the balcony you can see the Tower. I could see two sides of the Tower, one which faces in the direction of Latimer Road Station, the other faces towards our communal garden. At the furthest edge of the building I could see a kind of orange reddish light. I could not see any flames; it was more like a glow. I remember realising it was odd because I knew that at that time in the morning, I should not be able to see the outline of the building illuminated like that. I described the glow to Khadine and she said from where she was standing on the other side, she could see that it was a fire and that it was moving really fast. I took a photo from the balcony of what I could see. This photo is exhibited at **CB/1**.
11. I could not see many lights on at the windows in the building on the sides of the building that I could see, so I thought that most people must still be asleep and were not aware of what was going on. However I could hear a lot of shouting and screaming from other directions. I could hear people shouting 'help' from the Tower. It was horrible and shocking to hear.
12. Khadine told me that I needed to get my mum up. I remember thinking to myself, 'I've lived here all my life. We've had fires before and they've never been serious'. I thought they were going to put this one out like they had all the others. I didn't want to have to get my mum up. She is 84 years old [REDACTED] I stayed on the balcony watching the glow. I could see sparks coming off of the building. They were the kind of small sparks you see when there is a bonfire. I still couldn't see any flames at that point. I was still talking to Khadine and she started telling me that she could see police cars and fire engines near the leisure centre. Khadine told me again that I needed to wake my mum up.

13. After I got off the phone with Khadine, I put the radio on. I think it was Darren Adam on LBC. He was saying that he had heard there was a big fire in West London, and that if there was anyone in the area could they call in to tell him about it. I called in to the radio station while I was on the balcony. I explained that I could see the Tower. As I was talking to him I could see the glow moving. I remember I kept repeating 'oh my god, oh my god, it's moving'. Suddenly flames came from up and over the Tower. I could now see the fire eating away at the building. It was like things were happening really quickly but at the same time it felt like I was watching it in slow motion. I started to feel really panicky for the people in the building. I could see debris coming off the building, and I could hear it when it fell to the ground. Big sheets of material were flaming and flying off the building. I remember at the time thinking to myself that it was the cladding they had put on the Tower that was coming off. I knew that the Tower had been refurbished and that they had put cladding on the outside of the Tower. On the radio I was saying it was the cladding and the host was trying to play it safe. He said 'Oh we can't really say that, we don't really know that'. I said to him, "well I know it is! There have been fires here before and I've never experienced this..." I got off the phone after that.
14. After seeing how fast the flames were moving on the outside of the Tower, it started looking more serious and I realised I had to wake my mum up. I was worried about burning debris from the building landing on our balcony. When I got off the phone with the radio station, I went and woke her up. I tried to wake her up gently as she gets very startled when you wake her and I knew it was going to be worse because I was going to have to give her bad news. I told her that there was a fire in the Tower and that we might have to leave the flat. I started to get some things together for us. I took a painkiller to help dull the pain caused by my cyst.
15. By the time we got upstairs there was banging on the door. I opened the door and a police officer was standing in front of me and he told me that we needed to come out. He didn't tell us anything else about what was happening or where we needed to go. I know now that the police were telling everyone in the building that they needed to evacuate.

16. There wasn't time to get dressed, so I put a coat on over my pyjamas and put on some trainers. I helped my mum put her coat on over her nightie and helped her put on some slip-on shoes. We left our flat. There were lots of other people coming out of their homes. We went through the [REDACTED] section of the block to the Bramley Road entrance. If we had used [REDACTED] entrance we would have been right underneath the Tower. Once we were outside we all congregated on Bramley Road.
17. I got my mum to sit at the bus stop. The crowd built up as more people were woken up. I didn't know where else to go and most of us were still in pyjamas and dressing gowns. At that point people still thought that we were going to be able to go back inside at any minute. I thought so too. I still thought that the fire brigade would get everything under control.
18. From where I was standing on Bramley Road, I could see the top third of the building was on fire, and the atmosphere was getting more serious by the minute and people started to look anxious and I felt worried for those inside. At first the crowd was only made up of people who had come out of the Walkway blocks, and others who live close by. We were all people who had heard of or experienced fires in Grenfell Tower many times before. Most of us knew people who lived in the Tower. We were talking together, wondering about what exactly was going on at the base of the Tower.
19. The sky was getting lighter and more and more people were coming by saying things like 'my mum is in there' or 'my sister is inside'. We were joined by people who had family in the Tower and other people who had heard about the fire. People were watching the Tower and crying. Where I was standing there was a shortcut from the Tower out to the road. People who had escaped the Tower were coming out that way. The Tower residents coming out looked exhausted, frightened and confused. A lot of them seemed as though they were unable to breathe, coughing with tears running down their faces. I saw a few people being given oxygen and being looked after by the ambulance service. It was seeing the effect of the fire on the people who had gotten out of the Tower that started to make me realise that this fire was more serious than anything we had experienced before. It was upsetting and shocking to see all of this. I felt heartbroken for those people who had obviously been through something so awful.

20. Occasionally the police came by and spoke to us. For the first couple of hours while we were standing there, when it was still dark, the police were shouting to the crowd, "If you are in contact with anyone in the building, tell them to stay put as the fire brigade are working to put out the fire". It was difficult to hear what he was saying as there was a lot of activity going on. The message was passed around the crowd as it didn't quite reach everyone. The police kept reiterating it to us; that if we were in contact with anyone in the Tower we had to tell them to stay put and not to try and make their way out. They were hoping that we would pass on this information to loved ones and friends inside the Tower. They kept giving us tips to tell them, like putting wet towels over their faces and staying together in one room.
21. After a couple of hours, at approximately 4:30am the police suddenly changed their tune. They said that the people in the Tower had to get out and that there was no-one coming to help them. That was really shocking. People looked at each other in astonishment and dread. I could hear people shout "What"? "No way"? It was truly unbelievable what we had just heard. I realised this fire was on a totally different scale from anything that we had ever seen before. I was in disbelief that they weren't going to be able to put the fire out and rescue residents of the Tower.
22. . For hours I had faith in the fire brigade that they would be able to put the fire out as they had so many times before. The fire kept going and going and I slowly started to realise that this was different to the other fires at Grenfell Tower. I stood out there for hours watching this unfold.
23. At around 6.30am to 7am, my mum and I went to my aunt Judy's flat. She also lives in [REDACTED] That part of the block is the furthest away from the Tower. The people who lived in that section of the block were allowed to go home. I called work to let them know that I would not be in that day but the agency had already seen and heard what was happening on the news so they were very sympathetic and told me not to worry. We stayed at my aunt's house for two days. Our flat had no hot water.
24. The Tower just carried on burning. One of our neighbour's had recently passed away and his funeral was being held on the 14th of June. People were coming back from the

funeral in the afternoon and the Tower was still burning. The middle of the Tower looked like a red hot furnace while the outside was black, charred and burnt away. There were massive plumes of grey smoke billowing up into the air. I was still in a state of disbelief. I couldn't believe that the Tower was still burning. I took a photo at 2.25pm on 14th June and you can see how the building is charred. This photo is exhibited at **CB/2**. Even later that night the building was still burning. I took a photo at 11.11pm where you can see the fire inside the Tower glowing. This photo is exhibited at **CB/3**. The communal gardens had the burnt flying debris from the Tower littered across it. Police officers were stationed at the entrances/exit to the garages of the Tower. You could not enter beyond this point. The police cordon stretched from one side of the block to the other. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] The police were there 24/7 for about one month after the fire.

25. After staying with my aunt for two days, we went back to our own home. I took the rest of the week off work but I was back at work the following Monday. My colleague had told me that the nine year old boy I usually work with was really worried about me and was missing me. I had to go back to work for him and I wanted to try to get back to normality for myself.

Aftermath

26. In the days following the fire, I saw pictures of the people who died on the news. I kept saying 'oh my god' as I recognised them.
27. My great-niece [REDACTED] who was [REDACTED] years old at the time, told her mum, who is my niece that one of her friends from nursery, Fathia Ibrahim, had died in the fire. She was five years old. Her mum Rania Ibrahim and her three year old sister, Hania Ibrahim, also died in the fire. It is heart wrenching to think that children so young had died so horribly and needlessly. Where my great-niece lives is less than a five minute walk from Grenfell Tower. When they heard about the fire, they left their homes and came to see us. As they were coming out of their flat and walking down the stairs they could see the fire through the window. For a long time my great-niece didn't want to come to our home as she was frightened of the look of the Tower. She would say "Auntie aren't you scared of the Tower"? I was, but I had to show her I

was not, so that she would feel safe to visit us again. Now that some time has passed she has finally begun to accept that it is safe.

28. My mum had recently made a new friend called Debbie Lamprell. My mum was always very friendly with everybody. Debbie I think had only recently moved into the Tower. My mum introduced her to me the week before the fire when we were on our way home from the doctors. We were near Latimer Road Station and we were walking home. She had told me that when Debbie saw her out and about she always helped her, whether it was helping to carry her shopping or opening doors for her. My mum kept saying how nice and polite she was.

29. A few days after the fire my mum saw Debbie on one of the missing posters. My mum kept saying, 'Oh no, that's my friend...that's Debbie'. In the days afterwards people kept putting up posters of their loved ones who were missing. I was walking around and kept seeing the faces of people that I recognised. There were even people that I hadn't realised were still living in the Tower.

30. I recognised Marjorie and Ernie Vital who had been living in the Tower when I was a small girl. Every time I saw a familiar face it was an awful shock. I think that's when it hit me that this was all real. These are people that I have known since I was a child. They are my neighbours. People that I would see every day. Even when there are people that I don't know, my mother will know them or my auntie will know them or my niece will. There is always a connection around here.

Impact

31. I have lived in this community all my life. There is a real community spirit. The fire has been devastating for us all. I would never have expected something so catastrophic to happen in my lifetime. This will haunt our community for years to come.

32. I don't want at this stage to describe in detail the impact that this has had on me and the family in this statement, other than to say that the impact has been huge. We are all trying to move forward with our lives but it is like there is an atmosphere of sadness that is always present. At first I tried to avoid thinking about what happened because it was a lot to deal with. Thinking about it became unavoidable. I can still see the Tower every day. It is looming over our home. It is a constant reminder to me of what happened. For some time, every night I would feel as though the Tower was going to collapse in the night onto our home. I thought of us being crushed by this. This affected my sleep. I have decided to speak to my GP about getting some counselling.

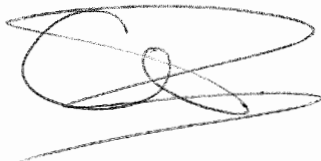
33. I want to make a further statement as part of Phase 2 to talk about the history of the Tower, the council and TMO, and the aftermath of the fire.

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 to be published on the Inquiry's website.

Signed:



Dated:

2.6.18