

Grenfell fire: Local resident and Grenfell Action Group member, Joe Delaney, gives harrowing account to inquiry of night of fire

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17 December 2018

The first phase of the Grenfell Tower inquiry into the deaths of 72 people on the night of June, 14 2017 ended last week. After taking evidence from the survivors and bereaved, as well as experts and professionals, particularly firefighters, it has also read into evidence testimony of residents living in the immediate surrounding area.

Earlier this month, the statement of Joe Delaney was read into the record. Delaney lived in Barandon Walk, a block of low-rise flats adjacent to Grenfell Tower. Immediately after the fire, he was evacuated from the area with many others, but was forced to live in “emergency” hotel accommodation for months. He was only finally rehoused in May, 11 months after the fire.

Delaney has a long record of fighting for decent and safe housing in the area and seeking justice for the victims and survivors of the Grenfell inferno. This has earned him the respect of the entire local community in North Kensington.

He is a member of the Grenfell Action Group (GAG), which played a central role over many years in campaigning for residents’ right to decent, safe housing. The group highlighted the great dangers to the safety of Grenfell Tower’s residents as a result of the callous indifference by the authorities, including during the 2016 refurbishment in which the entire building was surrounded in highly flammable cladding.

For his determined principled fight to expose the truth, Delaney was subjected to a filthy attack by the right-wing media. A February 15 *Sunday Times* article claimed Delaney—after being evacuated from his flat—was claiming a food allowance and living in a hotel while still accessing and living in his own home. In an interview with the *World Socialist Web Site*, he

exposed how the article was a manufactured sting operation to try and discredit him and shut him up.

In his statement to the inquiry, Delaney explained how on the night of the fire he became aware of blue flashing lights at about 1 a.m. but just assumed it was a regular incident being dealt with by ambulance or fire services. However, a few minutes later a neighbour knocked on his door to say Grenfell Tower was on fire.

He went out and saw the fire on the fourth-floor level on one side of the east face of the tower. While he was walking towards it, he saw how the fire was quickly spreading to the centre. Along with others he began throwing objects against the windows of the south face to alert residents of the fire. It quickly became evident to him that people were unable to get out of the building because of the thick smoke and poor visibility.

His statement read: “By 1.30am it was clear to me that people were definitely going to die but I didn’t want to say that whilst outside for fear of causing panic or upsetting anyone.”

He could see that by this time the fire was engulfing three of the tower’s faces. Concerned that the fire could spread to other blocks including his own he returned to Barandon Walk to make sure his neighbour and her son were safe.

He knocked on his neighbour’s door and urged her and her son to get ready to evacuate if necessary. Delaney explained that he got a clear view of the tower on fire from the window of her flat and filmed two videos of the tower on fire. The two videos are part of the evidence he has submitted to the inquiry.

His statement explained: “Whilst I was filming, I thought that the “centre” of the east side where the fire spread was where the only staircase in the block was

located, although I now know that it isn't quite in that location. I said to Tomassina [his neighbour] while we were watching the fire that I thought the fire was going up the emergency staircase and I could hear people in the tower saying 'help' and 'save us', which is clearly audible on the recording."

He rang 999 to emphasise that he believed the fire should be considered a major incident requiring the attendance of police and ambulance services in addition to the firefighters.

Throughout the evening, Delaney took pictures and videos of the difficulties being faced by firefighters attending the blaze. He explained, "I wanted to ensure that this was properly documented so those responsible for the architectural and planning decisions made when the Tower had been 'regenerated' would be held responsible; myself and other residents had raised numerous and repeated concerns about emergency access to the building prior to the Kensington Aldridge Academy and Leisure Centre being built."

Delaney's statement went on to highlight the major problems firefighters were facing attempting to rescue people and fight the fire. They were being showered by burning cladding raining down on them. A cause of this was that a curtain mesh around the lower level of the block—which would have caught falling debris—had been removed as part of the refurbishment. The firefighter's hoses and equipment failed to reach the fire as it rapidly rose up to consume all 24 storeys.

Delaney told the inquiry that at 2 a.m., after returning to his own flat in Barandon Walk, he looked down Grenfell Road—the main access road to the tower—to see "a chain of fire engines backed up" unable to proceed because of the narrow road being congested with parked cars whose owners were desperately trying to get them out of the way.

At 2:30 a.m., Delaney recalls that he and a neighbour banged on the doors of the flats on the three levels of Barandon Walk exhorting people to leave because of the danger of the fire spreading to their block. He noted how his progress was made difficult because of restricted access to some sections, key fobs only opening access doors in a specific block but not the neighbouring one. Delaney was only able to get access because his fob had previously been programmed to give multiblock access when he first moved there and had temporary mobility problems.

Delaney recounts how he, along with other residents and his two dogs, left Barandon Walk to gather in a safer area. It was now 2:50 a.m. One of his dogs, a young puppy, managed to slip his lead and ran off. Delaney set off in pursuit and had to breach a police cordon in his efforts. He recalls how he reached a gate between his block and a neighbouring one. From the gate he was able to look back at the tower and was taken aback by how quickly and widespread the fire had become.

He noted seeing several people jumping or falling from the top five floors of the block. Describing his shock at witnessing this he told the inquiry, "I was stunned... one of those I saw hit the building as they fell... Thankfully, I did not see any of them hit the ground; my view of the lower section of the Tower and ground was obscured... I remain affected to this day by what I did see and so I am somewhat grateful that I did not witness anything more."

After retrieving his puppy, Joe recalled how he and his neighbour and her son made their way to Holland Park tube station. A friend of Joe's returning from work had seen the tower on fire and contacted Joe to arrange to pick him up to go and stay at his home. He recalls the streets in the area were as packed as on Notting Hill carnival day.

Shocked by what he had witnessed, Joe was keen to get away from the area. He recalls while waiting to be picked up by his friend, "I checked... Facebook to see what I could find out. I also wrote a post at the time which said the KCTMO (Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation) had 'cheaped out' on their regeneration and because of that I watched people die before my eyes and that prison was too good for them."

Joe Delaney's statement to the Inquiry can be accessed here.



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