

Woman rescued from Salvation Army Collapse Meets the fire captain who rescued her

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The fire chief did not hesitate. He walked into a room at the West Philadelphia nursing home and headed straight for the woman in the wheelchair. Hers was the voice he had heard cry "help" after 13 hours buried alive.

The extraordinary encounter Friday between Mariya Plekan and John O'Neill was their first since he, then a Fire Department captain, rescued her from the rubble of a deadly demolition collapse two years earlier.

"Hello, Mariya," O'Neill said.

"Hello," she replied, looking up at the tall man. She could not rise to embrace the person who had saved her from the near-suffocating debris that had confined her in darkness for half a day. Her legs and her hip joints have been amputated.

"We met before, but I don't know if you remember me," O'Neill said. "I was the fireman who found you."

"Thank you, thank you, thank you," the 54-year-old Ukrainian immigrant replied, her English a struggle, and the tears, too, that she tried to keep inside.

"Oh, you're welcome," O'Neill said. He stepped aside as Plekan cried.

The meeting played out before a small audience of journalists at St. Ignatius Nursing Home & Rehab Center, the Catholic facility at 4401 Haverford Ave. that has been Plekan's home and lifeline since she nearly lost her life in what would become one of the city's most notorious tragedies.

Grief and reflection lingered across Philadelphia in many hearts and minds Friday, on the second anniversary of a collapse that left six people dead and 14 injured.

Speaking through an interpreter, Plekan explained how grateful and eager she was to meet O'Neill. But seeing him was a double-edged sword. It also brought back troubling memories.

"I have to remember this pain. I have to remember how it was difficult to survive, to hope somebody would hear me and find me," she said, motioning toward where her legs had been, occasionally making fists as she spoke in her native tongue.

"It's difficult to remember all these details - but I remember everything."

What happened was the collapse, on June 5, 2013, of an unsupported four-story brick wall of a building at 2136-38 Market St. that was being taken down. The wall fell onto the adjacent, one-story Salvation Army store, crushing it.

Two people have been criminally charged: Griffin Campbell, 51, the demolition contractor, and Sean Benschop, 43, the operator of the excavator that caused the wall to fail. Each has been charged with six counts of third-degree murder and 13 of reckless endangerment.

The Philadelphia grand jury impaneled to investigate the collapse expires next week.

At the empty lot where the store had stood, where Plekan had been shopping for the woman she had worked for as a caretaker, a large group gathered Friday morning for a somber journey into the past.

Family members of victims, backers of a planned memorial park there, and dignitaries including Mayor Nutter gathered under cloudy skies, some wrapped in blankets against an unseasonable chill. A light rain sprinkled down as mourners shed tears.

Nutter, whose administration had oversight over the demolition,

which has also led to civil litigation and a pending grand jury probe, expressed a desire to see a memorial of black granite rise by the end of the year.

He said the city would donate \$300,000 toward the \$1.3 million park.

"I want the work to start now," Nutter said of the still-underfunded effort. "We need to move forward."

City Treasurer Nancy Winkler shared deeply emotional memories about her 24-year-old daughter, Anne Bryan, who was among those killed. She read the names of the dead. When the time came to speak her own daughter's name, Winkler cried.

"She was and still is my daughter," Winkler said, the tears dissipating as memories poured out. "She had a very special quality - to be wholly in the moment."

Winkler and others spoke from a lectern in front of the narrow, long lot, covered in gravel and surrounded by a chain-link fence. A year ago, the Salvation Army donated the site to the city.

A committee that includes Winkler and Brandywine Realty Trust chief executive Gerard Sweeney has been raising funds for the park. An artist and design has been chosen, and the city Art Commission approved the plans earlier in the week.

"This is a very sacred day and time to be here," said Scott Aker, architect and project manager for the park. "The memory of this place, this intersection at 22d and Market, will not be forgotten."

Three granite slabs, each to stand eight feet, eight inches tall, will form the locus of the park, their height equal to the height of a commercial building's ceiling, said

Barbara Fox, the artist who conceived it.

"Its shape is a reminder," Fox said, "that a building once stood here. Lives were lost in a preventable tragedy."

In addition to Bryan, the collapse killed Mary Rosaline Conteh, Borbor Davis, Kimberly Finnegan, Juanita Harmon, and Mary Simpson.

At the nursing home across town, the fire chief said he was heartened to meet Plekan and recounted the harrowing moments of finding her.

O'Neill had heard her voice after a long day of supervising teams searching the rubble. He detected her only after generators were turned off and the search site had gone momentarily quiet before a shift change.

O'Neill looked up at the sky, wondered if rain was on the way, and noticed stillness in the air. Then, he heard the voice.

"Help."

He heard it again.

"Help."

It was shocking.

When crews extracted Plekan from the rubble, O'Neill got a glimpse of her determination.

"I knew that she was a fighter from the beginning," he said, smiling. "She was yelling at me for calling her the wrong name. I knew then she was going to fight through this."

After the collapse, O'Neill said, he had worried about Plekan having to face a life curbed by amputation. She swatted away that notion Friday.

"I am very happy I'm alive and can be with my kids," she told O'Neill,

"and I can make happy [the] people who love me."