

Collapse trial witness: Salvation Army officials dithered on closing thrift store during demolition

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A former Salvation Army dispatcher in Philadelphia told a Common Pleas Court jury Tuesday that "petty bickering" and an autocratic administrator blocked action that could have prevented the fatal 2013 collapse that buried the charity's Center City thrift store.

Edward Strudwick told the jury hearing the trial of civil lawsuits filed on behalf of the six killed and 13 injured in the collapse that the Salvation Army's leadership appeared stalemated about how to address demolition of a vacant four-story building that was threatening the store at 22nd and Market Streets.

Strudwick said Salvation Army Maj. John Cranford was adamant that demolition workers would not have access to the one-story thrift store's roof to knock down an unsupported three- to four-story brick wall looming above the store.

"It's my store, it's Salvation Army property, and they're not going to touch the store," Cranford said at a May 22, 2013, meeting, referring to demolition workers hired by STB

Investments Corp., a New York company owned by real estate speculator Richard Basciano.

Cranford's wife, Maj. Karen Cranford, pressed the possibility of temporarily closing or moving the store, according to Strudwick.

"One hurdle at a time," John Cranford replied, according to Strudwick.

Strudwick, who worked as a dispatcher for one year, gave conflicted testimony about an organization he said "changed his life."

He was a Salvation Army success story. A self-described functioning alcoholic, Strudwick spent eight months in 2012 and 2013 living at the Salvation Army's Roxborough Adult Rehabilitation Center while he worked through recovery.

In March 2013, Strudwick said, he graduated from the program and was immediately offered a \$9-an-hour job dispatching 16 trucks to pick up and deliver merchandise among nine Salvation Army thrift stores around Philadelphia.

It was a supervisory job, and it gave Strudwick a seat at the table at the weekly production meeting presided

over by John Cranford, the Salvation Army's Philadelphia administrator.

Questioned by plaintiffs' attorney Andrew J. Stern, Strudwick testified that Cranford was a "controller. He knew everything going on about everything . . . every aspect of the business.

"He had a closed-door policy, not an open-door policy," Strudwick added. "It was his way or no way."

Strudwick testified that he was concerned by the May 22 meeting because its tone seemed angrier than before.

Strudwick said he was friends with Kimberly Finnegan and her fiance, Robert Coleman. Finnegan, 35, was on her first day on the job as a cashier on June 5, 2013, when the unbraced wall toppled and crushed the store, killing her and five others.

Salvation Army lawyer John J. Snyder asked why Strudwick had never spoken up before now, at a time when he could have saved Finnegan's life.

"I think it's time to do the right thing," Strudwick replied. "I didn't

say things in the beginning because I thought it wasn't my place."

Strudwick said the production meetings were confidential. Within the meetings, he added, John Cranford tolerated no opposition.

"I felt concerned, but you never spoke back to Maj. Cranford," Strudwick said. "That was your first step out the door."

When the trial resumes Wednesday, the jury is to continue hearing from Col. Timothy Raines, who in 2013 was second in command at Salvation Army regional headquarters in West Nyack, N.Y.

Questioned by plaintiffs' attorney Steven G. Wigrizer, Raines told the jury that officials in New York had no idea demolition was ongoing at the building next to their Philadelphia thrift store.

Raines said that after a May 9, 2013, conference call with STB officials, he assumed demolition was on hold while both sides looked anew at their responsibilities to protect the Salvation Army store.

"We believed we were dealing with someone I believed to be a credible person - the developer," Raines said.

Wigrizer then confronted Raines with a Nov. 6, 2012, internal email to subordinates then investigating an STB proposal to swap a Basciano property farther west on Market Street for the thrift store.

"These people are not serious and have no credibility," Raines wrote. "They wouldn't know the truth if it slapped them in the face."

Raines replied that the demolition project was being handled by two other charity officials: "There was no mention of any red flags, no mention of any concern."