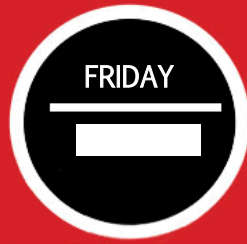


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NEWS

Trapped collapse victim: 'I remember everything'

SEAN COLLINS WALSH,
Daily News Staff Writer

ON THE MORNING of June 5, Mariya Plekan got on the Route 7 bus and took it to Center City.

The twice-widowed Ukrainian immigrant got off at 22nd and Market streets and went into a Salvation Army thrift store, looking for deals at a shop she had visited many times before.

"I was looking through the clothes and all of a sudden I heard the noise," said Plekan, 52. "And the only thing that I had a chance to say is, 'Why?' and the roof collapsed. . . . And my limbs, my legs were pinned down."

She wouldn't move from that spot for 13 hours. And she knows she'll never move again without the help of a wheelchair because Plekan lost both her legs to amputation after she was pulled from the rubble.

Plekan's account of that day - when six people died and 13 others were injured inside the collapsed thrift store - was made available yesterday for the first

time by lawyers helping her sue various parties involved with the tragedy.

In September, Common Pleas Judge Mark Bernstein halted all civil cases related to the collapse to allow criminal proceedings to unfold. But he made an exception so that the testimony of Plekan, with her precarious medical condition, could be recorded.

Her lawyer, Andy Stern of the Kline & Specter firm, deposed her last Wednesday through a translator.

Plekan, who said she was conscious for the entire ordeal, recounted how she found a small hole through which she could see light and hear parts of the rescue operation above her.

"They started to move things around, then I had a hope, I had a hope that they will save me shortly. But it didn't happen," she said. "I was screaming, 'Help, help.' But nobody heard me. And I remember everything."

"I was praying, praying, 'God, help me,' so I could be found,"

she said.

Eventually, her prayers were answered when a search dog led a firefighter to her cries.

"The dog followed my yell," said Plekan, who came from Ukraine in 2002 and lives in Kensington. "And they started pulling things apart and they pulled me out. And I didn't realize that it was night because the spotlights were on. I was so happy that I was saved. And I didn't know that my legs were dead at that time."

Just as harrowing as Plekan's memories from the collapse was how she described her two amputations and the myriad procedures that followed while she was at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania.

"Pain, pain, pain, and that pain is still going on . . . the pain of my flesh, but as well of my soul," she said. "I have a normal memory and I have a normal understanding of how I am living right now. And every day I understand how hard it is to be without legs. When you cannot take care of yourself when you constantly depend on

other people to take care of you, and I do not know how to live after that because it's so hard for me."

But Plekan, who has now lost two husbands and two legs, said she still has at least two reasons to live: her children Nataliia, 25, and Andrii, 26.

"My children and my granddaughter - because of them, I want to live, I want to live," she said. "But it's so hard."

Stern, the lawyer, said Plekan's medical bills are already in the millions of dollars and that the cost of care for the rest of her life will be "astronomical."

He established through the deposition that there were no signs at the Salvation Army indicating that the building was unsafe and that Plekan would have left if she had been told that it was.

Defense attorneys declined to question Plekan during the deposition.

Eric Weiss, a lawyer for the Salvation Army, said in an interview that the fault lies with Richard Basciano, owner of the building being demolished, and Griffin Campbell, the contractor who did the job.

He said lawyers for Basciano's firm, STB Investments, told the Salvation Army that they would be using a safer demolition method than they actually did.

Weiss added that the Salvation Army representatives communicating with STB work out of New York and therefore could not have seen the unsafe methods that Campbell ended up using.

"They never gave the Salvation Army a chance and they never told the Salvation Army that they had a change in plans," he said.

An attorney for Basciano declined to comment.