

Buried Alive in Collapse Rubble

“I lost hope ... that anyone would ever find me,” survivor tells jurors.

By Joseph A. Slobodzian INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Mariya Plekan said she was in the Salvation Army thrift store, about to make her purchase and leave, when she heard a cracking sound. A steel beam landed in front of her, then an avalanche of debris entombed her.

“I realized I was going to die here,” Plekan told a Philadelphia jury Thursday. Her next thought: She was still alive, and she felt no pain. But she was pinned so tightly, she could move her arms only slightly.

And then she waited, long into the night — almost 14 hours.

For the first hour, she said, she screamed for help but could not be heard over the throbbing of construction equipment and the chaotic noise above her.

A worried friend called her cell-phone, again and again, but Plekan could not answer. A man stood right above her on the rubble, but he was talk-

ing to someone else and did not hear her cries.

“I lost hope at that point that anyone would ever find me,” Plekan said.

Speaking through a Ukrainian interpreter, Plekan, 54, testified for about 40 minutes in the murder trial of Griffin Campbell, the Hunting Park demolition contractor charged with causing the collapse of an unsupported threestory brick wall onto the Salvation Army building at 22d and Market Streets.

It was not until after midnight that Plekan was discovered by a city fire battalion chief, John O'Neill, and rescued.

Wiping tears from her face, Plekan said that by that point she had lost

Track of time. The construction equipment had gone silent and she could hear less talking from above. There were sounds of a man and dog, so close that she could feel the dog's breath as it sniffed the wreckage.

“I began to yell, ‘Help!’ ” Plekan said, “and he yelled, ‘There's a living person here!’ ”

Six people died in the rubble and 13 were seriously hurt. Plekan, whose injuries are the basis of an aggravated-assault charge against Campbell, said she lost both legs at the hip sockets, and underwent 30 surgeries with more to come. She lives in a nursing home and uses a motorized wheelchair.

“This is my hell,” Plekan told the jury, adding that if her children had not moved to the United States from Ukraine to help care for her, “I would have lost my mind.”

Frequent shopper

Plekan said she immigrated to the United States after her husband died, to help care for his elderly parents, who came to Philadelphia years earlier. Plekan said that while living with her in-laws she shopped at the Salvation Army thrift store each week, usually on Wednesdays — Family Day — when the store increased the discount on many items.



Mariya Plekan and son Andrew in June at the nursing home where she was recuperating.

Campbell, 51, is on trial on six counts of third-degree murder, 12 counts of reckless endangerment, and

one count of aggravated assault for the six killed and 13 injured. He faces life in prison without parole if the jury of eight women and four men finds him guilty of more than one murder count.

Prosecutors say Campbell violated safe demolition practices to make more money from selling the 123-year-old wooden beams, joists, and floor planks.

Architect's testimony

Defense lawyer William D. Hobson has called Campbell a scapegoat for wealthy property owners, city officials, and professionals like Plato A. Marinakos Jr., the architect monitoring demolition for property owner Richard Basciano and his STB Properties.

Marinakos, testifying earlier under a grant of immunity, said he called Campbell and told him the unsupported wall was dangerous and had to come down by morning.

Marinakos, however, acknowledged he did not call city officials or the Salvation Army about what he saw. He said that Campbell bore sole responsibility for how the building was demolished and that he believed Campbell could safely raze the wall.

Common Pleas Court Judge Glenn B. Bronson has cautioned jurors that the only issue they have to consider is whether prosecutors can prove Campbell is guilty — not why others were not charged.

Only Campbell and Sean Benschop, 44, the excavator operator he hired, were criminally charged in the collapse.

Benschop pleaded guilty in July to six counts of involuntary manslaughter, 12 counts of reckless endangerment, one



Mariya Plekan, who lost both legs in the building collapse, in June 2014.

count of aggravated assault, and related charges in a deal with prosecutors for no more than 20 years in prison.

Benschop spent almost three hours testifying Thursday, telling the jury he worked on the job with his excavator though he knew the building was on the verge of collapse and could endanger those inside the adjacent Salvation Army store.

Benschop said he did so because Campbell told him to and because he needed the money: "I had to feed my family and I didn't have enough money to remove the excavator from the place when I was done."

Hobson questioned Benschop about hospital blood tests that showed he smoked marijuana the morning of the collapse. Benschop admitted it but said it was suggested by his doctor to create an appetite so his body could combat an unspecified disease that caused weight loss.

The gaunt Benschop, who said he is 6-foot-4 and weighs 147 pounds, testified that he has smoked about half a marijuana cigarette at 5 a.m. and before dinner for 15 to 20 years, and that it did not affect his ability to safely operate the

excavator.

The native of Guyana said he and other workers tried to persuade Campbell that demolishing the remains of the Hoagie City building with an excavator was too dangerous.

Benschop testified that he decided to plead guilty because "somebody should take responsibility, and I took my responsibility for the situation."

"I should have walked away when I saw the building like that," Benschop told the jury. "But I didn't."

Assistant District Attorneys Edward Cameron and Jennifer Selber said they would complete their case Friday. Bronson told the jury the defense case would begin Tuesday after the Columbus Day holiday.