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Survivor, excavator operator testify in emotional trial day

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MARIYA PLEKAN rolled into a Philadelphia courtroom in a mechanical wheelchair, which she maneuvered by pushing her right hand on a knob of the chair

Dressed in a sweater and black skirt that should have covered what was no longer there - her two legs - Plekan, 54, testified of the moment when a Salvation Army thrift store collapsed onto her.

The Ukrainian immigrant living in Philadelphia had gone to the store, where she was a regular customer, and was about to leave when "I heard a cracking sound," she testified through a Ukrainian interpreter.

"I turned my head to the side and I saw some kind of steel beam coming down and in a second I was down," she said, as her face reddened and she wiped away tears with a tissue.

"I realized I was going to die here," she said.

As Plekan testified, at least one female juror also got teary-eyed.

Plekan's emotional testimony came at the start of the seventh day of the trial of demolition contractor Griffin Campbell, 51, charged with third-degree murder, recklessly en-

dangering another person and related offenses in the June 5, 2013, collapse of the thrift store, at 22nd and Market streets in Center City, that

killed six people and injured 13 others.

Yesterday's trial day also included three hours of testimony from Sean Benschop, 45, the excavator operator who pleaded guilty in July to involuntary manslaughter and related offenses, and who is cooperating with prosecutors.

In straightforward detail, Benschop told the jury how he demolished the four-story Hoagie City building next to the adjacent one-story thrift store using his large excavator even though he knew that operating heavy machinery next to an occupied structure was dangerous.

He said he did so on the orders of Campbell - the general contractor on the job who was paying him \$800 a day.

Benschop said he first started working at the Hoagie City demolition site June 2, 2013, a Sunday, when the thrift store was closed.

A video, which the jury has seen numerous times during the trial, showed the excavator clawing at the front facade and removing the "Hoagie City" sign.

That Monday, nobody worked because it was raining. On June 4, Campbell wanted Benschop to start removing the eastern wall of the Hoagie City building with the excavator, Benschop said.

"He told me, 'Go ahead and take the left wall down. Don't mess with the right wall,' " Benschop testified. The right, or western, wall was the shared wall with the thrift store.

Benschop said he was concerned about the shared wall because it stood unsupported - the building's joists, or the horizontal beams that kept the walls stable, had been prematurely removed. He said he expressed his concerns to Campbell, who told him that he would have other men remove the western wall by hand.

On the morning of June 5, Benschop said, Campbell again ordered him to demolish the eastern wall of Hoagie City. "He said the owner of the building wanted the building down," Benschop said referring to property owner Richard Basciano, whom another witness has said was angry the demolition was behind schedule.

At the time of the collapse - 10:42 a.m. - Benschop said he had a steel beam in the claw of his excavator

and was using the beam to extend his reach so he could knock down the top of the eastern wall.

"I was taking the left [eastern] wall down. Instead of the left wall goes out [to the east, toward an already demolished site], it goes in," toward the Hoagie City building, testified Benschop, a native of Guyana.

The caving in of the eastern wall of the Hoagie City building caused the building to knock over the then-three story unsupported western wall, which collapsed onto the thrift store, Benschop said.

Right after the collapse, in the midst of screaming and firefighters coming to the rescue, Benschop said he saw Campbell, who had one question for him.

"Mr. Campbell turned to me and he said, 'Sean, do you have your insurance?' " Benschop said. "I said, 'Yes,' and asked him, 'Do you have your insurance?' " Campbell didn't, Benschop said.

Benschop said he stayed at the scene for about 10 minutes, but then had another worker take him to the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania.

At HUP, a nurse took his blood, which showed Benschop was under the influence of marijuana.

Benschop said under questioning by Jennifer Selber, chief of the district attorney's homicide unit, that he was smoking marijuana - half a joint each morning, the other half at night - for a serious medical condition. He contended it did not affect his ability to operate machinery.

During cross-examination, Campbell's attorney, William Hobson, got

Benschop to admit that he had previously lied about his marijuana use during a May motions hearing before Common Pleas Judge Glenn Bronson and on the day of the collapse to a police officer who questioned him at the hospital.

Benschop also acknowledged that he had kept his daily marijuana use secret from Campbell.

Asked by Hobson why he used his excavator to demolish the Hoagie City building on the day before and day of the collapse - when the thrift store was open - even though he knew operating machinery next to a store was unsafe, Benschop replied: "I had to feed my family . . . If I don't do my work, I wouldn't get paid."

Plekan, who now has to live in a nursing home, testified that after she realized she was still alive, but stuck under rubble, she yelled for help for hours.

"I heard the sound of a tractor," she said. "I heard a lot of people, yelling." At one point, she heard a man talking, standing right on top of her, "but he did not hear me, so I lost hope," she testified.

She said under questioning by prosecutor Ed Cameron that she was buried under rubble for about 14 hours. It wasn't until all the noises quieted down, and she heard a dog that "with whatever energy I had left, I began to yell."

That's when Fire Department Capt. John O'Neill found her.

Doctors at HUP had to amputate her legs to save her, she said.

"I have no legs," she said. "I don't even have the bones for legs. All I

can do is get around in a wheelchair."

The prosecution is expected to rest today. Campbell is to testify in his own defense Tuesday, after the Columbus Day holiday.