

‘No one can forget the images of 14 June 2017, nor the sense of shock, incredulity, pain and helplessness at the scale of the tragedy at Grenfell Tower. This book is a fitting testament to a wonderfully diverse and powerfully resilient community caught up in and seeking to overcome the effects of that catastrophe. Gaby weaves her family’s own story of loss into a wider narrative that describes the events from many perspectives and points to the ways in which ordinary people responded to promptings to “do something” with remarkable and life-changing effects. The pain and sorrow are palpable but Gaby also infuses the pages with warmth, humour, realism and, above all, hope.’

Caroline Welby

‘This book does not gloss over the tragedy, the bitterness and the hard political questions that surround the devastating fire at Grenfell Tower. But by telling the stories of individuals, allowing them their voice, Gaby Doherty shows us that there is always hope. Hope challenges the past and the present, demanding change; hope energizes, enables and refuses to be silent. This is a powerful, challenging and hopeful book, but only if we are prepared to take our part, not to stand by as onlookers.’

Dr Jane Williams, Assistant Dean, St Mellitus College

‘Ordinary people lost their lives and homes in the horrendous Grenfell Tower disaster. Ordinary people have also picked up the task of support and survival, working for a more hopeful future for others caught up in the system of unfairness and neglect. Gaby Doherty sees herself as an ordinary person, but, like many of those she writes about, has a vision for justice rooted in powerful faith and hope. The multiple personal narratives in this compassionate book are woven skilfully together to produce a challenging reminder of the significance of people’s lives and communities, and to make us resolved to work for a future which is more just and loving.’

*Dr Elaine Storkey, author of Scars Across Humanity:
Understanding and overcoming violence against women*

‘Gaby Doherty writes movingly from first-hand experience of the Grenfell Tower fire and its aftermath. Without minimizing the horror of what happened, she tells stories of hope in the midst of tragedy.’

The Revd Nicky Gumbel, vicar, Holy Trinity Brompton

'If you want to hear the stories from Grenfell Tower, read this book and read it with your church. Psalm 95 talks about hearing the Lord's voice and not hardening your heart. Gaby helps us to hear echoes of that voice from that night and the days that followed. She asks about our response. From that terrible night have emerged stories of faith, hope and love.'

The Rt Revd Keith Sinclair, Bishop of Birkenhead

'From her bedroom window, Gaby Doherty watched, horrified, as Grenfell Tower burned. Although stunned, she sprang into action in her community, sharing with others the grief, outrage and pain caused by the fire. *Grenfell Hope* contains not only her heartfelt account but gives voice to those often overlooked or misrepresented in the media. She shares stories of hope and transformation as ordinary people unite in extraordinary ways. And she reveals how neighbours bear each other's burdens in Christ and how God reveals his presence in times of great pain. Don't miss this previously untold story.'

*Amy Boucher Pye, author of Finding Myself in Britain:
Our search for faith, home and true identity*

'How do we offer hope when disaster comes to our door? In this timely book, Doherty offers a rare perspective: the eyewitness accounts of the political leaders and religious communities, and how they helped on the ground. This is not a book full of "grief tourism", but an exploration of the good – and bad – ordinary people can do. The book identifies unexpected heroes who love justice, look at suffering square on and don't offer glib answers, but look for practical good and supernatural hope. As someone active in the hub of support after the Grenfell fire, Doherty not only writes hope, she lives it. She is the perfect person to present this treasury of shards of hope within the wreckage, and she does so with grace and humility. Read it for lament, not hand-wringing; intelligent critique, not outrage; a vision of justice, not despair – and above all, read it to be inspired by ordinary people, and reflect on what it means to be a hope-bearer in this world.'

Tanya Marlow, campaigner for health equality and author of Those Who Wait: Finding God in disappointment, doubt and delay

'Gaby and I both believe in the efficacy of hope. We both believe that the lives that were lost will not have been in vain.'

*Counsellor Judith Blakeman, Royal Borough
of Kensington and Chelsea*

Gaby Doherty is a wife to Sean and mum to four children. She is passionate about faith, friends and justice, and speaking and writing about them. She hopes to leave the world a better place because she has lived. This is her first book.

GRENFELL HOPE

Stories from the community

Gaby Doherty



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*This book is dedicated with love
to the colourful community of North Kensington*

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Preface

In writing a book called *Grenfell Hope* there have been a number of issues.

First, hope is hard to find in times like this. We need hope, though, to retain our sanity and to encourage healing and forgiveness. Many people have told me that there is no hope; they are right that the fire was hopeless and nothing good can be found to say about death and suffering. However, I choose to believe that there can be hope in the wake of horror and tragedy.

Many beautiful people lost their lives. Behind each one of those is a grieving family, devastated friends and a bewildered community. Nothing that I write could ever make the events of that evening seem anything but devastating. But for myself, my family, my friends, I wanted to try to find hope and share it. Please don't for one moment think I have not cried tears of sadness over the stories of my friends and neighbours who died. I have obsessed over terrible web stories that told me about their last moments, their last conversations, and tried to second-guess their thoughts and feelings. I have woken up at 5 a.m. and planned my own fire escape routes and all the while thanked God for my own children and their safety.

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There has been a personal cost in looking for hope. Some stories may seem small and insignificant when the reality is that at the time of writing few of the survivors have new homes yet. Many are still in hotels and temporary accommodation. The public inquiry and police enquiries are still under way. Yet one tragic day meant that humanity planted so many tiny seeds which grew into something precious. Isaiah 61 tells of beauty coming from ashes and the rebuilding of ancient ruins. This book is my attempt at discerning beauty among the ashes, and my prayer is that, whatever ashes you are facing, you too may find beauty from them in time.

My purpose is to tell the story from my perspective and share some of the stories of my friends. Hopefully these will encourage and inspire you to seek transformation in your own community, without the goad of a hideous tragedy. These stories are just a tiny pixel, just one perspective. The whole picture is much bigger and there are even more amazing stories to tell. Perhaps one day someone will capture the rest of it. I simply offer the Grenfell Hope that I have seen and experienced.

Acknowledgements

This whole project has been a ‘God idea’ from the start, and all thanks and praise go to him.

Thanks to Amy Boucher-Pye who suggested the whole project and believed in me enough to tout the idea to the publisher.

I would like to thank Sean, my husband, for his never-ending encouragement and love – and for letting me go away for two nights to finish off the book!

I would also like to thank my family, especially my Mumma and mother-in-law who have looked after the children endlessly and have helped us live this crazy life in London. Thanks go to Zaila Dunbar and Tanya Marlow who read my toughest chapter and gave helpful pointers (which involved completely restructuring the whole chapter!), and to Lizzie Jakeman who gave me free counselling and put me in touch with Ruth Divall, whose depth of knowledge and understanding about Christian hope was a deep well I drew from.

Finally, I am grateful to all those who gave me their time so generously for interview, despite this being a very tough, personal subject.

Note to the reader

All royalties from this book will go to support the continuing work of St Clement and St James Church of England School, Penzance Place, Kensington. For more information about the school, go to <www.scsj.rbkc.sch.uk>.

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At 9 p.m. on Friday, 9 June 2017, my husband tore over to the open window of our bedroom and shouted, in as close to a football-hooligan roar as I have heard him make, ‘Kensington, you beauty!’ He doesn’t usually partake in uncouth gestures. He’s a Reverend Doctor, a tutor in ethics at an Anglican theological college, and a local church minister.

But he wasn’t the only one. Others all over the borough were rejoicing – and not those who normally get a chance to celebrate the result of a general election.

This was the moment when, after three recounts, Emma Dent Coad was declared to be the new Labour Member of Parliament in this fairly young constituency of Kensington and Chelsea. Twenty years of Conservative leadership had taken its toll on the people of the area and we were ready to party. Families celebrated outside Kensington Town Hall, where we saw drummers and dancing.

We were ready for change. We might have lost the war but our own area of battle was won, and Lady (Victoria) Borwick, the previous MP and former Deputy Mayor of London, had to step aside gracefully.

The disquiet which led to this result had been building for some time. From my vantage point at the school gate, I sensed

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the local mums becoming restless. I heard much talk in playgrounds of how the state of this borough could not continue. We were dissatisfied with the grants our school received, with the lack of financing, let alone the investment that had not gone into the National Health Service (NHS), and with the increasing gap between those in my neighbourhood and the wealthy next door, who seemed to view the rest of us as their workforce with the arrogance that wealth allows.

The Monday after the results, I hugged a few other mums in the playground, buoyant in our success. Each of us felt our vote had counted. Each of us was jubilant that we had encouraged others to bother with voting, and how that had made a difference. We were relieved that we were able to face our many local friends who couldn't vote because of their immigration status or lack of citizenship. We had won the battle they wished they could fight.

The excitement lasted into the next week as we gossiped about what change this might make for us as a borough and how it was time the ruling Conservatives had a shake-up.

Days later, in the early hours of 14 June, I woke abruptly from the noise of my husband moving around again. As it was 1.30 a.m., I berated him for going to bed so late. He said, 'I'm not going to bed; I'm getting up. Grenfell is on fire. I'm going to see what I can do to help.'

I rushed to the window and could hear the sirens and smoke alarms, and see the flames racing up the side of the building.

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Sean asked me to send our friends' phone number to him but I said I'd ring myself. It felt like a scene from a film, but much scarier because we didn't know whether there would be a happy ending. We had no assurance that the daring firefighters would put out the blaze. All we could see was a massive building being engulfed by fire with flames that were perhaps a hundred feet high and devouring everything quickly.

As Sean left, wearing his clergy dog collar, I tried to ring my friend. It was 1.50 a.m. and her phone went straight to answer-phone. I left a desperate text message, praying that she and her family, her husband and her three-year-old daughter were all somewhere safe. I also had another friend for whom I had no contact details, nor was I sure where she lived, but I knew it was very close to the Tower. Both families filled my head and my heart.

The flames were horrific and I couldn't help but watch as the hungry fire devoured the defenceless building. Helicopters hung overhead, and the sirens screamed and didn't stop for many hours. I shut all the windows in the house, anxious that the smoky air would poison my children – the same way it was poisoning other people's babies 200 metres away.

I tried to ring my friend again. I sent her another message, then sat on my bed and prayed. I watched the night turn to day and the Tower turn from light bright flames to dark charred space with the flames still burning.

As the dawn broke, my friends woke up all around the area and started sending messages. We all live dotted around the

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Tower. Some of us could see it; some were hearing the helicopters and saw the flames on the television, confused and horrified that such a familiar landmark was actually burning.

From my place of safety I had no choice but to watch what was happening just over the road.

I sat on my bed and prayed and messaged and watched and listened to the fire burn. I was blessed because 200 metres was far enough away that I didn't hear or see much of the detail. Some of my friends lived closer, and saw things no one should ever see. Adults as well as children were paralysed with fear as the fire ripped through. None of us could take our eyes off the red poison engulfing the building that housed so many.

So many questions still weren't answered. Who was safe? Who was perishing? How many souls were lost, we wondered, as we watched helplessly and prayed.

Terrible things were happening too, such as people jumping out in a last-ditch attempt to survive. To my knowledge none of them did.

I wandered outside at one point and found the neighbours of my block standing around variously attired. I was in my pyjamas. We all expressed our incredulity and spoke of those we knew who lived in Grenfell Tower. My upstairs neighbour was the first to receive good news of her friend and three kids, who were all safe and sound at Latymer Community Church. They were dazed and confused, but unhurt and out of harm's way. Another of my neighbours had a friend on the Tower's twelfth floor. She was in tears of fear. What was

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happening to her friend? I later discovered her friend was fine.

In my heart I knew my own friend and her family were not fine. Every moment that I didn't receive a message over the next few days clarified this for me. No one had seen them. Not even her sister had heard from them. Then we heard the devastating news that all those in hospital had been identified. My friends were gone.

At 3.21 a.m. I emailed the manager and staff at my daughter's nursery, which my friend's child also attended, asking them to pray if they received the email.

As the dawn arrived, the fire was still fierce. At 5.45 a.m. my ten-year-old daughter awoke as normal and I called her through to my room. I broke the news as gently as I could. She looked up from where she sat on my bed and said, 'But Mummy, lots of people live in that building.' She burst into tears and I tried to comfort her. We were united in grief, even though we didn't fully know what we were grieving. We only knew we had already lost something very important.

In the days to follow, this unity in grief became a common theme for our community.