

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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Investigation of:

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THE EXPLOSION OF APARTMENT  
BUILDING 8701 OF FLOWER BRANCH  
APARTMENTS IN SILVER SPRING,  
MARYLAND ON AUGUST 10, 2016

Accident No.: DCA16FP003

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Interview of: RAFAEL PORTILLO

Pine Ridge Apartments  
8617 Piney Branch Road  
Silver Spring, Maryland

Saturday,  
August 27, 2016

The above-captioned matter convened, pursuant to notice.

BEFORE: RAVI CHHATRE  
Investigator-in-Charge

## APPEARANCES:

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National Transportation Safety Board

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National Transportation Safety Board  
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(On behalf of Kay Management Company and Mr. Portillo)

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I N T E R V I E W

1  
2 MR. CHHATRE: Good afternoon. Today is Saturday, August 27,  
3 2016. We are currently at Pine Ridge Apartments, located at 8617  
4 Piney Branch Road, Silver Spring, Maryland. We are meeting  
5 regarding the investigation of explosion of Building 8701, Flower  
6 Branch Apartments, Silver Spring, Maryland, that occurred on  
7 August 10, 2016.

8 My name is Ravi Chhatre. I am with National Transportation  
9 Safety Board located in Washington, D.C., and I am Investigator-  
10 in-Charge of this accident. The NTSB investigation number for  
11 this accident is DCA16FP003.

12 I would like to start by notifying everyone present in this  
13 room that we are recording this interview and we may transcribe it  
14 at a later date. Transcripts will be provided directly to the  
15 interviewee for review and identifying any typographical errors.  
16 The transcripts may be posted in the NTSB public docket.

17 Also, I would like to inform Mr. Rafael Portillo --

18 MR. PORTILLO: Portillo.

19 MR. CHHATRE: -- that you are permitted to have one other  
20 person present with you during the interview. This is a person of  
21 your choice: your supervisor, friend, family member or, if you  
22 choose, no one at all.

## INTERVIEW OF RAFAEL PORTILLO

23  
24 BY MR. CHHATRE:

25 Q. Please state for the record your full name, spelling of your

1 name, organization you work for and your title, business contact  
2 information such as mailing address, and whom you have chosen to  
3 be with you during your interview. Okay?

4 And well, tell us your name, spelling of your name, your  
5 contact information.

6 A. Okay. My name is Rafael Portillo, R-a-f-a-e-l,  
7 P-o-r-t-i-l-l-o.

8 Q. And your business contact information?

9 A. My cell phone number is [REDACTED].

10 Q. Okay. And your title with the company?

11 A. Maintenance technician. Maintenance technician.

12 Q. Maintenance technician?

13 A. Maintenance.

14 Q. Okay. And for the record, Mr. Portillo, tell us any formal  
15 education, any training related to your job and how many years you  
16 have been been working with Kay?

17 A. I've been working for Kay Management 5 years, a little bit  
18 over 5 years.

19 Q. Okay.

20 A. And I studied in my country electrical trade and I have some  
21 classes over here, like as electrician.

22 Q. Okay.

23 A. And that's, you know, related -- relate to my job  
24 description.

25 Q. And prior to Kay, did you have any other work experience

1 anywhere?

2 A. Prior to Kay I was working at different trades. I was a  
3 construction laborer and --

4 Q. Okay.

5 A. -- commercial cleaning and electrical company.

6 Q. And as a maintenance technician, what are your  
7 responsibilities?

8 A. Well, my responsibilities as a -- on Kay basically is like  
9 prepare new units for tenants, that involves install electrical  
10 fixtures, plumbing fixtures, and also respond to some issues in  
11 apartment, like fixing leaks or appliances.

12 Q. And how long you have been in the Flower Branch Apartments?

13 A. It's over 5 years.

14 Q. Five years?

15 A. Little over 5 years, yeah.

16 Q. Okay. And you say you fix appliances. What do you do?

17 A. Well, most appliance that we have is just fridge or range  
18 stove, gas stove.

19 Q. Okay.

20 A. And on gas stove, what we do, most of what we do or we  
21 respond for a gas smell, is just check burners, the standard  
22 pilots that going off and just light up or, you know, we look for  
23 a gas leak. We have a gas leak detector to make sure, you know,  
24 that any gas leak. And if we find something that we can't fix, we  
25 do -- if it's on, we shut off the gas valve and call a contractor,

1 you know, for replacement.

2 Q. Okay. Now tell me about the gas meter. Who told you how to  
3 use that gas meter?

4 A. Well, we have a -- at the beginning when I first started, we  
5 have a training, have inside training here with the property.  
6 They had like a small classroom and we have plumbing and  
7 electrical and appliance. We have a class for that.

8 Q. Okay.

9 A. Yeah. That's -- but it's inside Kay Manage has a person who  
10 train us for that.

11 Q. And do you calibrate that gas meter or it is calibrated  
12 outside?

13 A. To calibrate the -- if something is going wrong with the gas  
14 meter, we got send it to, you know, factory or --

15 Q. And how do you know something is wrong with it?

16 A. Well, you basically test it. Like, you know -- let's say you  
17 have a lighter and let a little bit gas to check if it's working  
18 properly, you know, a bar reading. If it's not doing what it's  
19 supposed to do, well, you assume there is something wrong with.

20 Q. So tell me then -- let's say I'm the renter in the apartment.  
21 I call you for a gas odor. So walk me through. What will you do  
22 when you enter my apartment?

23 A. Well --

24 Q. Or before you come to my apartment, what will you do?

25 A. Well, I look -- first thing I look for, a gas meter -- gas

1 leak detector, you know, take with me. I got some flashlight and  
2 bubble soap. And get to the apartment, try to get the information  
3 what's going on, you know, and -- well, then sometime they say,  
4 well, I smell some and they're not really sure if it's gas or not.  
5 You know, even sometime I'm not really sure -- I can smell  
6 something, but I'm not really sure what it is.

7       So first I go to the stove, look for, you know, for the  
8 leaks. And if it's nothing there, I go for each apartment. But  
9 first I respond to the person who called and then I got to go for  
10 each apartment and make sure leak not came from another  
11 apartments. We include the laundry rooms and the storage room.

12 Q. Now, all your appliances, like the range, is it pilot light  
13 or it's electronic ignition? How is that --

14 A. Some of them are standard pilot. Some of them are electrical  
15 igniter.

16 Q. Okay.

17 A. So the new ones are electrical igniter, so --

18 Q. What about 8701? Or have you worked on 8701 in any  
19 apartment, the one -- the building that exploded?

20 A. Yeah, in the past.

21 Q. How -- past, you mean when? Like a few months, few years?

22 A. A few months, it could -- yeah, but different -- for doors or  
23 blinds or miscellaneous. Not that I can remember that I've been  
24 to work with some gas.

25 Q. So if the Washington Gas comes to respond to some odor



1 complaint, will you know that Washington Gas came in or you would  
2 not know?

3 A. Before the explosion, I didn't know.

4 Q. Well, I mean, of course, before the explosion. But if  
5 somebody called Washington Gas and complain to them that they  
6 smell gas odor, and Washington Gas comes, would you know that  
7 somebody complained and Washington Gas is here?

8 A. No.

9 Q. You would not know?

10 A. No, I didn't know. No.

11 Q. Washington Gas was, I guess, in 87- -- no, was in the complex  
12 July 25th, I guess, 2 weeks before this explosion. Did you know  
13 about it?

14 A. I --

15 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Excuse me, Ravi. Where is that from?

16 MR. CHHATRE: I believe the fire -- I'm sorry, fire  
17 department. I stand corrected.

18 BY MR. CHHATRE:

19 Q. Yeah, fire department came responding to a gas odor  
20 complaint. Do you know anything about that?

21 A. I didn't know anything about it. I just -- after this  
22 happen, I heard from people now that they mention it, but it's  
23 nothing that I know before that happened.

24 Q. Okay. So you didn't know.

25 A. I never -- nobody mention it. I didn't know about it.

1 Q. And do you ever work in the basement for the water heaters or  
2 appliances in the basement?

3 A. Well, on that building, we just -- it's just a storage room  
4 where we storage like a new furnaces and some supplies, so I'll  
5 being in and out, you know, to get some supplies.

6 Q. But what about the other buildings? Will you be working in  
7 the basement?

8 A. Yes. And some of them, you know, that we had to respond  
9 because say, they say there's not hot water. So basically we have  
10 like a one hot water tank supply the -- each building and most of  
11 the times just the pilot goes off, so you have to relight the gas  
12 volume light on the pipe, but that's all what we do.

13 Q. But you do that or somebody else does that?

14 A. We do it. We do it. I do it.

15 Q. You do? Okay.

16 A. Yeah.

17 Q. And then how often you have done that in last, let me just  
18 say, 6 months?

19 A. Maybe twice. And I can't remember, it was 64 or 62. I don't  
20 know the building, number of the building.

21 Q. Okay. And how many water heaters have pilots, do you know?

22 A. Most of them. I would say 20, maybe 24, because the only one  
23 -- very few has like a spark, you know, electrical spark that  
24 it's, you know -- but most of them is standard pilots.

25 Q. So most of the water heaters have --

1 A. Standard pilots, yes.

2 Q. -- pilots, right?

3 A. Yeah. That goes off.

4 Q. And then very few have electrical ignitions?

5 A. Yes. The new ones, mainly the new ones.

6 Q. Okay. And do you remember if 8701 had electrical ignition or  
7 a pilot? I mean, if you don't know, you don't know.

8 A. I mean, I -- I don't know. I don't know.

9 Q. That's fine.

10 A. Yeah, because I never work on that building.

11 Q. Oh, you've never been to that building?

12 A. In that, in that (indiscernible) --

13 Q. Okay. Okay.

14 MR. CHHATRE: And that's all I have. Thank you much.

15 Rachael.

16 BY MS. GUNARATNAM:

17 Q. So you say you've never been in 8701 basement?

18 A. Working on the hot water tank.

19 Q. Oh, on the hot water tank.

20 A. Yeah.

21 Q. Okay. Okay.

22 A. Working on the hot water tank.

23 Q. When was the last time you were in that room, in that  
24 basement, meter room?

25 A. That day of the explosion, on the (indiscernible) I went to.

1 Q. You went --

2 A. Because by the supply -- it's in the shop, basically, so we  
3 go in and out, you know, to get supplies because we store some  
4 supplies on that room.

5 Q. Okay. Did you -- when you went in, what were you getting?

6 A. Paper towels and rags.

7 Q. Okay. Can you describe the room?

8 A. Sure. When you get into the room, the left side is a shelf  
9 with some supply, like caulking or some, some light fixtures, I  
10 think. And the other side, the right side, is another big shelf  
11 all the way to the end with supplies, basically just paper towel,  
12 rags, cups and some other things. In the middle of the room was a  
13 new furnace and A/C units, condenser units. And then all the way  
14 back to the end was the gas meters on the right -- on the right  
15 side there's a hot water tank.

16 Q. Do you remember the pipes on the ceiling or anything, what  
17 color they were?

18 A. Yeah. I'm pretty sure -- I don't really remember because  
19 some of those rooms you can see some of them is like attached to  
20 the ceiling really -- so I don't --

21 Q. Were there any windows in that room?

22 A. Yeah. There are windows, but they're behind the shelves. So  
23 it's not like open window you can -- because the shelves are, you  
24 know on the way. Small windows.

25 Q. Yeah.

1 A. Could be two or three of those.

2 Q. So that day you went into that room, did you see anything odd  
3 or smell --

4 A. No, I didn't.

5 Q. Okay. All right. That's it right now.

6 MR. CHHATRE: Okay. John?

7 MR. CLEMENTSON: Nothing.

8 BY MR. PRICE:

9 Q. In the storage room of --

10 MR. PRICE: Oh, I'm sorry?

11 MR. CHHATRE: Can you identify.

12 BY MR. PRICE:

13 Q. I'm sorry. Steve Price with Washington Gas.

14 But in the storage room, the supplies that are maintained  
15 there, are there any chemicals or solvents that are kept in those  
16 rooms?

17 A. Well, those chemicals just some cleaning supplies like we  
18 call Spray Nine, Windex, you know, a small amount. Maybe one case  
19 each one.

20 Q. Okay. Are there any machines that are stored in that room?

21 A. That we have those salt spreader that we use in the  
22 wintertime. Just manual, just manual salt spreader.

23 Q. Manual?

24 A. Yeah.

25 Q. Anything that's powered by gasoline or fuel of any kind?

1 A. Well, not that -- in the past years, well, they used to, they  
2 move out from another building. That's what happen.

3 Q. How long ago in the past?

4 A. I would say 2 years maybe.

5 Q. You've referred to the new furnaces and new air conditioning  
6 units stored in that room. Do you know when the furnaces and air  
7 conditioners that were in that room on the day of the incident, do  
8 you know when they were delivered?

9 A. I'm pretty sure they might be delivering them, like, March of  
10 this year, you know, because be prepared for the summertime every  
11 year so we got to place our order. So about that time, but I'm  
12 not really sure. I just, you know --

13 Q. So they had been there for some months?

14 A. Yes.

15 Q. Were you involved with moving any of them out of there to put  
16 into the apartments?

17 A. No.

18 Q. Who does --

19 A. The contractor. We just -- we have contractors for new  
20 installation and what we do is just open the doors for them. They  
21 take them out and they put on their truck. They go to the place  
22 they have to install. Sometimes we may help move around  
23 something, but not that we do --

24 Q. To your knowledge, had there been any kind of movement of  
25 materials in that storage room that hit the water heater or hit

1 any of the piping in that room?

2 A. No.

3 Q. No?

4 A. No.

5 Q. Do you know a Mr. Castillo?

6 A. Do you have first name or --

7 Q. Yes.

8 MR. CHHATRE: Meldy (ph.).

9 MR. PORTILLO: Meldy Castillo, yes, sir.

10 BY MR. PRICE:

11 Q. Do you know him?

12 A. Meldy Castillo?

13 Q. Yeah.

14 A. Yes.

15 Q. How do you know him?

16 A. He used to work for Kay. He was a maintenance technician.

17 Q. And we understand that he was terminated not -- sometime in  
18 the last several months, correct?

19 A. Yes.

20 Q. Are you aware of that?

21 A. Yes.

22 Q. Do you know of his whereabouts now?

23 A. Where he at now? Well, he call me a couple time, but he's,  
24 but he's been working on someplace at D.C. He mentioned --  
25 Bozzuto. It's like a management company.

1 Q. Have you known Mr. Castillo to come back to the apartment  
2 complex for any reason since he was terminated?

3 A. No, I haven't seen him.

4 Q. Okay. Do you know of any residents or individuals that had  
5 any complaints with the apartment complex?

6 A. Complaints, you know, some people, some residents, they  
7 complain about, you know, a couple things. Like they, you know,  
8 they don't -- they just complain for small things.

9 Q. So --

10 A. We hear the, you know --

11 Q. But other than small things, have you known any residents or  
12 individuals to make a threat against the apartment complex?

13 A. No. Never seriously.

14 Q. Okay. And you were in that room on the date of the incident?

15 A. Yes, I went to that --

16 Q. You did not notice anything unusual about the storage  
17 facility or about the piping in the room? Nothing looked like it  
18 had been disturbed?

19 A. Nothing. It's just normal, like every day.

20 Q. And no smells?

21 A. No.

22 MR. PRICE: That's all I have. Thank you.

23 BY LT. OLIN:

24 Q. Bill Olin, Montgomery County. Rachael asked you about the  
25 pipes on the ceiling being painted. In other buildings that we've



1 looked at, the pipes up at the ceiling are painted yellow?

2 A. Yes.

3 Q. Do you know if windows were painted or any idea who would've  
4 done that?

5 A. The windows had been painted?

6 Q. Did I say windows or pipes?

7 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Pipes.

8 MS. GUNARATNAM: Pipes.

9 BY LT. OLIN:

10 Q. The pipes, the gas pipes in those meter rooms, in the laundry  
11 rooms, the rooms are very clean and the pipes are painted yellow.  
12 Do you know when that was done or who might've done that?

13 A. No. Since I've been working, I never seen --

14 Q. Anybody paint them?

15 A. -- nobody like paint it. It probably been that way since --

16 Q. You started?

17 A. Yeah.

18 LT. OLIN: All right. That's all I got.

19 MR. CHHATRE: Okay. Kelly?

20 BY MR. EMEABA:

21 Q. Mr. Portillo, this is Kalu Kelly Emeaba. Just a quick  
22 question. About what time of the day did you go into the storage  
23 room to do the work at 8701?

24 A. It was in the morning. I would say 9 to 10, I went in the  
25 room to get some rags and paper towel.

1 Q. About 9 to --

2 A. Yeah, 9 a.m.

3 Q. Between 9 and 10?

4 A. Yeah. And then --

5 Q. Did you visit that place again after that period?

6 A. Yeah. Before I leave -- that day I left that place around  
7 6 p.m. because I was on call that day. I went to the room just to  
8 make sure it was locked. I didn't get into the room. Just, you  
9 know, from outside to make sure it was locked. That way I can set  
10 out the alarm.

11 Q. By 6 p.m.?

12 A. By 6 p.m., around 6 p.m. Maybe a little bit over, 6:05, but  
13 at that time.

14 Q. And were you able to confirm that the door was locked --

15 A. Yes --

16 Q. -- to the storage?

17 A. Yes.

18 Q. And when you set up the alarm, was it engaged -- did it  
19 engage or do you have to go and check to do other things before  
20 you can actually engage the alarms?

21 A. Yes. I got to make sure the doors all shut and locked, you  
22 know, because otherwise the alarm is going to tell you something,  
23 any door is not closed. You got to -- and, you know --

24 Q. So at the time of your departure, which -- do you know if any  
25 other of your maintenance personnel who was, you know, on site or

1 around?

2 A. Well, that day what I know, the only person who would be  
3 outside was -- his name is Gabriel. He used to stay a little bit  
4 late because he has to close the laundry rooms.

5 Q. You call it -- you call what name?

6 A. Gabriel.

7 Q. Can you spell it?

8 A. J -- no, G -- sorry.

9 Q. Oh, G? Okay.

10 A. -- a-b-r-i-e-l.

11 Q. Oh, Gabriel?

12 A. Gabriel.

13 Q. Okay. Do you know the last name?

14 A. Manzias, M-a-n-z-i-a-s.

15 Q. Okay. Gabriel Manzias.

16 A. Manzias.

17 Q. Okay. Is that a -- you guys call the ground people?

18 A. Ground.

19 Q. Okay. So this group of people may stay if they are going to  
20 go to the storage room to check whatever is in there?

21 A. Yes.

22 Q. Okay. Do they also, do they also have the key to the office?

23 A. Yes, they --

24 Q. They do have a key. Okay.

25 A. They have, they have.

1 Q. So if you have to lock it and pull the alarm, what is  
2 normally -- what would they be looking for at the storage room?

3 A. Well, they not -- they shouldn't look for something because,  
4 you know, the only time that you -- during the day hours or  
5 working hours because we need a supply. But after 6, only  
6 maintenance will be need to get at that room in case that you have  
7 any call after hours and you need some supplies. But grounds men,  
8 basically they don't have nothing to do after hours over there, to  
9 the --

10 Q. To the storage?

11 A. -- the storage room. They maybe can get in -- they have to  
12 get into the, to the office or the area just in case they need to  
13 use the bathroom or something, just, you know, relax a little bit  
14 to --

15 Q. Okay.

16 A. They used to do.

17 Q. Do you know how that this group of people, the ground people,  
18 Gabriel Manzias, how late do they work?

19 A. How late? When they doing the laundry, it's until -- they  
20 supposed to start 8 to 9 to close the laundry rooms.

21 Q. 8 p.m. to 9 p.m.?

22 A. Yeah, 8 to -- yeah. So they probably left at 9, around 9.  
23 Could be a little bit early or a little bit late, but around that  
24 time.

25 Q. Okay. Then after the office is closed, by 6:00, like, that,

1 on the 10th, and you already put in the alarm and so on  
2 (indiscernible), and you checked the storage door is closed, if  
3 somebody like Gabriel or another person want to use the toilet or  
4 restroom, where do they go?

5 A. Yeah, they may -- they can go to the office.

6 Q. Okay. So they have to now --

7 A. They have to --

8 Q. -- remove the alarm again and --

9 A. Yes, and -- yes. They had -- they can do that.

10 Q. Okay. You also mentioned Mr. Castillo calling you. If you  
11 could go over, you know -- please can you just go into a little  
12 bit of detail what kind of discussion did he engage you in?

13 A. Well, after he been terminated for a company, he called me a  
14 couple times like, you know, like just hey, how are you doing, how  
15 is everything over there? It's like, fine. And I asked what he's  
16 doing and, you know, he told me he's working someplace in D.C.,  
17 you know, everything go well. And after the explosion, I think he  
18 called me and I couldn't answer and I tried call him back, you  
19 know, like a couple time. He never answer either.

20 Q. And by chance, did you people ever meet, maybe for drinks or  
21 whatever, since he left the apartment working there?

22 A. Say it again?

23 Q. Since he left working for Kay Management, I mean, as former  
24 colleague and all that, people have some time to hang out, to  
25 drink anything or spend time together?

1 A. No, I have never saw him, like, physically since he left  
2 that, yeah. He, like I said, he called me a couple times, hey,  
3 how's it going, you know, just that. But I never -- like, we  
4 didn't hang out.

5 Q. Okay. Are there any suggestion of you coming to work where  
6 he works now or he wants to come back?

7 A. No. He never mentioned.

8 Q. Okay. Thank you so much.

9 MR. EMEABA: I'm fine.

10 MR. CHHATRE: I really have no questions for you.

11 Rachael?

12 BY MS. GUNARATNAM:

13 Q. Just one. After you -- you said you went in 9 to 10 a.m. on  
14 the day of the accident. Did anyone work in that room after you?  
15 Did you notice anyone --

16 A. It probably some other guys. You know, everyone -- every  
17 maintenance can go any time during the day. We just do, whoever  
18 needs something for the room, they just go in and out, so --

19 Q. Did anyone ever report to you or tell you about a smell or  
20 anything in that room?

21 A. No, nobody report anything about it.

22 MS. GUNARATNAM: Okay. That's it.

23 MR. CHHATRE: Okay. John?

24 BY MR. PRICE:

25 Q. Steve Price. The lock on the storage room door, is it a lock

1 in the handle itself or is it a separate deadbolt lock?

2 A. They got both. They got two -- one on the bottom, one on the  
3 top -- using the same key to open.

4 Q. Okay. So you're the one who locked the storage room door  
5 that night?

6 A. It was locked. It was already locked. I just want to make  
7 sure that -- you know, because sometime they just, somebody -- we  
8 have like a doorstopper that you open the door and leave it open  
9 while you're working. It might be sometime they leave it like  
10 that. So I went to make sure it was -- the door is locked. And I  
11 just make sure, you know.

12 Q. Do you also check the deadbolt?

13 A. No, I just check the, you know, the door is not -- because it  
14 locks itself. As soon as you -- you don't have to lock it with  
15 your key. Just like you pull and automatic lock the door. You  
16 can't -- you needed the key to open.

17 Q. Okay.

18 A. I just make sure it's closed.

19 Q. When Mr. Castillo called you after the explosion, did he  
20 leave a message?

21 A. No.

22 Q. Were you surprised to hear from him?

23 A. No, not really, because I was like -- I thought with, you  
24 know, this is in the news everybody -- you know, he might be  
25 wondering what's going on, what happen, so --

1 Q. Okay. Thanks.

2 MR. CHHATRE: Okay.

3 BY LT. OLIN:

4 Q. Bill Olin, Montgomery County. I just wanted to --  
5 investigators spoke to you, like, the next day about your -- what  
6 you did there, right? And did they talk, they talked to you about  
7 the alarm pad and you locking out and turning the alarm on, right?

8 A. Yes.

9 Q. Okay. That's all.

10 MR. CHHATRE: Okay. If nobody has any questions, thanks for  
11 stopping by. I appreciate your help. Off the record.

12 (Whereupon, the interview was concluded.)

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the attached proceeding before the

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

IN THE MATTER OF: THE EXPLOSION OF APARTMENT  
BUILDING 8701 OF FLOWER BRANCH  
APARTMENTS IN SILVER SPRING,  
MARYLAND ON AUGUST 10, 2016  
Interview of Rafael Portillo

DOCKET NUMBER: DCA-16-FP-003

PLACE: Silver Spring, Maryland

DATE: August 27, 2016

was held according to the record, and that this is the original,  
complete, true and accurate transcript which has been transcribed  
to the best of my skill and ability.

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Karen A. Stockhausen  
Transcriber