

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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Investigation of: *

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NATURAL GAS DISTRIBUTION PIPELINE *

LEAK AND MULTISTORY STRUCTURE * Docket No.: DCA-14-MP-002

EXPLOSION IN HARLEM, NEW YORK *

MARCH 12, 2014 *

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Interview of: JAMES GELLS

Office of Emergency Management
165 Cadman Plaza
Brooklyn, New York

Tuesday,
September 30, 2014

The above-captioned matter convened, pursuant to notice.

BEFORE: RAVI CHHATRE
Investigator-in-Charge

APPEARANCES:

RAVI CHHATRE, Investigator-in-Charge
National Transportation Safety Board
Washington, D.C.

KALU KELLY EMEABA, Accident Investigator
National Transportation Safety Board

LEON HEYWARD, Deputy Commissioner
New York City Department of Transportation

CHRIS STOLICKY, Utility Supervisor (Safety)
New York State Department of Public Service
(Party Representative)

FRANK MCCARTON, Deputy Commissioner
Office of Emergency Management
New York, New York
(Party Representative)

LEONARD SINGH, Chief Engineer
Gas Distribution Services
Con Edison
(Party Representative)

SONJA ORGIAS, Assistant Counsel
Bureau of Legal Affairs of New York City
Fire Department
(On behalf of Mr. Gells)

<u>ITEM</u>	<u>I N D E X</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
Interview of James Gells:		
By Mr. Chhatre		6
By Mr. Emeaba		20
By Mr. Stolicky		27
By Mr. Singh		27
By Mr. Chhatre		33
By Mr. Emeaba		35

I N T E R V I E W

MR. CHHATRE: On the record. If you want to keep this close to you, like this. Okay. I think it's still morning. Today is Tuesday, September 30, 2014. We are currently in New York City's Office of Emergency Management Facility located at 165 Cadman Plaza, Brooklyn, New York. We are meeting regarding the investigation of natural gas distribution pipeline leak and multistory structure explosion that occurred on March 12, 2014 in Harlem, New York.

May name is Ravi Chhatre. I'm with National Transportation Safety Board located in Washington, D.C. and I am Investigator-in-Charge of this accident. The NTSB investigation number for this accident is DCA-14-MP-002.

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

Also I'd like to inform Mr. -- Gells?

MR. GELLS: Gells.

MR. CHHATRE: Gells. That you are permitted to have one other person present with you during the interview. This is a person of your choice: your supervisor, friend, family member or, if you choose, no one at all. Please state for the record your

1 full name, spelling of your name, organization you work for, your
2 title, business contact information, such as mailing address, and
3 whom you have selected to be with you this morning.

4 MR. GELLS: My name is James Gells (ph.). I'm a
5 battalion chief with the New York City Fire Department. I was
6 working in the 12th battalion the day of this incident.

7 Sonja, what's your last name?

8 MS. ORGIAS: Orgias.

9 MR. GELLS: Orjay?

10 MS. ORGIAS: Orgias.

11 MR. GELLS: Orgias? Sonja Orgias, attorney with the New
12 York City Fire Department law firm is with me today. And my work
13 number is [REDACTED]. But you can reach my cellphone, is [REDACTED]-
14 [REDACTED]

15 MR. CHHATRE: Okay. Thank you for that.

16 Now I'd like to go around the room and have each person
17 introduce themselves. Please state your name, spelling of your
18 name, your title and the organization that you represent and your
19 business contact information, starting from my left.

20 MR. HEYWARD: Leon Heyward, H-e-y-w-a-r-d, New York City
21 Department of Transportation, Deputy Commissioner. [REDACTED]
22 E-mail address [REDACTED]

23 MR. STOLICKY: Christopher Stolickey, S-t-o-l-i-c-k-y.
24 I'm a utility supervisor in safety, the New York State Department
25 of Public Service and the New York State party rep for this

■ investigation. E-mail address is ■

2 MR. MCCARTON: My name is Frank McCarton. I'm the
3 Deputy Commissioner of Operations here at OEM. I am a New York
4 City party rep on this investigation. My e-mail address is

5 ■
6 MR. EMEABA: My name is Kalu Kelly Emeaba. K-a-l-u, K-
7 e-l-l-y, E-m-e-a-b-a, from NTSB, and we're here for this
8 investigation. Thank you.

9 MS. ORGIAS: Sonjay Orgias, Assistant Counsel in the
10 Bureau of Legal Affairs of New York City Fire Department. S-o-n-
11 j ■ is my work e-mail address. My work
12 telephone number is ■

13 MR. SINGH: Leonard Singh, L-e-o-n-a-r-d, S-i-n-g-h,
14 Chief Engineer of Gas Distribution, Con Edison. NTSB party rep on
15 this case.

16 MR. CHHATRE: Thank you.

17 INTERVIEW OF JAMES GELLS

18 BY MR. CHHATRE:

19 Q. Chief Gells, if you can just walk us through the event
20 on the day of the accident, how you learned about the accident and
21 what your actions may have -- just walk us through and tell us
22 what happened?

23 A. All right. I was in quarters. I think the time was
24 9:31 in the morning. We recently received a call for a private
25 dwelling fire on 114th Street and Park Avenue. While en route,

1 they changed the address to an explosion and possible fire at
2 118th Street and Park Avenue. First units arrived, Engine 58,
3 Ladder 26, and they came upon a scene where the building had
4 exploded. It was a collapse of what we thought originally was one
5 building, turned out to be two. And they transmitted the
6 appropriate signals, 1060 signal in this case.

7 On arrival, it was difficult to get into the block due
8 to traffic being backed up. When we did get in and walked up to
9 the scene, there was a heavy body of fire exposing -- of most
10 concern was exposure 2 side, which would be 1642 Park, and there
11 was some fire exposure 4. I think that would be 117th Street
12 address. And we went to work from there.

13 There were a lot of concerns early on. There was cars
14 that were collapsed in front of the fire building. There was, you
15 know, major, major collapse onto cars, I should say, both that
16 were parked and in the lane of traffic. There was reports of
17 propane cylinders on fire. That was in the, I thought, was a
18 construction tent. It turned out to be nursery across the street.
19 There was concerns for a secondary collapse because the wall of
20 1644 was still standing, the left wall, which we call exposure 2,
21 and it was hard to distinguish what was, which wall was which. So
22 that building was still coming down a little bit, and my initial
23 reaction was that it was -- exposure 2 was collapsing as well.
24 That also goes for the other side, our exposure 4, that wall was
25 still standing and it was a major concern.

1 My first concern pulling in was what caused the
2 explosion. I figured it was one of two things, either a gas
3 explosion or potentially someone was building a device inside that
4 building. And when I got to the front of the building, I decided
5 we would act as if it was a gas leak, not knowing, but assuming
6 that there was some type of gas explosion, and we operated
7 accordingly. Guys were sent into the exposure 2 real fast in
8 order to get a primary search for potential victims that may have
9 been knocked unconscious in the blast. And the next group of guys
10 were sent into exposure 4. We started divvying up our guys
11 throughout the event on all three exposures to, you know, to
12 search for people.

13 A major concern, of course, was the amount of fire we
14 had, because without the fire being knocked down, we couldn't get
15 on that pile to search for any victims that were potentially in
16 the building. So that was the initial operations, you know. The
17 first two engines had stretched lines, one of which went into the
18 building to the exposure. That's to protect the firemen searching
19 exposure 2, which would be, again, 1642 Park Avenue. The next
20 group of guys went into exposure 4 to do the same thing.

21 We special called two tower ladders to the front of the
22 building to serve as a means of knocking down the fire and also to
23 be in position for potential rescue operations later on. The
24 first SOC unit was Squad 41. We sent them to the rear so they can
25 give us a perspective of what was going on in the rear of the

1 building and also to start -- you know, see if anyone was trapped
2 back there, anyone was in the voids and, you know, anyone was on
3 the pile that we can get to. What else?

4 There was a report early on by Engine 58 that it was a
5 gas-fed fire in front of the building. There was also
6 intermittent odors of gas in the air. We had special called
7 Con Ed, OEM and, you know, shortly thereafter, you know, there was
8 units coming in. Three chiefs eventually got there before Chief
9 DeVita, the first deputy chief, and we assigned them to the
10 different exposures for management of those particular areas and,
11 you know, for safety of the guys. And then when Chief DeVita got
12 in, I became the Sector 1 chief.

13 He had transmitted -- when Chief DeVita got to the
14 command post, we spoke about a couple of things, where everyone
15 was operating, number one, so he would know, and also who was
16 coming. I asked him, and he told me he had upgraded it to a third
17 alarm, what we call 1060 code 1, and he transmitted a third alarm
18 as well, which gave us plenty of units. We had plenty coming, but
19 we needed to address the outskirts too.

20 What I did was I concentrated on the area where I
21 thought we could save people, you know, and wasn't so concerned
22 about what was going on behind me, figuring units were coming and
23 see these people who needed help, and they probably weren't in the
24 jeopardy that the people in the immediate area were.

25 At that point Chief DeVita took over, took command, and

1 I became Sector 1 chief and I stayed with the firefighting as well
2 as we're moving debris from the front of the -- on the street,
3 uncovering the cars, you know, trying to see if anyone's in there.

4 MS. ORGIAS: May I just clarify --

5 MR. CHHATRE: Sure.

6 MS. ORGIAS: -- two things? Chief Gells referred to the
7 SOC unit. Can you just --

8 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Can you speak louder?

9 MS. ORGIAS: Sorry. Chief Gells just referred to the
10 SOC unit. If you --

11 MR. GELLS: Okay. Yeah, it was Squad 41 was the
12 original special operations company that went to the rear.

13 MS. ORGIAS: And then the three chiefs that came in
14 prior, that you -- the three chiefs that you referred to were
15 three battalion chiefs, correct?

16 MR. GELLS: Yes. Yeah, they took the -- we sectored
17 them off to different exposures.

18 MS. ORGIAS: That was --

19 BY MR. CHHATRE:

20 Q. Can you quickly tell me the hierarchy of -- like your
21 terminology, the battalion chiefs and the -- can you, just
22 simple --

23 A. Yeah, it's the battalion chief, which was me. I was the
24 first one. On a 1060, you get four additional chiefs and you get
25 a safety chief and you get a special operations command chief. So

1 they all got in. The special operations chief actually assisted
2 me in the front of the building, but they actually sent a second
3 chief who went around the rear to coordinate rescue operations in
4 the rear.

5 Q. And how many people, for example, Engine 58, how many
6 people will be associated with Engine 58?

7 A. Five.

8 Q. Five?

9 A. An officer and four firemen.

10 Q. And when you say a ladder, how many people for the
11 ladder?

12 A. Six, an officer and five firefighters.

13 Q. The ladder will have six people and the engine will have
14 five people?

15 A. Yes.

16 Q. Okay. And you said around 9:30 when you got a call. Do
17 you know who called you?

18 A. We got the call from the dispatcher in quarters. The
19 way, the way --

20 Q. So it's a fire -- there is a fire department dispatch,
21 not 911?

22 A. Fire department dispatch, yeah. What had happened, I've
23 been told, was Engine 58 and Ladder 26 heard the explosion from
24 quarters. They did an investigation. They thought the fire --
25 they saw a plume of smoke. They thought the fire was at 114th

1 Street and Park, roughly in that area. So when they went to
2 investigate, additional calls were coming in to our dispatcher and
3 they rerouted us to the exact location.

4 Q. And where is -- how far is Engine 58, Ladder 26 located
5 from the accident scene?

6 A. I'm not sure. I've never been to their firehouse.

7 Q. Okay.

8 A. I don't normally work in that area. I was assigned to
9 that area for the day. So if I was assigned to that, I would know
10 that question. But I would say it's 5 or 6 blocks. They felt it.

11 Q. Oh, they're that close?

12 A. Yeah, they -- well, it's 5 or 6 blocks to Park Avenue
13 and then down a few. I'm not sure of the cross street.

14 Q. Okay.

15 A. But anyway, they investigated. They got out first.
16 They transmitted the box when they saw the smoke and called for
17 additional help. And when they got there, again, they transmitted
18 the 1060, which is a major response from the fire department.

19 Q. And you said you're responsible for Sector 2, which
20 would be --

21 A. Me personally?

22 Q. Yeah.

23 A. I was in 1.

24 Q. Sector 1?

25 A. Yes.

1 Q. Okay. That's the (indiscernible) --

2 A. Yeah, I was at -- the command post is in this area.

3 Q. Okay.

4 A. I sent chiefs here, here and here.

5 Q. Okay.

6 A. So to the 4, 3 and 2 sides.

7 Q. Okay. Upon your arrival, can you tell us how two
8 buildings looked like? Are there anything you can --

9 A. Yeah, well, I thought it was one building.

10 Q. Okay.

11 A. Again, I'm not familiar with the area, so it was sort of
12 like a double lean-to collapse, or a V collapse, however you want
13 to, you know. I actually thought it was a V collapse of the
14 building because I was thinking it was one. But it was actually
15 like two, lean-to, what we call. There was heavy fire on the
16 exposure 2 side, up over the exposure 2, which a four-story
17 building, there was fire probably five stories in the air. And
18 some fire on exposure 4 side as well, not as major concern as the
19 2 side.

20 Q. So the major was on between 1642 and 1644 sides?

21 A. Yeah, the fire was up the whole side of that building.

22 Q. Okay. And where were you standing upon your arrival?

23 A. I was actually what would probably have been the middle
24 of the street on top of the pile.

25 Q. In front of the building?

1 A. Yeah, in front of the building. Yeah, I was probably,
2 like, you know, right about here, on top of the pile.

3 Q. Okay. And this is walkway and this is --

4 A. Oh, that's the walkway? I'm sorry.

5 Q. Yeah.

6 A. I thought, I was thinking that was the street.

7 Q. No.

8 A. Okay. I was probably out about here.

9 Q. Oh, okay.

10 A. On the pile. Yeah. This was covered with brick. Brick
11 was all the way out across the street into this area where the
12 nursery was.

13 Q. Okay.

14 A. And I was on the pile over here.

15 Q. And how did the cleaning operations started? What time
16 the cleaning operation started, the moving the debris?

17 A. Pretty fast. Other than, you know, searching and trying
18 to knock down the fire, we immediately started removing debris
19 from the front because those cars, we figured, were occupied at
20 one time. They all self-evacuate -- not self-evacuated. I've
21 seen the film, you've probably seen it yourself, where the people
22 in the community came and helped the people out of those cars.

23 Q. So ground is covered with all the debris and brick --

24 A. Yeah.

25 Q. -- and all that? Did you see any water, any kind of

1 indication that there's a breach --

2 A. Not until later on.

3 Q. And what time did you remember seeing that?

4 A. I'm going to say --

5 Q. If you don't remember, you don't remember.

6 A. I don't remember exactly, but it was -- I think we moved
7 some debris and we first saw a hole, maybe a foot circle, a little
8 bit smaller.

9 Q. And do you recall roughly where you saw that hole in
10 the --

11 A. It was on the exposure 2 side towards this 1642
12 building, middle of the street.

13 Q. Okay.

14 A. Yeah.

15 Q. So by that time you had cleaned up --

16 A. Yeah, it was a few hours.

17 Q. Okay.

18 A. -- I would think. Again, I'm not absolutely positive --

19 Q. Sure.

20 A. -- of time frames because things happened so fast. But
21 that hole developed and then eventually there was some water
22 coming out of it.

23 Q. Do you recall how many times you actually excavated
24 around that hole and how many times you refilled it? Or it was
25 just done once or twice or --

1 A. I don't think, while I was there, we filled it at all.

2 Q. Okay.

3 A. We moved some debris around it, some of the cars from
4 that area, but I don't recall -- I don't recall refilling that
5 hole, filling it. I do know that there was -- later in the
6 afternoon there was an explosion out of that hole.

7 Q. Okay.

8 A. There was a gas, you know --

9 Q. Were you there at that time?

10 A. Yes.

11 Q. And where were you when the explosion occurred?

12 A. I was -- I think that was the time when we were actually
13 getting to the point where we could clear the cars, so I was
14 probably in this area over here. I was still close to the pile.
15 I was still -- we had actually recovered a body from this location
16 early on and we had units removing brick this way and this way and
17 we had a Bobcat over here with a chain pulling cars and that was
18 -- I would say it was like, you know, between 1 and 3 in the
19 afternoon that there was all of a sudden there was an explosion
20 out of that hole.

21 Q. And do you recall when Con Edison showed up on the scene
22 to try to isolate the gas?

23 A. I don't really know. I -- again, I've heard that they
24 were -- what I heard happened with the original call from the fire
25 marshals was that there was a person in 1652 Park who had gotten

1 their gas bill the day before and he smelled gas and he called.
2 He was the caller to the fire department.

3 Q. No, no.

4 A. Actually, he -- I'm sorry, he --

5 Q. I didn't mean that call. I'm talking about once the
6 explosion occurred, Con Edison came in and cut the gas supply to
7 the gas main by digging at three locations on the street to
8 isolate, to stop the gas flow.

9 A. Oh, I was -- what I was going to tell you was that Con
10 Ed was on the scene at the time of the explosion, I was told.

11 Q. Okay.

12 A. So when they started, they had -- probably, I would
13 imagine, the gas valves were buried in the street. But I know
14 that they had a hard time trying to find the location and reach
15 the valves. They were jackhammering for quite some time.

16 Q. Do you know when the fire subsided on 1644 side of it?
17 Was it after Con Ed stopped the gas flow or it was before that
18 or --

19 A. We knocked it down pretty fast. You know, but there was
20 fire, you know, there was -- you know, it's impossible for us to
21 reach a lot of what was burning with the lines, but the major part
22 of the fire was knocked down within the first hour.

23 Q. On a gas leak --

24 A. We can't -- we don't extinguish gas leaks. We try not
25 to extinguish because it's, you know, just makes a bigger hassle,

1 bigger hassle for us. But I don't really remember when that
2 particular area was extinguished where the gas leak was, because I
3 actually -- I'm thinking I worked from -- you know, I think I got
4 there at 9:37. So somewhere around 12:30 in the afternoon, I took
5 a break for, like, probably less than an hour. Then I came back
6 till 5:00. That was the time frame that I operated.

7 Q. Okay. Now, with your long career, do you ever get
8 involved with gas fires or gas odor complaints or rescue, that
9 kind of thing?

10 A. Every day, probably, at least an odor of gas. We deal
11 with them all the time, you know. We -- I've been to a few gas
12 explosions, houses, you know, some with non-fire and I've read
13 about them and, you know. But reports of odor of gas is a very
14 common incident for the fire department. You know, we do them,
15 like I said, every day, numerous. I may not go to one, but I
16 would say in a 24-hour period, I probably go one or two, you know.
17 So we get them all the time. And a lot of times, you know,
18 they're minor incidents. It's not a major deal. Someone left
19 their stove on. It's a, you know, pilot light issue or, you know
20 -- thank God they're not like this, you know.

21 Q. Have you ever been to an event like the multistory
22 building like this with a gas odor situation?

23 A. A gas odor in a building that size? Yes. Numerous
24 times.

25 Q. And what do you normally -- do you evacuate or --

1 A. Most cases, it's not an issue. But I have been to some
2 where the readings were pretty elevated and we have a procedure we
3 try -- we vent it out. If we need to, we'll get the people out of
4 the building. But simultaneously, we'll try to vent it from its
5 highest point and work our way down so it -- because gas rises.

6 Q. Yeah.

7 A. Which could be dangerous as well, because there's that
8 little explosive limits. But most cases we go in, we vent the
9 particular apartment in a building like that and we're in pretty
10 good shape. We shut the gas to the stove, we notify Con Ed
11 through our dispatcher, and you know, once the odors are gone, we
12 pretty much wrap it up.

13 Q. And what kind of equipment do you use to measure the
14 LEL?

15 A. We have three types of meters. Our meters are a little
16 different from Con Ed. We have -- special operations, which
17 normally are on the scenes of a gas leak, they have meters that, I
18 believe, tell them when it's in the explosive limit. We have a
19 TIF that just tells us there's gas in the area, gas being
20 detected.

21 Q. Um-hum.

22 A. Then we have another meter that tells us, that goes off
23 when we're within 10 percent of the low explosive limit, so 10
24 percent or 5 percent, within that area --

25 Q. And does each fire engine have that equipment?

1 A. The ladder companies have that.

2 Q. Ladder company has it?

3 A. Yes. Ladders, squads, and rescue --

4 Q. Okay.

5 A. -- squads and rescue. There's also a couple of, we have
6 haz-tech engines, hazmat engines. They have devices as well.

7 Q. So in this particular incidence, did anybody measure the
8 gas, I guess, reading, take gas reading on this one?

9 A. Yes. Not immediately. But as units came in, units were
10 assigned to monitor the gas.

11 Q. And do you recall, were you involved in those readings
12 or did you --

13 A. I wasn't involved, no. No.

14 Q. Do you know what the readings were anywhere?

15 A. I don't know the readings myself. It wasn't -- I don't
16 believe it was a concern because, if it was, they would've backed
17 us off.

18 Q. Okay.

19 A. Again, we were getting intermittent odors and the 58
20 Engine did, you know, relate to me that there was -- appeared to
21 be a gas-fed fire.

22 Q. That's all I have. Thanks.

23 MR. CHHATRE: Kelly?

24 MR. EMEABA: Yes.

25 BY MR. EMEABA:

1 Q. Just for correction, you mentioned codes you use. I
2 have the 1020 and 1060; is that correct? Or was it just 1060 you
3 mentioned?

4 A. 1060, not a 1020.

5 Q. Okay. Not 1020. Okay.

6 A. That would be slowing units to responding down.

7 Q. Okay. I wanted --

8 A. 1060, I don't -- did I say 1020? I don't --

9 Q. Yeah, I heard that earlier on and then later you spoke
10 of 1060, so I wanted --

11 A. It was a 1060 was transmitted initially by Ladder 26.

12 Q. Yeah. Yeah, that's fine. So I don't have to --

13 A. Okay.

14 Q. -- worry about that anymore. And what time, can you
15 remember, arriving at the site? What time did you arrive at the
16 site?

17 A. According to the -- our computer system, I got there at
18 9:37.

19 Q. 9:37. Okay, that's fine. And you also mentioned that
20 you don't extinguish gas fire?

21 A. Say it again? I'm sorry.

22 Q. You said you don't extinguish gas fire?

23 A. Right, right.

24 Q. So what do you do if there is gas fire?

25 A. We try to keep it from expanding.

1 Q. How did you do that?

2 A. We cool -- we wet down the surrounding areas, you know,
3 make sure it's not expanding anywhere, try to maintain our fire.
4 The problem is if we extinguish that fire and gas is just leaking
5 and it finds a source of ignition, there'll be another explosion.

6 Q. Okay. In this case of 1644, did you know whether it was
7 gas fire or not?

8 A. I was told, it was from Engine 58, as I mentioned, that,
9 you know, he thought it was gas-fed. And he would know that by
10 when you start to extinguish that and more gas leaks out, then it
11 starts to -- you know, it reignites, rather, and you can tell when
12 it reignites the area.

13 Q. Okay. So you know only when it reignites?

14 A. Right.

15 Q. So if it does not reignite?

16 A. If it didn't reignite -- there was so much fire there,
17 it was bound to ignite right away. But if it was just a gas leak
18 with no fire, then we would smell the gas. But because there's
19 fire, we don't smell the gas, we just see the reaction of us
20 extinguishing the fire.

21 Q. Okay. On your arrival, did you observe on the left wall
22 of 1644 any concentration of fire from that side of the wall in
23 front of the building?

24 A. There was fire throughout at that point, when I arrived
25 on the scene. There again, there was fire all the way up the side

1 of the building about five stories high, almost to the depth of
2 the building, front to rear. Tremendous amount of fire.

3 Q. So you did not observe at any point in time while you
4 were there, you know, being among the first responders, kind of a
5 source where the gas was (indiscernible) from?

6 A. No. But it was apparently right at the building line.

7 Q. Between which buildings?

8 A. 1644.

9 Q. And what?

10 A. It wasn't between. It was -- like, say, this is the
11 front of the building. They were up on a pile of brick trying to
12 extinguishing that fire and it was right in front of them, the
13 area they were concerned with that was gas-fed.

14 Q. Yeah, I mean -- when you said the building walls, that's
15 why I said which walls? Which building walls?

16 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: If you'll --

17 MR. GELLS: I'll show you over here.

18 BY MR. EMEABA:

19 Q. If you want to look at it here, please?

20 A. Yeah. This wall right here. They were up on a pile of
21 bricks in front of 1644. This was the area concerned that was
22 being fed by gas, this area.

23 Q. Okay. In front of 1644.

24 A. I assume that it was potentially where the meter was
25 coming in, the main, the feed line was coming in and maybe it

1 broke and explosion. That was what I figured happened --

2 Q. Okay.

3 A. -- not knowing the facts, but, you know, that's what I
4 assumed.

5 Q. So could that be seen as a middle of it or left side of
6 1644? If you are looking at the building directly, does that
7 place you in front --

8 A. I'll be honest with you.

9 Q. -- midpoint or the left side?

10 A. I couldn't tell exactly where it was. I don't remember.
11 But I know they were operating in front of that building, that
12 building was -- how big was it, 40 feet or -- I think it's in this
13 report. I know I have it in here. Let's see. Let's see here. I
14 don't have the dimensions here. Oh, wait. Here it is. I don't
15 have the dimensions. I thought the dimensions were in this
16 report.

17 Q. Okay.

18 MS. ORGIAS: They may be --

19 MR. GELLS: They probably are somewhere in there, but --

20 BY MR. EMEABA:

21 Q. Being the fact that you came in there early enough and
22 can you give us, can you recall it when the vehicles on the
23 parking lane were moved?

24 A. When they were removed?

25 Q. Yes. Vehicles on the parking lane from 1644 to 1642,

1 when were they removed?

2 A. Exactly, no, but it took a while. We had people digging
3 right away, but I would say probably an hour into it we started to
4 be able to move the first vehicle.

5 Q. Okay. That was in the parking lane?

6 A. In the actual parking lane? Well, one of the cars
7 probably within an hour, hour and a half, 2 hours, we were able to
8 move one car. You know, I forget which car we moved first. I
9 don't really recall that. But, you know, we were trying to get
10 into that area to search for people obviously.

11 Q. Okay. So on your arrival, vehicles were parked in place
12 for the driving lane southbound and the parking lane southbound
13 while you were fighting the fire?

14 A. Yes. We were able to, you know, obviously search some
15 of those vehicles because they were partially exposed, so we did
16 that right away. The cars that were buried buried, you know, of
17 course we had to dig them out before we could get into them.

18 Q. Okay. And you said it took about an hour before the
19 vehicles were removed from the --

20 A. Not all of them.

21 Q. Not all of them?

22 A. That's probably when we got to the first one to move it.
23 It took us -- there was, you know, you're talking a five-story
24 building worth of brick on top of those vehicles, so we had a lot
25 of digging to do.

1 Q. Okay. The second, or second real explosion that was
2 heard, you know, from the roadway, on the roadway?

3 A. Right, right.

4 Q. Did that happen while those vehicle were still parking
5 on the road or after they'd been removed?

6 A. That area had been cleared already.

7 Q. They had been cleared?

8 A. Yeah, that -- I would say, the pile was maybe 15, 20
9 feet away from that hole at that point.

10 Q. Okay.

11 A. So that was exposed.

12 Q. Okay. So when the explosion occurred, was the hole
13 already in existence or it did result from the explosion?

14 A. It was already in existence.

15 Q. The hole was already in existence. Okay.

16 A. It started out, like I said before, maybe like a 12-inch
17 circle, 1-foot circle, then expanded out, you know, few feet by a
18 few feet wide, you know, maybe 2-feet wide by 3-feet long.

19 Q. Okay. At the time of your arrival, do you observe that
20 hole at all?

21 A. No.

22 Q. There was no hole at all?

23 A. No, I don't think it was there. It was either there, or
24 it may have been buried. But, you know, I didn't see it till
25 quite some time later on.

1 Q. Okay. What kind of, if you can recall it, what kind of
2 vehicles or equipment drove past that location?

3 A. The FDNY had a Bobcat that they were using in that area.
4 Are you familiar with a Bobcat? You know, it's a small tractor.

5 Q. Yes, sir.

6 Okay. Thank you so much. I'll pass (indiscernible).

7 MR. CHHATRE: Chris?

8 BY MR. STOLICKY:

9 Q. This is Chris Stolickey. Engine 58 was out there and
10 they had their hoses hooked up fighting the fire early on.

11 A. Um-hum.

12 Q. Do you recall when they had to move their hoses because
13 they weren't getting enough water out of the hydrant?

14 A. That's something I didn't know about. I saw it, I read
15 that in the fire report, that they had to change something over.
16 But I believe they never lost water. They did move the line when
17 I sent guys into the exposure to search for people, because I
18 needed -- I wanted the guys to be protected who were searching.

19 MR. STOLICKY: That's all I have right now.

20 MR. CHHATRE: Okay.

21 Frank?

22 MR. MCCARTON: I'm good right now.

23 MR. CHHATRE: Okay.

24 BY MR. SINGH:

25 Q. Couple of follow-up questions on Kelly. Talked about --

1 so when you first arrived, did you smell, personally smell gas, an
2 odor of gas anywhere?

3 A. Intermittently.

4 Q. Intermittent?

5 A. Yes.

6 Q. Is that unusual in a fire that could have been gas-fed
7 or where a building collapsed, where you could have a stove
8 separated from -- is it uncommon?

9 A. No. No.

10 Q. Okay.

11 A. Could you just repeat your question?

12 Q. Let's say a typical building collapse.

13 A. Okay.

14 Q. Like something that's attached to a gas line. It was a
15 typical to have intermittent gases, odor of gas --

16 A. Yes, right.

17 Q. So that's not unusual, right?

18 A. No.

19 Q. You mentioned that they were able to knock the fire down
20 within the, you know, first hour? When you say knocked down, was
21 it completely extinguished?

22 A. No. No.

23 Q. But you got it --

24 A. The fire was burning probably a good portion of the day.
25 But we were able to knock down -- you know, when you have five

1 stories collapse, in between all those floors are still burning,
2 so we can't get -- we can't reach that with our lines.

3 Q. Right. So you have residual fire somewhere in the --

4 A. The fire was burning below.

5 Q. Below. What about the, what you thought was the gas-fed
6 fire along the wall? Was that extinguished completely?

7 A. I don't recall when that was extinguished to be honest
8 with you.

9 Q. But if Engine 58 thought it was a gas-fed fire, why
10 would you not let -- why wouldn't they let it burn until the gas
11 was shut off? I mean, it seems contrary to --

12 A. Why would they let it burn?

13 Q. Yeah. Why wouldn't they let it burn, as opposed to
14 trying to extinguish it? Because then you have -- if there's, you
15 believe it's gas-fed, then the gas is going to be going somewhere
16 else, right?

17 A. Right. Right.

18 Q. So it seems counter-protocol, right?

19 A. Yeah. Well, they -- I don't remember when that fire was
20 extinguished. They obviously wouldn't extinguish a gas-fed fire.
21 There was so much fire there early on, it wasn't an issue because
22 we had to control the main body of fire.

23 Q. Yeah, I guess, going back to Ravi's point about
24 synchronizing the time that the fire was out and the time Con
25 Edison shut off the gas, I mean, there's a gap there and we're

1 trying to understand what that gap is. Because, I mean, certainly
2 if you extinguish the gas-fed fire and the gas is not shut off,
3 you're going to have an odor of gas.

4 A. Major problem. I --

5 Q. Or potentially a problem.

6 A. You know, I don't remember exactly when Con Ed was able
7 to control the gas, but I would think it was in the afternoon
8 period. There --

9 Q. Yeah, no, definitely it was. It was sometime about --

10 A. You're from Con Ed?

11 Q. -- 1:45, 1:40 -- 1:30, 1:45.

12 A. You're from Con Ed?

13 Q. Yeah.

14 A. Okay.

15 Q. Around that time, which, again, it fits with the
16 secondary explosion, and I think the previous chiefs said there
17 were several secondary explosions in that hole in the street.

18 A. Oh, yeah?

19 Q. Yeah.

20 A. It may have been one when I had left to get a drink.

21 Q. Right.

22 A. I was gone for probably less than an hour. I got
23 relieved at that point. But yeah, I don't know when Con -- I know
24 they were jackhammering for a long period of time.

25 Q. Yeah, several hours.

1 A. Like I said, I assumed the control valve for that
2 particular building was buried.

3 Q. Yeah.

4 A. So that was the issue for them. They couldn't isolate
5 that building, which would be ideal, you know. You know, you
6 don't want to shut the whole street down, but -- it was a crazy
7 event.

8 Q. The previous two chiefs mentioned a rescue operation
9 potentially at 1642 to look for, you know, people for rescue and
10 evacuation, as necessary.

11 A. Um-hum.

12 Q. Part of the protocol, I believe you have, you would
13 check for gas as you go in. Do you know if they registered gas on
14 their meters in that rescue operation in 1642?

15 A. They probably -- the initial?

16 Q. Um-hum.

17 A. No, they probably didn't have their gas meter with them
18 at that point.

19 Q. Okay.

20 A. You know. And --

21 Q. The -- oh, go ahead.

22 A. No, go ahead.

23 Q. The bobcat, also had to get a backhoe there. Was that
24 part of your operation?

25 A. Yes. They wound up with two bobcats and a backhoe.

1 Q. The final cleaning around where you discovered that 2x4
2 hole or the 12-inch hole that eventually got bigger, was that done
3 with the backhoe or was that done with Russo's clam bucket, the
4 big machine?

5 A. First of all, I wasn't there for when Russo was there.
6 I left at 5:00.

7 Q. Okay.

8 A. They may have been on the scene, but they weren't
9 operating while I was operating. And -- what was the question
10 about the --

11 Q. The backhoe?

12 A. Yeah?

13 Q. Did your backhoe find that hole or did Russo's machine
14 find that hole? So you were cleaning from north to south?

15 A. We were just clearing stuff out and that hole --

16 Q. Right.

17 A. -- appeared, yeah.

18 Q. Okay. So was that's a combination of bobcat and
19 backhoe?

20 A. The way I remember it, there was a bobcat on that side
21 in front of 1642, moving with a chain trying to pull the cars out
22 of the pile so we can search.

23 Q. When you found that hole, did you smell gas at that
24 point?

25 A. No. We were probably getting it intermittently, but I,

1 you know --

2 Q. No strong odor?

3 A. -- it wasn't, it didn't change our situation.

4 Q. Okay. And no water gushing out of the hole?

5 A. There was water coming out of the hole as well, but it
6 was more like, you know, like a spray coming out of it.

7 Q. Okay. Look through my notes here real quick. Sorry.

8 MR. SINGH: I think that's it for now.

9 MR. CHHATRE: Okay.

10 MR. SINGH: Thank you.

11 BY MR. CHHATRE:

12 Q. Let me just follow up on the hole. The hole's kind of
13 interest to us.

14 A. Yeah, yeah. I'm sure.

15 Q. The secondary explosion did occur at the hole, around
16 the hole, near the hole?

17 A. There was explosion and I would say a flame came out of
18 that hole, maybe 3 feet around by 20 feet high --

19 Q. Came from that hole?

20 A. -- to the best of my memory. Yes.

21 Q. But came from that hole?

22 A. It was quick explosion, flame, gone. That's, you know,
23 from my memory. And that was, you know --

24 Q. The explosion was in the hole, then, (indiscernible)?

25 A. Yeah.

1 Q. And were you there at that time?

2 A. Yes. That's what I witnessed.

3 Q. Okay.

4 MR. STOLICKY: When you say explosion, did the ground
5 shake or was it a big flare?

6 MR. GELLS: It was a noise.

7 BY MR. CHHATRE:

8 Q. A noise?

9 A. It was a noise and flame. Again, it was, like, 3 feet
10 round, maybe 20 feet high, and dissipated. It was extremely fast.

11 Q. And was the water coming out of the hole at that time?

12 A. The water was -- you know, I don't recall exactly. I
13 would -- you know, I don't remember if it was still coming out or
14 not. It probably was, but I don't --

15 Q. You don't --

16 A. I couldn't tell you 100 percent.

17 Q. -- you don't specifically remember water coming out at
18 that time?

19 A. Right.

20 Q. Do you -- now, after that explosion, what happened? Did
21 you guys do anything special after that explosion?

22 A. No. No. We just, you know, told the guys stay away
23 from it, you know.

24 Q. Were you involve in excavating that hole, making that
25 hole big, and in --

1 A. No.

2 Q. You were not?

3 A. No.

4 Q. Do you know who was?

5 A. No, I don't.

6 Q. Okay. That's all I have.

7 A. That wasn't -- again, I left at 5:00 in the afternoon.

8 If they touched that hole in any shape or form, I was gone.

9 Q. Oh, okay.

10 A. I wasn't there.

11 Q. So hole was left intact while you are still there?

12 A. While I was there, it was -- yeah. But we didn't mess

13 with it at all.

14 Q. Yeah, okay.

15 A. We stayed away after that situation.

16 MR. CHHATRE: Anybody have any questions?

17 MR. EMEABA: Yes, I do.

18 MR. CHHATRE: Okay.

19 BY MR. EMEABA:

20 Q. You just said something which is of interest. You said

21 you left about 5:00?

22 A. Um-hum.

23 Q. And the hole was there?

24 A. Um-hum.

25 Q. And the big backhoe or bulldozer excavation had not been

1 done by 5:00.

2 A. The --

3 Q. The big --

4 A. Russo.

5 Q. Is it Russo or whoever, the big -- what I can remember

6 is the big bulldozer that expanded this hole in front of 1644, are

7 you saying it was -- that work has not started before 5 p.m. of

8 expanding that hole?

9 A. Yeah, no.

10 Q. It was not?

11 A. No. Not to my memory.

12 Q. Okay. Yeah, because --

13 A. They had, the fire department had their backhoe.

14 Q. Okay.

15 A. It was a backhoe and a bobcat operating on the exposure

16 4 side, the right side. And we had one bobcat on the opposite

17 side, that I remember.

18 Q. Okay.

19 A. What happened with me personally was they told me I

20 could leave the scene at 12:30, 1:00, when I got relieved the

21 first time. And I didn't want to leave because I knew what was

22 moved in front of that building, along with what hadn't been

23 moved. So I felt it my obligation to go back and make sure I

24 could oversee what they're moving or not. So that's why I stayed

25 till 5.

1 Q. Okay. I know that in the process of this investigation
2 we've been told that they had to expand this hole in order to
3 allow heavy equipment to -- and backfill it, in order to allow
4 heavy equipment to come in, come closer.

5 A. Um-hum.

6 Q. So it draws my interest to know when does this activity
7 of the big equipment started happening? And, you know, our talk
8 of the big equipment are things like your fire truck and the
9 ladder truck coming closer. So that's why I'm asking.

10 A. Well, the two tower ladders, they were pulled out of the
11 block before I left. But they couldn't get too close to that
12 site. That's why there was two of them, and they were sort of
13 like crisscrossing streams to, you know, knock down fire right and
14 left, respectively.

15 Q. So they couldn't get close to this --

16 A. Because of the collapse.

17 Q. The road collapse or the --

18 A. No. No, because of the brick, the building collapse.

19 Q. Okay. So none of them reached closer to 1642 before
20 5 p.m.?

21 A. I don't remember how close -- it was Ladder 14 on the
22 left side, how close they were to that hole. You know, again, I
23 can't exactly remember exactly. They were pretty close to the
24 debris pile, obviously, because we needed them to get as close as
25 possible.

1 Q. Correct.

2 A. But as far as filling that hole in -- now you're saying
3 heavy equipment. You mean the excavation equipment?

4 Q. Heavy equipment, like the ladder truck.

5 A. The ladder truck was there.

6 Q. Okay. And then you have your fire truck.

7 A. Before we knew that hole was even there, that ladder
8 truck was operating for hours.

9 Q. Is that right? And that is what I want to know. If the
10 hole was excavated and refilled in order to allow big trucks like
11 the fire truck -- I mean, the ladder truck and the fire truck to
12 actually get closer, when was that excavation performed in order
13 to backfill it to make it accessible for such ladder trucks and
14 then the fire truck, which are heavy, to go through?

15 A. Probably after I left. I don't recall them filling that
16 hole in.

17 Q. So -- okay. So no -- are you saying that no hole was
18 expanded, refilled, even while the ladder trucks and the fire
19 trucks were close to 1644 address?

20 A. Correct. When I was leaving, what I remember last was
21 that they -- we had cleared the tower ladders off the block, major
22 body of fire was knocked down. Of course there was probably some
23 stuff smoldering, but they were clearing out so that they could
24 eventually get cranes and whatnot in there to, you know, remove
25 the building.

1 Q. Okay. And you did say that the ladder truck and the
2 fire truck came in close, almost immediately for the --

3 A. Yeah. Um-hum.

4 Q. So were the vehicles that were damaged through this,
5 based on the explosion, still in place when the fire truck and the
6 ladder truck actually came close?

7 A. Yeah.

8 Q. They were still in place?

9 A. Yes.

10 Q. Okay. Can you give us a little bit of an idea how close
11 were the fire truck and the ladder truck proximity to the front of
12 this --

13 A. Do we have any --

14 Q. -- 1644 and --

15 A. -- do you have any pictures here?

16 MS. ORGIAS: I don't have any pictures here.

17 MR. GELLS: There's pictures around that you can see.

18 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: All the pictures were transmitted
19 via --

20 MR. CHHATRE: Yeah, we are really (indiscernible) --

21 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: -- the NTSB, which shows where
22 the fire ground upon arrivals.

23 MR. CHHATRE: Yeah.

24 MR. GELLS: You can see exactly, you know -- I can't
25 tell you exactly, but, you know, they were --

1 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: (Indiscernible) shots and
2 everything.

3 MR. CHHATRE: Yeah. We should have --

4 MR. GELLS: They got as close as they possibly could so
5 that, again, we -- you know, we're thinking we're going to rescue
6 people here. We're trying. So we use those tower ladders to get
7 on the pile and to search and, you know, to get equipment in and
8 things of that nature. So they got as close as they could, not
9 knowing that hole was there. And again, where that fire truck was
10 and where the hole was, you know, I'd be speculating if I told
11 you.

12 MR. EMEABA: Okay. Thank you so much. I appreciate it.

13 MR. CHHATRE: Anybody have any questions? If not, thank
14 you so much for coming.

15 MR. GELLS: No problem.

16 MR. CHHATRE: We appreciate your time.

17 MR. GELLS: Thank you guys.

18 MR. CHHATRE: Off the record.

19 (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: NATURAL GAS DISTRIBUTION PIPELINE
 LEAK AND MULTISTORY STRUCTURE
 EXPLOSION IN HARLEM, NEW YORK
 MARCH 12, 2014
 Interview of James Gells

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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.

Karen A. Stockhausen
Transcriber