

The Leveson Inquiry

Witness Statement for Part 1, Module 1

Witness statement of Sally & Bob Dowler

I, Sally Dowler c/o Collyer Bristow LLP, 4 Bedford Row, London WC1R 4DF will say as follows:

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1. I make this statement together with my husband Bob Dowler, in connection with our role as Core Participants in the Leveson Inquiry.

Milly's disappearance

2. On 21 March 2002, our thirteen year-old daughter Milly went missing on her way home from school. She was missing for nearly six months. In September 2002 we received the devastating news that she had been murdered. Levi Bellfield was convicted of Milly's murder on 23 June of this year.
3. Milly's disappearance and the events leading to the arrest and conviction of her killer have been widely reported and, following the recent phone hacking revelations, the case continues to be a subject of press interest. As a result, the Inquiry will be well aware of a lot of the background to this statement.
4. I do not intend to describe in detail the events surrounding that day in March 2002. Nor do I intend to describe the emotional turmoil that Bob, my daughter Gemma and I experienced. Needless to say, it was a living nightmare for us all – a nightmare that took place under an intense media spotlight.

Press Coverage

5. Milly's disappearance and the police operation investigating it was obviously a massive news story. We understood at the time that it would attract a serious level of media attention. We also understood that the press' was like a double edged sword, but we

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needed the press coverage to help generate information about what had happened to Milly.

6. What we did not appreciate was the extent to which the newspapers would intrude on our private turmoil and how little control we would have over where the lines were drawn in this respect. We did not have any experience in dealing with the media and we had to make a lot of difficult choices, without the benefit of professional advice and at an extremely harrowing time in our lives. It felt like a lot of our decisions to engage the press had ramifications beyond those you could logically expect.
7. Particularly distressing were the articles and pictures detailing events or information we considered private. One example which sticks in my mind occurred in May 2002, about 7 weeks after Milly had disappeared.
8. Bob was working in London on that day and I spoke to him on the phone during the day (and, most likely, left him messages). We decided to meet at Walton-on-Thames station that afternoon to do the same walk home that Milly would have done at roughly the same time that she would have done it. While Surrey police were aware that we were doing the walk, it was not a formally organised re-construction or something that the police had suggested we do for the purposes of the investigation. Rather, it was something that we both felt may help us psychologically in dealing with Milly's disappearance or reveal something we had not previously thought of.
9. Bob and I met at the station as agreed. It was quiet and there were no press photographers around. We began our painful walk together. Half way home we came across a large tree with a poster of Milly on it. I walked up to the poster because I wanted to check that the telephone number on it was correct. Seeing the picture of Milly during the course of this walk inevitably made me emotional and I lent forward to touch the picture. I was not aware of any photographers being present at the time and did not expect any press coverage about what we were doing (as I said, it was about 7 weeks after Milly's disappearance and it was something Bob and I had arranged to do alone). Three days later a photograph of me

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touching the poster was printed in the News of the World. It was distressing to think that someone had been secretly photographing us during this intensely private moment. I remember calling my police family liaison officer on that Sunday morning after I saw the article as I was furious at the intrusion. I also remember asking if our phone line could have been bugged as this particular arrangement was very 'last minute'.

10. In the weeks and months that followed Milly's disappearance, we were often 'doorstepped' by journalists and photographers looking for a story. Bob would be in the front garden and a reporter would pop up asking him a question about the case. In our experience, the journalists rarely started by introducing themselves. They would simply launch into a series of questions about Milly. The 'doorstepping' was particularly intense around the time that the head of the police investigation changed. We were shocked that the press often seemed to know information before we did and we needed to be constantly 'on guard' when leaving the house as we were often approached. Sometimes a report on Sky news would come out before the police were able to inform us. For example shortly after Milly went missing a body was discovered on the local railway line. Sky news reported this and my brother sent us a text before we were informed by the police. Also sometime later a body was found in the river Thames near Sunbury Lock there was a great deal of press speculation about it being Milly's body. It was not her body but the following morning the Daily Mail printed full front page headline that said Milly body found in the Thames alongside a massive photo of her - that front page image still haunts me.
11. At the time the Surrey Police press office handled all our press and occasionally we would agree to do an interview with a journalist if it would help the investigation. Most interviews were then pooled and therefore could be used by any paper.
12. Whilst the media were extremely difficult to deal with - our thoughts and pain were of course focussed on our loss of Milly and looking after Gemma.

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Milly's phone

13. As I said, I do not intend in this statement to go into detail about the events surrounding Milly's disappearance and the police operation that was set up to investigate it. However, there is one thing that I would like to mention. It is a moment that has always stuck in my mind and it is especially relevant given what we now know.
14. In around April or May 2002 we went with the police to look at CCTV footage at the Birds Eye building in Walton-on-Thames. It was a building that Milly would have walked past on her way home and we were asked to identify whether a girl that had been spotted on the CCTV was her. As it turned out, the girl that had been captured by the CCTV cameras was not Milly.
15. We were in the reception waiting to view the footage. In the preceding days and weeks we had all been frantically calling Milly's mobile phone in the hope that we would reach her or glean some information about what had happened to her. A huge number of voicemails had been left for her by us, family members and friends and her voicemail box very quickly became full. From then on whenever we called her number we would hear the automated message which said that the voicemail box was full and that the caller should try again later. Despite this, Bob, Gemma and I continued to call her phone constantly and I was doing just that when we were waiting in the Birds Eye building reception. I had dialled a number of times only to hear the usual message. I then phoned again and was shocked to hear Milly's voice – I had got through to her personal voicemail message! I jumped out of my seat and screamed. In that moment, I was just so elated to think that there was a possibility that Milly had accessed her voicemail and was therefore still alive. We immediately phoned Gemma to tell her the news and she had a similar reaction to me, jumping up in response to the possibilities that this information represented.
16. I cannot comment on the impact the development had on the police investigation but it certainly felt like an extremely memorable moment to me. It certainly was an enormously important moment –

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or seemed to be – from a personal point of view since it gave us all hope that Milly was alive and well. It is impossible to put what that felt like into words.

Levi Bellfield and the criminal trial

17. On 30 March 2010 Levi Bellfield was charged with Milly's abduction and murder. Bellfield's trial began on 5 May this year and he was convicted on 23 June. Again, I do not propose to go into any detail about the events surrounding the trial save as to say that we were put under an enormous amount of pressure and at times it felt like we were on trial, not Mr Bellfield. It was extremely difficult and exhausting time for Bob, Gemma and I.

The phone hacking revelations

18. On April, just weeks before the criminal trial began, we received a call from the Metropolitan police saying they would like to see us. We were told that it was about the hacking of Milly's phone by the News of the World in 2002. My mind went into overdrive. I was trying to make sense of what I had been told and I started to relive a lot of the events that had happened at the time.
19. We met with the Met Police on 1st April 2011. When they explained what the News of the World had done, I was sickened and shocked at the thought of it. I had a great deal of difficulty processing the information. It was all too much particularly given the fact that we were preparing for the trial of Milly's murderer, something which was a horrific ordeal for all of us.
20. We were unable to do anything about the revelation in case it jeopardised the trial but all the family definitely felt sickened and that something would have to be confronted.
21. Before the police contacted us, we had read about the phone hacking scandal. Like many, we were astounded by the level of intrusion that people in the public eye had been subjected to. To some extent, I would have said that being in the media spotlight is something that comes with being a celebrity. However, I would never have thought that private information would have been obtained and used by the press in the way that it has been. I

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certainly never thought that ordinary or vulnerable people like us would have been subject to phone hacking and that a newspaper would have accessed Milly's voicemails during the time that she was missing and we were desperately trying to find out what had happened to her.

Instructing Mark Lewis and the phone hacking story breaking

22. Once we had had a chance to process the phone hacking revelations a little bit, we were very concerned about putting arrangements in place to deal with the situation that would arise if the information became public after the conclusion of the trial. As part of this we felt that it was extremely important for us to be able to obtain some legal advice. I phoned Mark Lewis as I had seen that he had acted for other phone hacking victims and we arranged to meet with him after we had given evidence in the criminal trial.
23. We discussed with Mark the possibility of bringing a claim. The cost of doing so was a problem and I told Mark that we simply would not be able to afford it. Mark said that he would act for us regardless. He explained that there would still be a risk in relation to the other side's fees (albeit small) but an option was for him to conduct the case on a 'no win no fee' basis and obtain insurance to cover costs risks of losing. It was such a weight off my mind to know that Mark would be able to represent us and we would not have to deal with it on our own or have to pay his fees while he pursued the case.
24. It was agreed that we would not do anything until the trial concluded and we had had a chance to recover from that process before confronting the next. Immediately after the trial we took a week's holiday.
25. The first day we got back Mark phoned us and said that he had been notified that the news of our phone hacking was about to break. The grief we had experienced during the criminal trial had taken a lot out of us and when we heard this it felt like there was yet another juggernaut coming our way. The last thing we wanted was any more publicity but we felt that Milly would have been pleased to know that she was doing something good to help expose the wrongdoing that had taken place at the hands of the press.

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Thankfully, as Mark was now acting for us, he was able to shoulder the burden of the press attention.

Meetings

26. Mark engaged in settlement negotiations with News International on our behalf and, as it has been widely reported, it was agreed that we would receive a substantial sum in compensation. I talk about this further below.
27. Bob, Gemma and I were also invited to meetings with Rupert Murdoch and David Cameron.
28. The meeting with Rupert Murdoch was extremely tense and a little surreal. There was little that he could say apart from acknowledge that what had taken place was totally unacceptable and apologise to us which he did, although he did not make it clear what he knew about what was going on. Gemma asked Mr Murdoch how he would have felt if it had happened to one someone in his family. He just sat with his head in his hands.
29. We also received an apology letter from Rebekah Brooks. However, she did not take responsibility for what had happened nor did she fully accept that the hacking of Milly's phone had taken place. All the letter said she had not known about it at the time but if it was true she was sickened by it.
30. We also had a meeting with the Prime Minister. We were anxious to obtain his assurances that something would be done about phone hacking scandal and press conduct as a whole. Gemma in particular emphasised that this was the opportunity for Mr Cameron's government to take the lead and clean up all the wrongdoing in the industry. It is something that we all feel very strongly about, particularly given what we have been through.

The future

31. As we all know, shortly after the story about Milly's phone became public the News of the World shut down and this Inquiry was set up.
32. We then reached an agreement with News International about the payment to be made to us by way of compensation. Of course, it is

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an enormous sum. The level of payment by News Corp was intended to mark how serious their wrongdoing was. But it will also secure Gemma's future and our own and for that we are grateful. However, being blunt about it, accepting this money carries with it mixed emotions. Whilst securing the family's financial future is very reassuring and leaves us one less thing to worry about. In terms of this family coming to terms with the loss of Milly, ultimately, we cannot get away from the fact that it is inextricably linked to the tragic loss of our daughter and the wrongdoing that occurred as a result of that.

33. Most importantly, it goes without saying that no amount of money will ever bring Milly back. And the truth is there is nothing that can rectify the damage that has been done to our family. The hacking and level of press intrusion that occurred at a time when we were so vulnerable has only served to heighten the impact of the events in 2002. Indeed, it has become very difficult to separate one from the other now in our minds. All that we can hope for is a positive outcome from this inquiry so that other families are not affected in the way we have been, and that the press are forced to behave with responsibility. We look forward to seeing Lord Justice Leveson's report and furthermore seeing any recommendations he makes implemented by Parliament without delay.

Statement of Truth

We believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true.

DATED the 3rd day of November 2011

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