Carole’s Account – Tree Protector

My actions were because of fear and anxiety for the potential loss of our street trees, but also because of anger about the council’s approach.

I joined a group of campaigners. Each of us felt that we wanted to break the injunction. We would respond to callouts posted on social media, via Facebook, Messenger and WhatsApp. We also developed a rota to patrol areas under threat. There were only a small number of us, but we did the best we could.

This is how it made me feel when I carried out the non-violent action: butterflies in the tummy once I had made a decision to ‘jump’ a barrier, rapid breathing, heart thumping, breaking out in a sweat (even on a cold day). These were all symptoms of stress, because at times it was scary. The security and other workers would use physical pain, by pushing, shoving and grabbing my arms, bending my fingers back and verbally abusing me in an attempt to threaten and stop me.

On the 11th of January 2018 I had been woken up by a call at four o’clock that morning to say that the arborists were butchering a tree on Meersbrook Park Road. I and another campaigner responded, and although we stopped the crew continuing, we discovered that they had already amputated the branches of two other trees on the road. I was devastated and emotionally distraught. It was a horrific sight and I could not return to bed. I was so angry. At 10:45 that morning, I responded to a callout on a WhatsApp group, to say that a crew was setting up at Crescent Road to fell a beautiful London plane. I chose a bunny outfit, choosing clothes that I would not wear at any other time. I made my way to the area.

I was faced with lots of hi-vis jackets, and an area fenced off with large metal barriers. I was aware that my heart rate had increased. That state propelled me forward. There were campaigners cheering as I got closer, which was confusing, as although they were supporting me, I became anxious that I would fail and not get in. I remember walking up and down the fencing like a caged animal, but the ironic thing was I was trying to get into the cage! I was stopped at every turn. I considered climbing onto the bonnet of a large truck that was parked up at the corner of the fencing, and just trying to alight from there over the fencing, but a large Security Industry Authority (SIA) operative stood blocking my way. I knew that it was hopeless. I was close to tears, but another campaigner took me to one side and told me that I could go around the back of the next house and they had given permission to stand in their front garden.

I found myself standing on their garden wall, hands on the fence looking down at SIA operatives on the other side looking up at me. The height of the top of the fence reached my hips, so it was still a challenge and I was fighting a sense of panic that I would not get over it. As I tried to raise my leg over the fence several times, with fellow campaigners who were trying to assist, I became weary and needed to stop for a few seconds. I saw an opportunity and moved quickly to my left, throwing my left leg over the fence clinging to it, whilst the SIA operative attempted to push me back. I found myself lying on top of the fence struggling to bring over my right leg, but I was pushed back and found myself hanging off in a horizontal position on the wrong side of the fence.

I don’t know how, but I found the strength to pull my body up over the fence. Once I was over, my body reacted and I started to shake. I had developed a pounding headache and I found myself short of breath. I thought that I was going to have a panic attack and I could not move. I knew that people were talking to me, but everything was muffled. I could just hear and feel my heart pounding against my chest. I stayed facing the fence, focusing on my breathing and not responding to anyone until I composed myself. The tree still stands today.

On the 22nd of January there was a call out to say that the arbs (arborists) had turned up at Meersbrook Park Road, a street lined with beautiful lime trees. I made my way there. I was able to get over the 6ft high metal Heras barriers four times. On each occasion that I was dragged out of the barriers, I never fought or became physical. I remained silent. On the last occasion when I clung to the park fence, I was excessively manhandled by the security guards who pulled me off the fence.

Suddenly I heard the barriers come crashing down, as another campaigner felt that he could no longer witness what was happening to me. Then all the other supporters followed. I started crying out of relief to see these wonderful, wonderful, people that had been there on the day and all throughout the weeks and months of the campaign. It was just the most extraordinary moment. The tree still stands today.