TRAGEDY IN SURFSIDEx

How the Miami Herald covered the breaking news of the collapse of Champlain Towers South

MATIAS J. OCNER | MIAMI HERALD
The text alert came from Miami-Dade Rescue shortly after 2 a.m.: “Miami Beach, FL (Miami-Dade County) Mass Casualty| Collins Av| MBFR 0/6 Of A High Rise Collapse Level 5 MCI Multiple Patients M/A:Broward County M/A:Hallandale Beach| 02:11.”

Another came four minutes later: “multiple patients” and a request for “all available resources.”

Miami Herald Day Editor Jeffrey Kleinman, an early riser, was monitoring his phone and immediately began rousting reporters and photographers out of bed. First on the scene was Joey Flechas, who encountered an apocalyptic scene of blinking red and blue lights, shocked onlookers, wailing sirens, a layer of finely pulverized concrete covering everything and a phalanx of police and firefighters.

The first story went up at 3:21 a.m., with updates throughout the predawn hours. The Herald was the first outlet to post the news and alert it through phone, email and desktop, as well as post on social media.

Here is how the Herald staff covered the breaking news of the collapse of Champlain Towers South on June 24, 2021.
June 24, 2021: ‘Mass Casualty, High Rise Collapse’

2:11 a.m. “Mass Casualty, High Rise Collapse,” reads a scanner transcript that pops in overnight to the Miami Herald newsroom, when most others are asleep. But news desk editor Jeff Kleinman, often the first monitoring overnight news, immediately recognizes the ominous report. He calls police and fire sources to confirm it.

2:45 a.m. “Every cop in Miami-Dade County is down there,” Kleinman tells reporter Joey Flechas, who lives 16 blocks from the collapse and sends him to the scene.

3:21 a.m. While Flechas is driving, Kleinman confirms the scanner information and the Miami Herald becomes the first news source to report the news that a 12-story condominium has collapsed in Surfside, Florida. The Herald alert goes out to a sleeping world via push notifications on phones, email alerts and social media posts on Twitter and Facebook. This url would become the main writethrough for the staff, where the number of 99 feared missing is first reported.

4:38 a.m. Flechas, who has made it to within a block of the collapsed building, files the first onlooker accounts to Kleinman, who like the rest of the Herald staff is working from home due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

5 a.m. Flechas is interviewing Santos Mejil, 50, who is standing behind police tape, when his phone rings. Mejil has been waiting to hear from his wife who was staying overnight with a disabled woman she cares for in the part of the tower that is still standing. “They’re bringing you down?” he said into the phone to his wife. “Thank God.” He wiped tears from his eyes with his T-shirt. Flechas updates his story.

5:45 a.m. Managing Editor Rick Hirsch and Senior Editor Dave Wilson talk by phone and start planning coverage. The first tasks: Wake up more reporters, get them rolling and find an anchor to compile the feeds from the field into a cohesive narrative story. By 6:30 a.m. more reporters who live nearby are heading to the scene, Alex Harris is anchoring the story, Douglass Hanks is headed to the trauma unit at Jackson Memorial Hospital and others are mobilizing.

6:40 a.m. By the time Harris first posts the main story with her updates and write-through in it, Kleinman and Flechas had posted and reposted the story more than 40 times with their early details. Harris later hands off the anchor duties to Daniel Chang at 2 p.m. In all, the main story is updated and reposted 106 times between 3:21 a.m. and 11:34 p.m., including 67 times before 9 a.m. as the early accounts, photos and videos rolled in. Reporters file their feeds via email to a special email address the Herald uses for coverage of big, breaking news stories.
Daylight reveals the extent of the destruction

7:16 a.m. The first staff photo of the scene is taken from the beach by Herald photographer David Santiago. The visual staff would later shoot from boats offshore, balconies and drones.

7:30 a.m. Hirsch convenes a video conference with editors. From that meeting a three-pronged approach to coverage emerges: Wilson runs the daily coverage already in action; Investigations Editor Casey Frank runs reporting on the forensics of how and why the collapsed occurred; Health and Education Editor Joan Chrissos assembles a team to report and write the stories of those missing and those confirmed to have died. By the time this team is done, it will have written the obituaries of all 98 who were lost.

7:33 a.m. At a time many in Miami were still waking up, a team of reporters led by Rene Rodriguez and Rebecca San Juan, with help from Taylor Dolven and Michelle Marchante, publish the first narrative history of the tower, from $200,000 payments by developers to the first news the tower was having extensive repairs to its roof as part of its 40-year certification for insurance purposes. The story encompassed first-person interviews, property records, county records and real estate experts.

8:14 a.m. The Herald posts a story with hotline numbers for the families of missing loved ones who live or work at Champlain Towers to notify officials of who might be safe and to create a total tally of the number of people missing. It helps officials build a framework for the number of still-missing people.
**8:35 a.m.** Reporter Ben Conarck reports via text message that he overheard city of Surfside employees discussing the Herald’s public records request for city inspection records of Champlain Towers South. “They’re not happy” about our request, Conarck writes.

**8:44 a.m.** Crime writer Charles Rabin reports on the first person freed from the rubble, later identified as 15-year-old Jonah Handler, and his mother, who would not survive her injuries.

**8:50 a.m.** Video of rescuers pulling 15-year-old Jonah Handler from the rubble is posted to the Herald website and Instagram.

**9:03 a.m.** The first posts of a live, running blog of news from Surfside are compiled by Marchante and Devoun Cetoute from reporters’ emailed feeds and information they gather themselves. The last post on this file was made at 11:24 a.m. Friday, 23 hours after the collapse. A new blog file is started each day while the search and recovery mission continues at the site.
Reporters from neighborhood are on the scene

9:09 a.m. Reporters who live blocks from the tower publish the first account of victims’ families, who have arrived at a makeshift reunification center at the nearby Surfside Community Center desperate for information about their missing loved ones. Samantha Gross, who took the first published photos with her cell phone, combines first-hand accounts with Conarck, who walked 13 blocks past closed streets to the center and is later spelled by Bianca Padró Ocasio. “You can imagine the horrible anguish, because you don’t know … if she’s under the debris, if she’s alive, if she isn’t,” said Luz Marina Peña, who held up a photo of her missing aunt.

12:27 p.m. Summer reporting intern Marie-Rose Sheinerman files a feed after interviewing Soriya Cohen. Her husband, surgeon Brian Cohen, and brother-in-law, also a physician, had stayed at Champlain Towers South with their ailing father the night before. They were missing. The sons and their father would be among the victims. Sheinerman, who was sent first to Jackson Memorial Hospital and then to the Surfside Community Center, wasn’t the only Herald intern who participated in the Surfside reporting.

1:17 p.m. Chrissos emails her team that is working on profiling the missing and deceased with instructions and examples from previous times the Herald did this after mass-casualty events (mass shootings at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland and Pulse nightclub in Orlando).
Communities within the condo community

4:51 p.m. At least 36 people from Latin American nations — including Colombia, Venezuela, Uruguay, Cuba, Chile, Paraguay and Argentina — are among those reported missing, the Herald reports with research by Monika Leal that leads to the first profiles of those lost. Interviews were woven together by writers Syra Ortiz-Blanes, Kevin G. Hall, Ocasio, Martin Vassolo, Adriana Brasileiro and Gross. Ortiz-Blanes is reporting from Puerto Rico, where she would later write an obituary on an entire extended family from the island lost in the collapse.

5:07 p.m. A video of families pleading for information on lost loved ones posts by visual journalist Matias Ocner.

7:11 p.m. In addition to the many residents and visitors from Latin America and the Caribbean, many of the missing were part of Surfside’s large Jewish community, particularly the nearby Shul of Bal Harbour. A feed from Sheinerman described the shul’s efforts to aid the community.

8:14 p.m. ‘The apartments were gone.’ In a sweeping story 16 hours in the making, Flechas, with feeds from Gross, Allie Pitchon and Rob Wile, publishes the first narrative of the collapse, beginning with a man who opens his front door six floors up and finds a dust-filled night sky where his neighbors should have been. The story weaves first-person testimony of people on different floors of the remaining structure to create a picture of the terrible sound that awoke them “like a crash of thunder.” Flechas and Wile were unknowingly interviewing the husband and wife in that apartment and that led to the lead of this forceful recreation.

Overnight: As the first day of coverage ends, it’s clearer than ever that there is much work for the Herald team ahead. Who lived in Champlain Towers South and what are their stories? What happened to this building by the sea to make it fall down? Who is responsible and what will be done to make sure it doesn’t happen again?
THE DAY AFTER

June 25, 2021: The first victims are named

**5:29 a.m.** The print edition containing the first day’s coverage hits Twitter while it was also hitting driveways across South Florida.

**6 a.m.** The second day of reporting starts before dawn, and we continue starting reporting shifts at the scene at 6 a.m. for a couple of weeks. Early morning hours are a good time to gather color, speak to people in the morning quiet and be there to see what might appear new from the day before.

**7:18 a.m.** Anchored by Harris, 10 other reporters combine efforts to report a story that includes the first casualty named, Stacie Fang, 54 — the mother who was pulled from the rubble with her 15-year-old son, only to die from her injuries at Aventura Hospital, where writers were stationed. We hear the chilling first account of a man, Mike Stratton, who was traveling but got a call from his wife, Cassandra, when the building shook. She was on the phone with him when the building fell, he told reporter Dolven.

**Throughout the day:** Reporters feed notes into one main story, where readers can return for updated information. This is where we first learn of an informal vigil at the family reunification site 24 hours after the building partially collapsed. A gust of wind and rain forces people seated outside the center to take refuge under the building’s central walkway.

Also within that story, we learn the following, through individual reporters contributing:

- President Biden signs an order declaring a disaster in Florida and authorizing the Federal Emergency Management Agency to provide financial and logistical support to local officials and individuals.
- The federal agency that investigated the Florida International University bridge collapse in 2018 is on the scene hours after the Surfside building fell.
- Late Thursday, a lawyer representing a proposed class of Champlain Towers South homeowners files a lawsuit in Miami-Dade Circuit Court, claiming the condo association failed “to secure and safeguard the lives and property” of lead plaintiff Manuel Dreznner and other residents.
HEARTBREAK

Number of missing in Surfside condo collapse rises to 159, Miami-Dade mayor says

Family and friends wait for updates at the reunification center set up at 1670 Collins Ave. in Surfside during the search and rescue operation after the partial collapse of the Champlain Towers South on Thursday, June 24, 2021. (JESUS ROJAS/PHOTO MIAMI HERALD)

Database of the missing and victims is created

12:54 p.m. The missing are given faces in a published database of all the missing, updated with profiles of each person as writers are able to connect with relatives. Those profiles would later prove to be obituaries that the Herald was able to write for every person killed in the collapse. Editors Chrissos and Amy Reyes begin collecting the data for reporter Connie Ogle to anchor while developer Albert Franquiz builds the database.

5:28 p.m. Shabbat, observed sundown Friday through sundown Saturday, is a particularly poignant topic handled in a story by Gross, Carli Teproff and Sheinerman. The writers tell how this disaster is being felt as far away as Israel.

The Miami Herald is gathering the names and stories of those who have been reported missing after the building collapse as well as those who have been confirmed as deceased. You can search by name and filter the missing and the deceased. The list will be kept updating the list. Please send information to breakingnews@miamiherald.com or @miamiherald.com.

PEOPLE REPORTED MISSING AND DEAD IN SURFIDE CONDO COLLAPSE

Name

SEARCH

The Miami Herald's database of the missing in Surfside, generated by Chrissos and Amy Reyes, and developed by Albert Franquiz, contains profiles of every person killed in the collapse. The database is updated with names and stories of those reported missing as well as those confirmed deceased. This week, reporters Carli Teproff, Jennifer Sheinerman and extended family member Genoa Gross report how this tragedy is being felt as far away as Israel. The Miami Herald is gathering the names and stories of those who have been reported missing after the building collapse as well as those who have been confirmed as deceased. You can search by name and filter the missing and the deceased. The list will be kept updating the list. Please send information to breakingnews@miamiherald.com or @miamiherald.com.

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## PEOPLE REPORTED MISSING AND DEAD IN SURFIDE CONDO COLLAPSE

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<tr>
<td>Jane Doe</td>
<td>Confirmed Deceased</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bob Johnson</td>
<td>Reported Missing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Davis</td>
<td>Confirmed Deceased</td>
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The investigation begins: I-Team finds ‘major error’

In the first five days, the Herald forensic team uncovers a history of damage, neglect, and inaction and works with engineers to explain how the building collapsed.

JUNE 24

6:05 a.m. The Herald investigations team is deployed. Reporters Sarah Blaskey, Aaron Leibowitz and Conarck, are tasked with understanding the engineering behind why the tower fell, and who — if anyone — was to blame.

7:29 a.m. Redubbed the forensic team, the reporters submit the first records request for the tower’s inspection and deficiency reports to the town of Surfside.

4:48 p.m. The first investigative story is published detailing the engineering of reinforced concrete structures, how they can fail, and what policies are supposed to prevent such events.

10:14 p.m. A scrollly-telling article built by experience designer Aaron Albright in collaboration with the forensics team shows what was known by the end of the first day.

JUNE 25

10:36 p.m. Buried under an avalanche of records requests, Surfside posts documents to an online portal, including a recent engineering report outlining major structural damage.

JUNE 26

2:23 a.m. The records reveal the damage was caused by a “major error” in the building design, and the team breaks the news hours ahead of other publications.

JUNE 27

5:00 a.m. A 3D animation by Sohail Al-Jamea, edited by Eduardo Alvarez, shows the probable collapse sequence. It is the first specific theory published by a major news outlet. To date, engineers agree it remains the most plausible scenario.

9:20 p.m. A town building official reviewed a damning report and still told residents their condo was safe, despite having evidence to the contrary. Again, the team breaks the news.

JUNE 28

4:28 p.m. Photos taken in the garage 36 hours before the collapse and exclusively obtained by the Herald reveal extensive corrosion in the structure.
The early morning chat message on that fateful Thursday from my managing editor said we had a huge story developing with a building collapse in Surfside. It’s a condo, he wrote, with people inside.

The first Miami Herald reporter on the scene was Joey Flechas, our local government reporter, who covers the city of Miami. The seaside condominium Champlain Towers South is about 10 minutes away from Joey’s apartment. He said the rubble and rescue operation could be seen from a stretch of beach that he loves to visit on the weekends.

Joey said there was little information available when he arrived, but the seriousness was clear. He’d never seen so many police and fire rescue vehicles in one place. Firefighters already looked haggard, he said, some of them saying they didn’t expect many survivors. It was dark, and the mood was grim.

Joey witnessed a man get the call from his wife, a caretaker inside the part of the tower that still stood, saying she was being rescued. The relief on his face and the tears in his eyes represented a small moment of reprieve. Joey would later share Santo Mejil’s story with our readers. Joey told Mejil’s story and the gut-wrenching chronicles of other families who walked out of their front door to find the rest of their building missing. In less than 24 hours our headline on miamiherald.com went from ‘Collapse’ to ‘Heartbreak.’

Our community was hurting like no other. Those families of the victims are enduring the unimaginable.

South Florida has been hit by tragedy — what could end up being one of the deadliest building collapses in American history.

In times of crisis, we come together. Moments like this show the power of community. While we may not always agree or even get along with our neighbors, communities will come together to provide support and encouragement in our darkest moments.

It’s human instinct. This is a time when we all need to channel positive energy in the right direction to help those in need.

The Miami Herald and el Nuevo Herald are part of this community. We are still working this story to bring the latest news through words, pictures and video. And we will continue digging as questions loom about how something like this could have happened. We are committed to finding the answers.