



Written by [Raven Clabough](#) on August 6, 2021

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The Goodness of America

Goodness in the Midst of Tragedy



AP Images

The unimaginable tragedy that took place in Surfside, Florida, in the early morning hours of Thursday, June 24 is almost too unbearable to think about. A total of 98 people, including children, laid their heads down to go to sleep on Wednesday in their beautiful beachfront homes in Champlain Towers South condominiums, only to be killed before another sunrise in a building collapse virtually unheard of here in the United States. The harrowing search-and-rescue, and later, search-and-recovery, that took place in the weeks following the deadly collapse was torturous for families and strangers alike, who wept for the innocent people who fell victim to a tragedy that was entirely avoidable.

And still, in the wake of this horrific tragedy, good people have managed to shine their light in an otherwise dark place. Hundreds of rescue workers and first responders, which included members of the Miami Beach Police and Fire Departments as well as specialized search-and-rescue teams from all over Florida and throughout the country, descended upon the site of the building collapse and immediately went to work. These workers acted without consideration for the possible dangers that the efforts posed to them, driven solely by the urgency to find survivors.

“The firefighters and the first responders have been working so tirelessly and have been so dedicated,” Champlain Towers East resident Orit Schloss recalled. Schloss somehow slept through the collapse and was woken the next morning by frantic calls from friends and family to confirm she was safe. It was then she looked out of her window and saw what happened. “In those first moments and days, they were searching through the rubble so carefully with their hands, digging through the mountain of debris, standing shoulder-to-shoulder helping one another. Meanwhile, we watched and prayed for their success, hoping for a miracle and that they would be able to find people alive.”

Video from Miami-Dade Fire Rescue posted on Twitter showed firefighters wading in knee-high water and using a drill to tunnel under the mountain of rubble upon arrival at the site of the collapse on June 24. As noted by the *New York Daily News*, the “dangerous and delicate work” was done out of “desperate hope” that they might find people trapped under the debris.

Sources told Local 10 that those first responders who rushed into the collapse were not sure they would



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make it out, but forged ahead anyway. One firefighter, realizing the remainder of the building could collapse on him at any moment, sent a text to his children, which read, “I love you guys, always.” And yet those first men on the scene continued to search tirelessly because they had made communication with a woman trapped in the rubble. They talked with her for hours as they desperately tried to reach her.

One first responder, who asked not to be identified, told Local 10, “Everybody that was there that’s what we’re trying to do get this lady out and comfort her. She was asking for help and she was pleading to be taken out of there. We were continuously talking to her.... ‘Honey, we got you. We’re going to get to you,’” he said.

And when the team could not reach the woman in time before she perished, one supervisor reported that the “wind was knocked out” of those first responders.

“It’s incredibly moving to be on site with these safety personnel, fire rescue. They are totally, totally motivated to find people. They have to be pulled off the shift. That is how motivated they are to continue their efforts,” said Miami-Dade Mayor Daniella Levine Cava, noting that “this work is being done at extreme risk to these individuals.”

“Debris is falling on them as they do their work. We have structural engineers on site to assure that they will not be injured, but they are proceeding because they are so motivated, and they are taking extraordinary risks on the scene every day,” she added.

CNN reported that rescue workers, even after working 12-hour shifts, refused to go home at the end of the day, preferring instead to sleep in tents to keep their focus on the rescue. The workers weathered intense winds and rain from Tropical Storm Elsa, blazing Florida heat, and dangerous conditions.

“It’s hard not to put yourself in that situation — not to put yourself in the position these families are in,” Miami-Dade Fire Rescue Captain Eddy Alarcon said. “We started thinking about it in that way: What would I do? How hard are we going to work to save our family members if something like this were to happen?”

And though the primary focus in those first two weeks after the collapse was on saving lives, when a body was found, the teams paused and paid a moment of respect to honor the dead. They continually maintained reverence even as they worked against the clock.

When the devastating announcement was made that the search-and-rescue efforts would transition to search-and-recovery after it became clear there were no survivors, rescuers and first responders who had been working for two weeks to find survivors refused to quit, the Christian Post reported.

Mayor Cava said at a news conference that Miami-Dade County Task Force 1 members, who had been part of the rescue from the beginning, were able to go home once the transition to search-and-recovery began, but they insisted on staying, according to WSVN.

“With heavy hearts, we begin search & recovery efforts, and will continue to give our all as our commitment still remains to reunite families with their loved ones,” Miami-Dade Fire Rescue tweeted, along with a video of the solemn moment of remembrance.

And because so many rescue workers remained, the recovery effort was able to proceed rapidly, the mayor reported.



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Workers also meticulously preserved anything they found in the debris that would likely be of value to the families, including paintings, cards, photos, even unbroken bottles of wine that miraculously survived the collapse, the *Miami Herald* reported.

The work was so difficult for the rescue and recovery teams that Florida Fire Marshal and Chief Financial Officer Jimmy Patronis asked for the “nation’s best mental health experts” to assist in the treatment of PTSD among response officials.

And though the purpose of this column is to observe the goodness of Americans, we cannot discount the efforts by rescue teams that arrived from Mexico and Israel to tirelessly aid in the search efforts. When those teams departed the site to head back to their countries, they were rightfully honored by Florida and local officials for their valiant efforts.

Mayor Cava presented the members with the key to the county, Local 10 News reported, “In recognition of your unrelenting dedication, compassionate service commitment to the victims and survivors of the Surfside tragedy.”

The outpouring of support from the community and all across the country for the first responders and rescue and recovery crews has also been enormous. Hundreds of notes and letters have been sent to workers, as well as tokens of appreciation, the *Washington Post* reported. According to WFLA, loads of volunteers have been serving rescue workers and emergency crews everything from water and energy drinks to meals, both prepared and purchased. One good Samaritan, Nicolette Daniel, was so determined to offer first responders a hot meal that she and her husband hired a food truck to cook 350 meals to be distributed in a parking lot near a church. She and her husband traveled from Texas to Florida to offer their assistance. CBS 12 reported that a volunteer chef in Vero Beach drove to Surfside to serve displaced families as well as first responders.

Volunteers have also stepped up to offer aid to the families anxiously awaiting news at the family reunification center. Children’s Disaster Services provided a “kit of comfort” for children at the center impacted by the tragedy. These are suitcases full of play activities, according to WTSP. The organization also sent volunteers to comfort children struggling to deal with the loss of family members, and provided childcare for adults and families who needed to handle affairs in the aftermath of the collapse.

Players from the Miami Dolphins, the Miami Marlins, and the Miami Heat, including Tyler Herro and the retired Dwayne Wade, arrived in Surfside to meet with first responders and the families impacted by the collapse. Some even unloaded food and water to those who were affected by this tragedy.

The *Tampa Bay Times* reported the Miami Heat Charitable Fund was teaming with World Central Kitchen and Direct Relief to help the victims of the collapse. In a joint effort, they plan to “deliver more hot meals and food trucks and help with some of the displaced victims,” Steve Stowe, the vice president and executive director of the Miami Heat Charitable Fund, told the *Times*.

Similarly, the Dolphins worked with Seed Miami Food Bank to deliver meals to families and first responders.

The Miami Marlins sent vans filled with meals and water to the rescue workers, as well as kits of toiletries, NBC Miami reported.

Americans and people from all over the world have donated generously to GoFundMe pages connected to the collapse, according to GoFundMe’s verified page of Surfside fundraisers.



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The collapse of Champlain Towers is a tragedy that most of us are not likely to forget. But the greatness of those who came forward to help provides some solace in the wake of this enormous catastrophe.



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