

Memorandum



Date: April 25, 2022

To: Alan Cominsky
Fire Chief

From: Raied S. Jadallah 
Deputy Fire Chief

Subject: Champlain Towers South Condominium Collapse
Victim Identification Report:
Theresa Velasquez
Valeria G. Barth

In the aftermath of the Champlain Towers South Condominium collapse, Miami-Dade Fire Rescue (MDFR) has conducted several reviews as part of its after-action assessment. This report documents the actions taken and the testimonial and physical evidence gathered leading to identifying the female voice under the rubble as that of Theresa Velasquez.

Consequentially, this report addresses accusations lobbed by a USA Today article alleging that MDFR inadequately responded to the building collapse. Additionally, it serves as a rebuttal to claims made by USA Today that the voice of the female victim was that of Valeria Barth.

Back in October 2021, I began conducting station visits with the intent to discuss the individual and collective mental health and the operational conditions encountered by the first-arriving crews who responded to the collapse of the Champlain Towers South Condominiums on the early morning hours of June 24, 2021.

For over two months, I spoke to the crews who worked directly underneath the rubble in the parking garage area, as well as crews who worked on the debris field pile. During these visits we would discuss details of the operation, lessons learned, as well as the crews' mental and emotional well-being. At times, the details of the operation were at the forefront of the conversations shedding a light on the unsurmountable efforts made by our MDFR crews to find life under the rubble.

The discussion with the individual technical rescue crews began in November 2021 regarding the operations underneath the building as well testimonial evidence about the communication efforts between members of MDFR and the female victim they communicated with.

During these conversations, crew members provided key details and information regarding the exchange with the female victim they communicated with in the rubble. As a result of the information, I began more in-depth discussions with other parties with the intent to identify the identity of the female's voice. Crews who participated in these conversations are as follows:

- Squad 69-A
- Squad 69-C
- Ladder 19-A
- Ladder 19-C
- Ladder 46-A
- Ladder 46-C
- Engine 43-A

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- TR Bureau OIC
- TR-2
- K-9 Handler

As part of this report, I was able to use the information provided to me by the rescue crews as well as evidentiary reports obtained from the Miami-Dade Police Department (MDPD), the Medical Examiner's Office, and information retrieved from the family of Ms. Valeria Barth.

Follow-up visitations began in December 2021; however, at this time, the station's atmosphere was filled with frustration, anger and disbelief. Rescue crews referenced an article by USA Today filled with what all felt was misleading and nonfactual information. There were high emotions as many felt that the article misled the public to believe that the technical search crews burned and ultimately let a child die due to their actions. This frustration led the crews to dissect the article and address the nonfactual information one statement at a time during my visits.

June 24, 2021

After being notified about the building collapse on the morning of the incident, I contacted the Special Operations Division Chief and the USAR Bureau Chief to activate specific resources. The resources requested were a mission-specific response that included the K-9 search dogs, technical information unit, and the USAR Hackney tractor-trailer filled with heavy hand equipment, such as saws, jackhammers, and core drills. This equipment is in addition to and supplements the equipment on all four technical rescue apparatuses and the two collapse trucks in Operations.

For the first five hours, all operations were concentrated on the incident priorities, which included life safety (searching for victims) and incident stabilization. For that period, various MDFR fire companies began rescue operations removing trapped victims from balconies, staircases, and the parking garage. Additionally, a combination of initial MDFR fire rescue companies and MDFR technical rescue companies began extricating four victims trapped underneath the rubble. Technical rescue companies used airbag lifts, hydraulic extrication tools, pneumatic shoring devices, and hand tools to achieve this objective. Within 90 minutes, the four people pinned by debris would be removed. Operations shifted to the inside of the building as rescue crews found people in the staircases and bedrooms during their search.

At approximately 6:30 A.M., MDFR K-9 search and rescue dogs picked up a live victim scent underneath the parking garage. Soon thereafter, rescuers began hailing (calling out), and a female's voice could be faintly heard. The information was relayed to the Incident Commander (IC), and search and rescue operations commenced underneath the building.

Before any rescue operations began, the hazmat crews had reported to the IC that there were carbon monoxide (CO) readings already between 70-90 PPM. The permissible exposure limit (PEL) to CO, according to Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), is 50 PPM. Any reading above 50 PPM requires respiratory protection or ventilation to reduce the PPM. CO is formed by the incomplete combustion of wood, coal, propane, and natural gas fuels. Leading many to believe we had smoldering fires in the debris pile. As a result of the CO readings, constant ventilation of the parking garage was ordered to render it safe for rescuers and the victim. This issue also required the power generators, used to power electrical equipment, to remain outside the building because of CO emissions.

MDFR technical rescue companies were dealing with numerous issues once operations began. Jackhammers, core drills, and saws utilizing electrical power occasionally stopped working for a few

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minutes. According to the technical rescue crews, the power generator's closest location was on the south side of the Champlain Towers South building, approximately 300'-400' from where the work was conducted. According to rescue crews, their operation was located on the extreme far north side of the building. As seen in *Image 1*, the area our rescue crews were working was between parking spots 95 and 118, as seen on the vertical columns.



Image 1: Rescue Crew operating between parking columns 95 and 118

By reviewing *Illustration 1*, a floor plan of the garage area, the two vertical columns are noted as being on the far north side of the property. As a result of the distance, crews exceeded the tool manufacturer's recommended cord length at times by 300'. However, our rescue crews would adapt and overcome.

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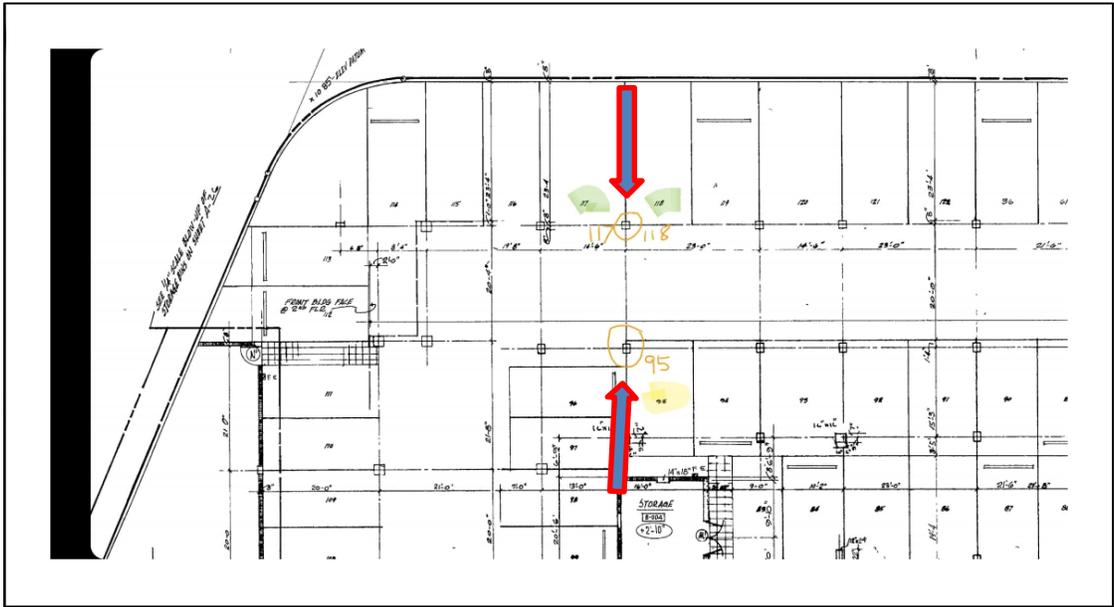


Illustration 1: Location of parking columns 95 and 118 in the parking garage.

In addition, electrical cords were daisy-chained on hanging rebar and on top of vehicles to avoid the cords from getting wet, as seen in *Image 3*.



Image 3 - Electrical cords were daisy-chained

While working in standing water, rescue crews were electrically shocked as they operated the jackhammers due to the moisture in the electrical lines. These issues were one of many complexities

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that rescuers constantly encountered as water and moisture continued to affect electrical cords further tripping the ground fault circuit indicators (GFCI). The GFCI could not be reset until the electrical cords were dry or moisture-free. Though the USA Today article correctly identified some issues that rescuers encountered, as noted above; however, the reasons why our rescue crews had these issues, as stated in the newspaper article, are not factual.

The rescuers advised that the claim made by the reporter that the rescuers lacked proper tools to handle the search and rescue operations is baseless and nonfactual. According to the rescuers, all technical rescue equipment necessary for immediate breaching and breaking was available at their request, in excellent working order. The interviewed rescuers advised that the USAR Hackney apparatus was onsite with the necessary heavy hand tools (to view the cache in the Hackney, click this [Hackney Equipment List link](#)). As the rescuers explained repeatedly, it was not an equipment issue but rather a moisture and voltage issue that could not be resolved due to the conditions of the collapse that were not in the control of the rescuers. The power cords, at times were beyond the manufacturer's recommendation, reducing the necessary voltage needed for the tool to run optimally, and moisture continued to trip the GFCI. A search for openings on the west and north sides of the building to bring the generators closer to the working area and reduce the length of power cords were unsuccessful. Several portable distribution boxes, as seen in *Image 3*, were used to safely distribute electricity from the generator to other devices in a circuit. It typically has one input and multiple outputs, allowing several devices to be connected to the distribution box rather than directly to the power source. This makes things safer, more efficient and more convenient.



Image 3: Portable distribution box

Additionally, one of its key advantages is that it reduces the chances of blown fuses or even dangerous short-outs. However, the rescue crews continued to encounter tripped GFCIs as moisture got into the electrical lines. Additionally, the rescuers advised that the search camera batteries did run out momentarily; however, a charged battery was inserted within minutes.

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Continued interviews with the crews led to the discussion of the first reported fire. A rotating metal cutting saw was used to cut the rebar found in the slab. A flareup of a mattress leaning up against the backside of the first slab caught fire but was quickly extinguished by standing water. Almost two hours later, outside crews on Collins Ave reported smoke showing from the rubble pile. However, interior crews reported on the radio that they did not have any smoke or fire at their location. An interior supervisor communicated this information and asked the IC to continue search and rescue operations. However, the IC ordered all personnel out of the building based on the outside crew's inability to locate the fire.

The newspaper article stated that at 1:42 P.M., MDRF declared an active fire, and the reporter claimed it was the mattress next to Valeria that caught fire. After weeks of reviewing this claim, this investigating supervisor could not formulate the same conclusion as the reporter. This investigating supervisor could not support, nor substantiate the reporter's claim based on the information, facts, and evidence provided.

The slab that the crews were breaching and cutting in *Image 4* shows our rescue crews utilizing cameras to inspect the area behind the slab. Radio communications reported a mattress was behind the slab after the camera inspected the area behind the slab.

There was no report of a victim, alive or deceased. Locating a patient, alive or deceased, is a department benchmark that would have been communicated over the radio. Additionally, the rescue crews reaffirmed that there were no victims behind the slab during the interviews, just a mattress. The circular saws with the water line connection the newspaper reporter claimed that MDRF was lacking are also nonfactual. MDRF had a Stanley Twin Circuit Portable Hydraulic unit on hand, one version of the saw the reporter erroneously reported we were not equipped with. However, the water spigot was 600' away, so a water line was not an option. Additionally, these saws are used to cut concrete in a straight precision line and reduce concrete dust when water is used. Therefore, these saws may be utilized without water connections when necessary. Finally, these saws are not designed for cutting large gauge rebar, as the water would destroy the hot blade. To summarize, even if a water line was used on a Stanley saw, rescue crews would still need to switch saws to utilize a metal cutting blade to cut through the large gauge rebar. The assets of the Hackney may be viewed in the by accessing the [Hackney Equipment List link](#).

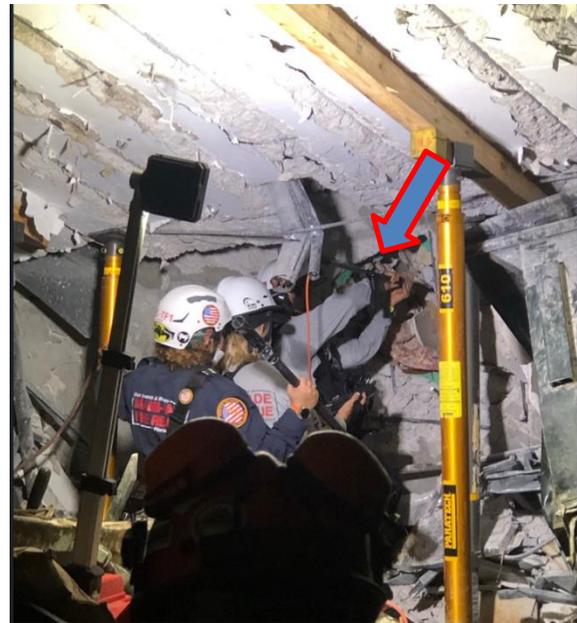


Image 4: Search camera used to view behind the slab.

Speaking to the two firefighters that the newspaper reporter quoted, both stated that she called their phones and advised me that the reporter "name-dropped" a Chief in the department to one employee and the Mayor of Surfside to another employee, as if preauthorization to speak to the reporter was cleared. This bait tactic was attempted on CFO Andy Alvarez. However, prior to an interview, CFO Alvarez researched the given information only to realize it was not truthful. This unprofessional bait tactic was discussed with other department members, so they did not fall for this scam in the future.

It was explained to this supervisor that the crews never had a whole or a long conversation with the woman in the debris pile; instead, they would only communicate for a few seconds at a time. When asked to elaborate, crews explained that the woman was not behind the vertical slab where operations began.

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The more experienced technical rescue crews believe, based on the type of collapse, with little to no voids and encapsulated by compressed debris around her, that the woman could have been as far as 10'-20' feet from the slab. These collective experiences were learned from collapses we've encountered at the Doral Parking Garage, USAR deployments to the earthquakes in Haiti, and Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana.

Rescue crews explained that the only times they could communicate with the woman was when all operations ceased, and everyone was silenced. Even the faintest whisper from the rescue crews or sloshing in the standing water negated any ability to hear the woman (to understand better the type of operations and noise occurring underneath the building, [click this link to watch a short video](#)).

Interviews with the rescuers who heard the voice unanimously agreed that the voice was that of a woman, and not a child. According to the USA Today article, the reporter identified the voice as that of Valeria Barth, a 14-year-old girl visiting from Medellin, Colombia. As personnel attempted to communicate the woman's whereabouts, one rescuer believed he heard apartment #204 and radioed the information to the IC. Apartment #204 was occupied by Valeria Barth and her parents.

As a result of that radio information, MDFR fire dispatchers are trained to capture specific information and type it into the computer-aided dispatch (CAD) as pertinent information or benchmarks when crews speak, creating an incident recall sheet. An incident recall sheet, an audit trail of units arriving, shorthand notes, and benchmark notes were provided to the reporter per the public records request (PRR) submitted. On the incident recall sheet, at 7:05 A.M, the following information was inputted by the fire rescue dispatcher based on radio communications between rescuers: *TOTAL OF 3 PEOPLE FROM UNIT 204 ONLY LOCATED 1* (see *Illustration 2*).

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21/06/24	07:05	TOTAL OF 3 PEOPLE FROM UNIT 204 ONLY LOCATED 1			T4
21/06/24	07:06	Unit FD/TR2	Timed Out		
21/06/24	07:07	PER D64, NEED COLLAPSE TRK			T3
21/06/24	07:07	PER B14, P21 WILL REMAIN IN MANPOWER WITH R78 R31,R33,P38,E08,E35			T3
21/06/24	07:07	3 PEOPLE WERE IN THE RM WITH THE PAT THEY ARE SPEAKING TO, WILL ADV IF			T3
21/06/24	07:07	ADDT'L RESOURCES ARE NEEDED			T3
21/06/24	07:08	Stat FD/VOC	DS-DISPATCHED	Loc: 88TH ST&COLLINS AVE	
21/06/24	07:08	AL FRM-47		TO-48	T6
21/06/24	07:08	Stat FD/VOC	EN-EN ROUTE	Loc: 88TH ST&COLLINS AVE	
21/06/24	07:10	Stat FD/AB10	07-CANCELED		
21/06/24	07:10	Dispo Non-Primary	ADDED	Dsp: 42	ForFD/AB10
21/06/24	07:10	Stat FD/AB12	07-CANCELED		

Illustration 2: Incident recall sheet.

In speaking with various rescuers, two other rescuers believe they heard apartment #304; however, it was challenging to hear the woman because of the distance. It is in my opinion the USA Today reporter irresponsibly used the incident recall sheet as the only source of information to identify the voice.

Additionally, numerous conversations and emails were had as a result of the PRR submitted by the USA Today reporter (before the news article) regarding the reporter's persistence for information and records that identified the female's voice. It was made very clear to the reporter on numerous occasions, from this investigating supervisor, MDFR's Media and Public Relations Bureau, and the County Attorney's Office, that MDFR did not have any evidence or reports clearly identifying who the woman was at the

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time of the PRR. An email and a PDF file are attached via share folder that addressed this information with the reporter from my office ([click here to access files](#)).

During my interview with the rescuers, they were asked questions regarding the voice and if they could provide any information that could assist us in identifying the woman. The following information was obtained from the interviews with the rescuers:

1. The voice of the female was that of a woman not a young girl or a child.
2. The woman spoke only English to the rescuers with the language syntax and vocabulary consistent with that of a native English speaker.
3. The woman claimed she was stuck between two mattresses (paraphrased).
4. The woman claimed she was stuck between a wall and mattress (paraphrased).
5. The woman advised rescuers she was visiting her parents (paraphrased).
6. The woman advised rescuers that she was with her parents in the apartment but did not see them around her (paraphrased).
7. The woman remained calm when communicating with the rescuers in between personnel changes according to rescuers.

Identifying the Victim's Voice

The following section provides information that combines collective interviews with rescuers based on past experiences gathered from incidents within Miami-Dade County and FEMA deployments. This section includes follow-up questions via telephone with various rescuers to confirm new information revealed during our findings. In addition, this section will highlight crucial information from Mr. Sergio Barth, next of kin and uncle of Valeria Barth. Lastly, records or reports provided by MDPD and the Medical Examiner's Office will be discussed in this section to provide supportive evidence that the woman who rescuers spoke with was Ms. Theresa Velasquez.

1. One rescuer stated that when they asked the victim if she was with someone else, the female voice responded she was visiting her parents (paraphrased). This statement correlates with the accounts from Theresa Velasquez's family stating that Ms. Velasquez was visiting her parents from California and was staying with them in apartment #304. Unlike Ms. Barth, who was accompanied by her parents visiting from Colombia and were occupying apartment #204.
2. According to rescuers, the voice was that of a grown woman whose English appeared to be that of an English speaker with native sentence syntax and excellent vocabulary. According to the family, Ms. Velasquez was an educated woman and very articulate. A search of Ms. Velasquez on the internet provided a short video segment on YouTube where she spoke about her career as a DJ (the video has since been deleted). Noticeable in the short 30-45 seconds of the video was Ms. Velasquez's lack of a Spanish accent. In a follow-up question to the rescuers, they were asked if the voice in the rubble had spoken with an accent. All the rescuers unanimously stated no that she did not have an accent.
3. A conversation with Mr. Sergio Barth (Valeria's uncle) provided me with two essential pieces of information to reaffirm that the voice heard by rescuers was not Valeria Barth. During our conversation, Mr. Barth was provided information from me regarding information received from the rescuers, and he was asked various questions, including the following:
 - Did Valeria speak English?
Yes, she did. She spoke Spanish and English.

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- Did she have a Spanish accent?
Yes, she does. Her first language is Spanish, but she can speak English.
- Mr. Barth proceeded to tell me that he had read the USA Today article but did not believe that the firefighters spoke to Valeria. I asked him to explain why he believed the voice was not Valeria. Mr. Barth proceeded to tell me that the information I provided him earlier, that every rescuer heard a grown woman's voice, that it could not have been his niece. Mr. Barth explained that Valeria had a "*very distinct high-pitched voice that could not be mistaken.*" Valeria Barth was 14-years-old.

4. Many of MDFR's employees assigned to the technical rescue units have been deployed worldwide to assist with search and rescue operations at major disasters. Additionally, hundreds of firefighters scattered across 157 MDFR Operations units have also been deployed to the same disasters. As a large metropolitan all-hazard fire rescue department, our firefighters are involved in daily complex emergencies within Miami-Dade County. We capture historical knowledge during these events or incidents and formulate tactics and ideas when dealing with future incidents that may occur. One crucial knowledge captured from past incidents is how people react or converse with rescuers in dire situations. Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana, the earthquake response in Haiti, the parking garage collapse in Doral, Florida, the Sunny Isles high-rise gas explosion and partial collapse, the FIU bridge collapse, and the Champlain Towers South Condominium collapse were perfect examples of knowledge captured.

One factor that has been scientifically proven is the effects of stress on bilingual speakers. Research has proven that when a person experiences varying degrees of stress, they will unconsciously revert to their primary or first language. MDFR personnel deployed to the above events or incidents experienced this firsthand when performing search and rescue operations. Research has shown that Code Switching (CS), which is a bilingual person's ability to alternate between their primary language (L1) and their second language (L2), becomes impaired during periods of high stress and emotions. During the Champlain Tower South collapse, it was evident that the high degree of stress/emotion experienced by a person would unconsciously enable the person to communicate in their primary language with rescuers. Hence this is what our rescuers witnessed in Haiti with those who spoke English and Creole, and the Doral parking garage collapse with those who spoke English and Spanish. Rescuers made it very clear during the interviews that the woman did not speak Spanish to them, not once. Though Valeria spoke some English, her primary language was Spanish. Furthermore, the woman rescuers spoke to was calm at times during many of the communication attempts with rescuers, and she never communicated in Spanish.

Another factor that our rescuers noted was that the woman was not crying and calling out for her parents. Considering Valeria is a 14-year-old on a visit to America, rescuers would have heard her crying, perhaps shouting in Spanish, or as expected for a young girl to do, calling out for her parents. Instead, the woman's voice was calm and in control, never calling out for her parents during the rescue operations, as it is expected of a 14-year-old girl. Based on experience of countless numbers of emergencies, incidents and rescues involving children trapped, one of the most common reactions noted is the calling out to the parents.

5. On July 8th, Ms. Velasquez's remains were located and removed by one of the FEMA taskforces. On July 12th, FEMA taskforce crews were able to retrieve two Paratech pneumatic shores that were left underneath the parking garage where initial rescue crews made entry to conduct operations, as seen in *Image 1*. These two Paratechs were too risky to remove on June 24th, and

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the decision was made to leave them behind. The Paratechs were found approximately 15' from where Ms. Velasquez's remains were found. This is physical evidence that the equipment was located within the boundaries described by the rescuers and in accordance with where Ms. Velasquez remains were ultimately located (see *Image 5 and 6*).



Image 5: Paratech devices removed near Theresa Velasquez. Image 6: Paratech devices removed near Theresa Velasquez

6. The Medical Examiner's findings did not report charring to the body or bones of Ms. Velasquez. Therefore, if MDRF rescue crews had caused the second fire, the proximity to where Ms. Velasquez was to our rescue crews would have revealed charring to the bones. Additionally, as stated earlier in this report, CO readings prior to the first tool introduced in the garage revealed readings between 70-90 PPM. Leading many of us to believe we had smoldering fire(s) that may have been fed by the afternoon winds. Spontaneous fires were not uncommon as damaged electric vehicles (EV) were igniting during operations ([see this video of an EV catching fire on July 16th](#)).

Conclusion

After providing a verbal report in a meeting with the Mayor's Office, MDPD, the Medical Examiner's Office, and the County Attorney's Office, all on the Zoom conference were provided the above information. I concluded that the female's voice was that of Ms. Theresa Velasquez and not Ms. Valeria Barth. Therefore, a request was made to speak to both families to provide our conclusions. Authorization to notify the families was approved.

On December 21, 2021, the first phone call was made to Mr. Sergio Barth, the uncle of Valeria Barth. Additionally, on the call with me was FF Maggie Castro. We spoke to Mr. Barth and advised him of our

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findings. Mr. Barth, as explained earlier, did not believe it was his niece we were speaking to from the beginning. He felt that the newspaper article was incorrect before MDFR called him. Mr. Barth spoke highly of MDFR and the operations. He was appreciative of the truth and transparency from MDFR since day one. We exchanged information and advised Mr. Barth to contact me for any assistance or questions in the future.

On December 21st, 2021, the second phone call was made to Mr. David Velasquez, brother to Ms. Theresa Velasquez. I spoke to Mr. Velasquez, advised him of the department's findings, and advised him that the voice we communicated with in the rubble was identified as Theresa Velasquez. I provided the above information to him, though he was receptive and appreciative of the information, he was overwhelmed by the information. After asking several questions, Mr. Velasquez offered his assistance to MDFR personnel. He was aware of our first responders' mental anguish due to the incident itself and the undue emotional toll the USA Today article had on the crews and offered to speak to them to reassure them that he, along with his family, knew that the crews did everything possible to reach Theresa. I advised Mr. Velasquez I would reach out to the rescuers and advise them of the support he was offering. We exchanged information and advised Mr. Velasquez to contact me for any assistance or questions.

On December 22nd, Mr. Velasquez contacted me and requested the Medical Examiner's findings for Theresa Velasquez. On December 23rd, the Medical Examiner's findings were sent via email. Additionally, we discussed the Medical Examiner's findings, and I explained what some of the information meant.

Constant dialogue with Mr. Velasquez will continue. I advised him that the department would be inclined to provide this report under the Florida Sunshine Law when a PRR comes to MDFR regarding Theresa Velasquez for any of the above information. I advised Mr. Velasquez that I would call him first when a PRR comes in so that he may prepare for the media inquiries.

In conclusion, based on abductive reasoning and taking all physical evidence into account has led us to the confident conclusion that the female voice our MDFR rescuers communicated with was that of Ms. Theresa Velasquez, and not 14-year-old Valeria Barth.

RSJ/rsj