“Does anybody have bolt cutters?”

The words come crackling over a police scanner and catch the ear of breaking news editor Doug Phillips. “I can get this kid out of the fence. He’s stuck in the fence.”

Suddenly the curious radio traffic grows grim.

“I see a student down …”

“I need rescue …”

“Possibly three more victims, shooter possible inside three-story building …”

Reporter Linda Trischitta quickly confirms that police are headed to Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, about 10 miles west of the newsroom.

“Go! Just go!” Phillips barks.

Within hours, the Sun Sentinel delivered hundreds of breaking news updates and pieced together a profile of the disturbed teenage shooter who gunned down 17 staff and students at a school considered one of the safest in Florida.

Relying on public records and deep community sources, we captured the efforts of student activists, revealed breakdowns by police, explored the killer’s troubled life, honored his victims and provided our community with resources to heal – all within days of the murders.

The first story came only 19 minutes after our scanner crackled and 27 minutes after gunman Nikolas Cruz started firing. Police were still tracking him inside the building.
Feb. 14 (continued)

2:58 p.m.
Our story is updated — 10 minutes after first posting — with reports of people shot.

3:15 p.m.
Photographer John McCall arrives at the scene and begins capturing photos of badly injured students being rushed away by medical workers — one on the back of a pickup truck, another on a golf cart.

Reporter Aric Chokey arrives and sees parents driving erratically toward the school, hopping their cars onto curbs and running toward the building. Freshman Samuel Dykes tells Chokey of being escorted outside by SWAT officers, who told students not to look at the ground so they wouldn’t see dead bodies. Dykes saw them anyway.

3:20 p.m.
We post the first video from the scene and a map. We also post a Spanish-language version of the story for our heavily Hispanic audience.

3:59 p.m.
Reporter Lisa J. Huriash taps longtime sources to confirm that multiple people are dead. Unknown to us and police, the gunman, after fleeing the school and stopping at Walmart and McDonald’s, is strolling through a nearby neighborhood. He will be arrested two minutes later.

4:14 p.m.
The Sun Sentinel launches a live video stream, partnering with local TV affiliate WPEC-CBS12.

5:19 p.m.
We post a gallery of photos from Stoneman Douglas.

5:24 p.m.
Three hours after the shooting, we report that the gunman is a former student. Other media identify him incorrectly, but we hold off until we have a positive ID at 5:30 p.m.
Feb. 14 (continued)

6:25 p.m.
We update our story to confirm that 17 people are dead and several others wounded.

6:36 p.m.
Staff writers Paula McMahon and Stephen Hobbs begin to assemble a profile of Nikolas Cruz, the 19-year-old killer who had been expelled from Stoneman Douglas. They track down classmates who remember him as troubled and “a little off.”

6:49 p.m.
Multimedia designer Yiran Zhu posts an interactive map of major school shootings in the U.S.

7:52 p.m.
We become the first to publish Cruz’s yearbook photo from Stoneman Douglas, after reporter Erika Pesantes tracks it down through a relative.

8:35 p.m.
David Hogg, a senior at Stoneman Douglas, hears a gunshot from his classroom just before 2:30 p.m. Huddled with fellow students in a tiny, dark classroom, Hogg pulls out his cellphone and begins recording messages from himself and classmates.

“I call on the legislators of this country to take action and stop this from happening,” Hogg says. “Thousands of people have died from gun violence, and it’s time to take a stand … for human lives, for children’s lives.”

Hogg is an aspiring journalist who will soon become a national voice in the March for Our Lives and Never Again movements. He also is a member of the Sun Sentinel’s Teenlink program for high school journalists.

Jennifer Jhon, the editor who runs the program, sends out a note asking members from Stoneman Douglas whether they are OK and whether they have stories to tell. Hogg agrees to share his video, telling Jhon: “I don’t want to be paid. I just want an internship.”

8:41 p.m.
Our first editorial is published, sharing the community’s grief and calling for sensible gun laws and mental health reform.

9:00 p.m.
Story posts with political leaders weighing in on changes in gun laws.
Feb. 14 (continued)

9:22 p.m.

Athletic director Chris Hixon among those shot at Douglas High School

Athletic director Chris Hixon among those shot at Douglas High School.

Every corner of the newsroom has been mobilized to cover the tragedy. Sports reporters David Furones and Gary Currier work their contacts and get the first on-the-record confirmation of a shooting victim, athletic director Chris Hixon. An hour later we report that assistant football coach Aaron Feis also was shot.

9:35 p.m.

We post our full profile of Nikolas Cruz’s troubled life, just seven hours after he slaughtered his former classmates. An initial story was published at 6:36 p.m. and was updated 82 times. Through sources, social media and street reporting, our staff reached his classmates, neighbors and close family friends. They described him as a young man who was adopted at birth, watched his father die of a heart attack and lost his mother to pneumonia 3½ months before the shooting. He collected guns, bounced around homes, shot chickens and got kicked out of school. Police had been called to his home multiple times, but he had legally purchased the AR-15 rifle he used in the attacks. “I’m afraid he was the kind of kid who would do something crazy,” one neighbor says. “The older he gets, the worse kind of trouble he got into.” Another says Cruz would bang his head against a concrete wall when he didn’t want to go to school.

11:30 p.m.

The presses roll on the print edition of the Sun Sentinel. Every copy editor and designer on the Night Desk works to transform the day’s online coverage into print stories and visuals. As the desk pushes deadline to include the latest information from reporters, the press manager calls: “That’s OK, we’re fine. This is heartbreaking to watch.”

11:55 p.m.

Nine hours after our first report, we update our lead story for the 181st time. It will continue to update until 2:43 a.m. as we begin organizing the newsroom for the next day. We lay out the questions that will define our work for the next 10 months: How can an 18-year-old with mental health issues buy an assault rifle? How did warning signs about this disturbed teenager get ignored? How did the gunman get through school security? Where were the cops when the bullets were flying? And who were the heroes?
Feb. 15

5:40 a.m.

We post video of Nikolas Cruz being escorted through a back entrance to Broward County’s main jail.

9:00 a.m.

We file the first of hundreds of public records requests in the Parkland case. The first ones seek more information about Nikolas Cruz; police calls to his home and school records. We add requests over the next few days seeking to evaluate the police response at Stoneman Douglas: dash and body cam videos, 911 calls, surveillance video, police reports and more. We will spend much of the year in court over denials of our public records requests, and a court battle over the surveillance video will wind up with the Florida Supreme Court before we prevail.

12:10 p.m.

We publish an obituary about Jaime Guttenberg, a freshman who died in a third-floor stairwell at Stoneman Douglas. A team of seven reporters and two editors is dedicated to writing detailed obituaries for all 17 victims. We pull reporters from Sports, Features, Metro and Business departments and assign them to specific families to build relationships for short- and long-term coverage. All of the obits are published by the end of the day Feb. 15 and compiled into an interactive presentation the next day.

1:20 p.m.

We report that the FBI failed to act on a tip months earlier that Nikolas Cruz vowed online to become “a professional school shooter.” Later that day, sources tell reporter Stephen Hobbs about Cruz’s long history of discipline in Broward schools. The story grows into a catalog of how many people and agencies failed to heed warnings signs about Cruz before his rampage.

2:40 p.m.

We learn that Cruz had encountered a student just after entering the building and allowed him to live. Reporter Rafael Olmeda connects with freshman Chris McKenna through a courthouse source. In an exclusive story, Olmeda recounts Cruz’s ominous warning to McKenna: “You’d better get out of here. Things are gonna start getting messy.” A state commission later highlights the episode in its investigation into the shooting.

3:47 p.m.

We learn more about how Cruz got his gun. Our story reveals that he passed a background check, including a mental health question, and explains that Floridians can buy assault-style weapons from federally licensed dealers once they reach age 18.
Feb. 15 (continued)

7:25 p.m.
Reporter Stephen Hobbs posts a video he obtained from Cruz’s neighbor, showing him practicing with a gun outside his house months before the attack.

7:55 p.m.
We tell the story of hero teacher Shan-thi Viswanathan, who saved students in her Algebra II class. She made them get on the floor in the corner of the room and she put paper over the door’s window so no one could see in.

8:40 p.m.
We detail how the killer was able to get around school security, through an open, unstaffed gate. The story is the first of dozens we end up writing to question inadequate school procedures.

9:45 p.m.
Our staff reports from a prayer vigil that drew thousands of mourners at a park less than a mile and a half from Stoneman Douglas High School.

In the first 36 hours of coverage, we produced:

- 229 updates to our main story.
- 65 staff-written stories.
- 13 opinion pieces and editorials.
- 197 staff photos.
- 26 updates to the Spanish-language version news story.
The coming days

After two frantic days, the Sun Sentinel newsroom regrouped to continue covering the biggest story of our lives. We organized our staff into teams to explore the many facets of Parkland: the faulty police response, school district failures, the killer himself, the community suffering and the young activists seeking to change the world.

**OVER THE FOLLOWING WEEK:**

- Reporter Paula McMahon, working through a source, landed an exclusive interview with the couple who had taken Nikolas Cruz into their home after his mother’s death. “We had this monster living under our roof and we didn’t know,” they said.

- McMahon obtained confidential records detailing Cruz’s repeated involvement with police and child welfare workers, raising questions about why they didn’t act.

- Using an online archive of police radio transmissions, reporter Stephen Hobbs documented that police relied on delayed surveillance video by mistake as they tracked the killer through the school.

- Working on a tip from a source, reporter Lisa J. Huriash discovered that several sheriff’s deputies waited outside the school — not confronting the killer — as gunshots rang out. It is the first confirmation of response failures that would lead Florida’s governor to remove Broward Sheriff Scott Israel.

- Columnist Mike Mayo rushed to Newtown, Conn., to learn lessons from the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School.

- Photographer Susan Stocker embedded with the Parkland students on a seven-hour bus ride to lobby legislators in Tallahassee for tougher gun laws.

- As the debate about Parkland spread, we began a Facebook group providing the community a place to come together. Moderated by two editors and a reporter, it grew to 800 active members and 15,000 engagements on 900 posts.

Parkland became a story that consumed our newsroom for all of 2018. Our work in those first few days helped shape a community debate about police work, school security and government accountability for the next 10 months.

It was an effort that began on Valentine’s Day with one peculiar question on a police radio:

**“Does anybody have bolt cutters?”**