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Pulitzer Prize-Winning Rivalry

By [Kirsten Ballard](#) August 18, 2016



A Look Inside a Pulitzer Prize-Winning Partnership Between Two Competing Newspapers

When *The Tampa Bay Times* and *The Sarasota Herald-Tribune* gained access to a giant database that detailed every crime committed in the state of Florida since 2004, reporters at both papers knew they had hit the motherlode. The database explained every aspect of the legal process following the crime – from the arrest to prosecution to the court case to appeals and everything in between.

In order to make sense of the enormously overwhelming – but incredibly important – tool, Michael Braga and Anthony Cormier of *The Sarasota Herald-Tribune* reached out to Chris Davis and Leonora LaPeter Anton at *The Tampa Bay Times* to gauge their interest in tackling the database together in order to

figure out how to best deploy the information it housed.



Chris Davis, deputy managing editor for investigations and data at *The Tampa Bay Times*, became interested in a story one of his staff members was following surrounding an intellectually disabled individual who had been accused of committing a crime. The case was never brought to a judge because the individual was deemed incompetent to stand trial. Yet, he was sent to a high security mental health hospital, and stayed there for 11 years. He had been – essentially – sent to a prison-like facility without ever being found guilty of a crime.

Fascinated – and disturbed – by this story, Davis brought the angle to Braga, Cormier and LaPeter Anton. How common was this? How many people were trapped in the system? The reporters believed that looking specifically at crimes committed by people deemed incompetent to stand trial would result in an incredibly powerful story. It was a story that would trump any concerns over competition between the newspapers.

And so an unusual partnership was formed.

For the next 18 months, Braga, Cormier and LaPeter Anton dug through the database. And what they uncovered was nothing short of astounding.

The state of Florida cut more than \$100 million in funding for mental hospitals from 2009 to 2014. Violence in some of the state's largest hospitals had doubled since 2009. Staffing is so short that often times one nurse will be left monitoring an entire floor of mentally ill patients. More than a dozen people have died in the past five years after being attacked by patients.

The reporters' months of research and reporting resulted in a powerful five-part series called *Insane. Invisible. In danger.* The series was published by *The Tampa Bay Times* and *The Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, as well as two other papers in Florida, including *The Miami Herald*, in late 2015. In April 2016, the report won the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for Investigative Reporting.

In speaking with Braga, Cormier and LaPeter Anton about the series and the partnership, it is clear that the reporters have the utmost respect for one another and are incredibly proud of the piece of journalism they created.

Davis had previously worked with Braga and Cormier at *The Sarasota Herald-Tribune* (Cormier has since moved to *The Tampa Bay Times*), and all three reporters noted that this pre-established relationship was critical to the ultimate success of the series. That level of trust and comfort fostered open communication, which allowed the team to agree upon goals and assign tasks without conflict. Davis was the project editor, and Braga, Cormier and LaPeter Anton each took on a different role, which was determined based on each reporter's strengths.

"I learned a lot from Leonora, who is a wonderfully tenacious features writer," said Braga. "Anthony, who is also a terrific writer, is a cops reporter, so he knew how to get documents that we wouldn't have even thought of getting. And I'm a business reporter, so my specialty is getting ahold of the numbers and seeing patterns."

Cormier noted, "We all considered ourselves to be one group, but within that group we all took smaller reporting parts. Writing, data collection, finding sources, looking at budgets – we all gravitated to things we were good at."

LaPeter Anton added, "This partnership definitely brought together different skill sets from each paper. I think if all of us were investigative reporters, we wouldn't have been able to create such a broad, in-depth series."

The collaboration ultimately benefited both the papers and the audience.

For the newspapers, the intense investigation took a lot of resources – not only monetary ones like paying for records or travel, but it took three reporters out of commission from doing other stories for more than a year. The partnership allowed the papers to pool resources and split overheads so that the burden of the expensive project didn't fall on only one news organization.

It also benefited the newspapers from a reader engagement perspective.

"It allowed us to have more impact," said Cormier. "When you've got the power of two news organizations behind a single product, people take notice. People who are important – in the state legislature, in government affairs – are now reading this. Not just in Tampa Bay or in Sarasota, but both at the same time. We gain readers and influence by teaming up."

The reporters were sure to note that a project of such scope did not come without its challenges. First, the subject matter was difficult to understand and findings were often jarring. Additionally, the newsrooms had different cultures and different philosophies, so compromise was often required in order to come to an agreement.

But Bill Church, executive editor of *The Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, doesn't think any of the obstacles were too difficult to overcome. There were disagreements and delays, but that is to be expected with projects that are this complicated.

Ultimately, the desire to tell the story drove the partnership. It resulted in an incredible piece of investigative journalism that caught the attention of Florida lawmakers, resulting in a significant increase in funding to state mental hospitals. Church believes that the immense impact proves that news media is still incredibly influential.

In the end, for the right story, Braga, Cormier and LaPeter Anton all believe that newspaper partnerships are worth pursuing.

In order to be successful, the reporters noted that open communication and defined roles are key. It is also important to lay out the ground rules from the beginning so that there are no surprises. A focused theme is vital, helping to center and drive the project.

Additionally, Cormier advised that mistakes are a part of the process.

"In a sprawling investigation, you are going to have a lot of false starts and you're going to go down a lot of blind alleys," he said. "Be prepared for those and don't get discouraged by them. In the beginning, there were a lot of things that we felt were important that by the end, were less important. And those are okay. Be willing to make mistakes when you are deciding where to take the story."

Church, too, would recommend this type of partnership to other newspapers.

He concluded, "I think as long as you identify the commonalities and the reasons you're doing it, it makes a lot of sense. Newspapers both in print and on the digital side have a significant influence on what is happening in this country and our watchdog role is paramount to what makes us unique."



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