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One 'hand' saves two lives

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A hand rose out of the twisted pile of metal and wood and tried desperately to draw the attention of rescuers.

"He was tapping on the scaffolding. That's how we found him," said Lt. Steve Turilli, a firefighter with Rescue 1 who helped pull out two survivors after yesterday's Park Avenue South scaffold collapse.

The man Turilli spotted was trapped near the top of the mangled wreckage.

"He was pinned so bad all he could do was move his hand," said firefighter Joel Kanaski, also of Rescue 1.

"You couldn't see anything but his hand. He reached his hand out to us."

The two firefighters found another man further down in the heap of debris, but he was easier to extricate than the first man.

"We moved a couple of pieces of wood and he was out of there," Turilli said.

As many as nine men were pulled out alive as rescuers used skills honed at the World Trade Center disaster site to hunt for the living.

They formed bucket brigades, cut metal with circular saws and welding torches, and clawed at debris with their hands. They choked on dust in the building's cramped inner courtyard and raced against time to reach the wounded.

"There were a couple of workers that fell close to the windows and they were still alive," said Everett Ulmer, 48, a police canine-squad officer.

Rescuers were able to break the windows and pull them to safety, he said.

"A couple more were not as fortunate," Ulmer said. "They were more toward the middle. We had to move a lot of debris, do a lot of cutting. It's extremely difficult.

"There's all sorts of debris in the way. We had to move everything with buckets and lines of guys, then you have to find a place to put it. Some, we piled in rooms; some, we dropped out the windows into Dumpsters."

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