

charges that may be put against them.”

“Once it was explained, we didn’t receive any more reports of misbehavior,” Haas said. “It’s kind of like people will run — some people, not all people — until somebody jerks the rope, and once the rope is jerked, they find themselves standing corrected. They try to see how much they can get by with or how much misbehavior will be tolerated.”

Haas said he received several offers of inducements from media representatives if he would agree to an exclusive interview, and Sadler said the sheriff told him that some media outlets had offered substantial cash payments to deputies monitoring the cell block if they would take a picture of the two boys in custody. Haas would not specify how much money was offered.

“I knew that he (the sheriff) decided he wasn’t going to have it, and it wasn’t going to happen, and he told his people that if he caught anybody, they’d lose their job,” Sadler said.

“I think the pressure from their superiors (was to blame),” Haas said. “You can look at the equipment and see there was a lot of dollars sent into this area as far as equipment and money and high-price employees, and their job is to get a story. But on some things, there’s not a price.”

The families

Mitchell Wright and Suzann Wilson say the first week or so after the shootings pretty much remains a blur. They and Gretchen Woodard were effectively shielded from the barrage of media calls by friends and relatives so they could grieve in private. In the case of Suzann Wilson’s family, there was a little extra protection because Britthney had a different last name than her mother and stepfather, and their house is on a rural road not shown on maps.

“The only time I ever got real upset with the press was at the funeral,” Suzann Wilson said. “We asked that there not be any reporters at the funeral or any cameras, and I don’t think that was a problem. But when we got to the cemetery, there were just hordes of reporters and cameras. They were in the trees. They were everywhere. It was unbelievable.

“There was this one guy, and I’ll never forget this picture.

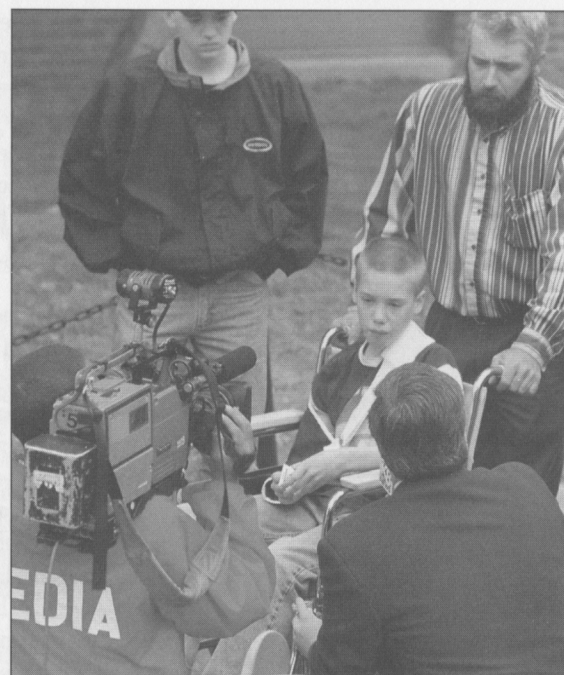
We were following behind the hearse and he got right out in the middle of the road and got down on his knee ... to take a picture of that hearse. I thought to myself, how morbid. Is it really that important to get a picture of a little girl? I felt really bad when the guy stepped out in front of the hearse because that was just such an important thing to me that she not be exploited in that way. I would have gave him any pictures he wanted of her alive, but I thought this is just not the way I want my daughter on TV,” she said.

Suzann Wilson said there’s a lesson for the media in her experience. “If they could be more sensitive in that area,” she said. “Even though people may want to see that (because of) their morbid curiosity, you’ve got to remember that these are victims, and that these people have been through a lot, and they’ve lost something very, very valuable.”

“I have to be fair and say I’ve watched the same thing for other families,” Regina Kaut, Britthney’s aunt, said. “I’ve sat there and watched it and wanted to see it, you know? It’s different when you’re on the other side, and I’ll always remember it from now on when I see those things.”

The Wilson family and Mitchell Wright agreed, however, that some news coverage of their loved ones helped with the healing process.

“It did help,” Suzann Wilson said of one particularly sensitive article about Britthney that ran in *The Jonesboro Sun*.



Bill Templeton, *The Jonesboro Sun*

Omnipresent media: Wounded Westside student Tristan McGowan, 13, is surrounded by members of the media as he is wheeled from the hospital by his grandfather, Bill McGowan.

space are filled with visiting news and production staffers and equipment. The next day, after an angry telephone conversation with top management at ABC News, KAIT and Anderson get an apology.

1:30 AM The press begins rolling at *The Jonesboro Sun*, about an hour behind schedule. Reporters and editors will linger until about 2:30 a.m. They plan to return to work no later than 6 a.m. They’ll keep up that pace for nearly a week.

2:00 AM Sadler has been working nonstop, talking to authorities and fielding media inquiries, helped by two lawyers and a research specialist brought in to handle media telephone calls. Now exhausted, he goes to a nearby Holiday Inn to sleep.

5:00 AM Sadler is back on the job. “I began with the morning show broadcasts, with ‘Today,’ CBS, CNN.” After those shows, he meets with Sheriff Haas and others and “that’s when the sheriff started showing me his message slips and said, ‘We need one person doing this,’ because we already had begun to see some inconsistencies” on spellings of names and some details about the shooting and police investigation in early editions of local and regional newspapers.