

good at throwing accusations."

Troutt did not speak directly to the newspaper's failure to interview Woodard, but he made pointed comments when asked if the community had pulled away from the shooters' families.

"I don't know if they've pulled away from the Golden family, the community didn't know. They came in from elsewhere. The boy spent time in Minnesota, and heaven knows where the woman (Woodard) spent time," Troutt said.

He said the Golden family was "well known" in the community. "The grandfather manages the Bayou de View hunting preserve ... and he's well known. The father, I'm not sure what he does ... The mother is a postal employee at Walnut Ridge. They are a family," Troutt said.

The newspaper

Woodard's complaints notwithstanding, *The Jonesboro Sun* won wide praise from area residents for the consideration it showed to the victims and their families, its accuracy and the absence of sensationalism in its coverage of the shootings. "I thank them for being a role model for the other media," Kandra Johnson, the counselor, said.

"Our paper's that way," Sheriff Haas said. "We have a relationship where we can sit down and communicate with each other honestly. And they are all good neighbors, and when one of us hurts, they tend to hurt right along with us because we're a tight-knit community."

For all the national media that descended on the community, there was not a single story broken that *The Jonesboro Sun* did not have. "I think we owned the story," Troutt said.

"Even the news that they did break we turned down." For example, he said, "we refused to run the picture of the little Golden boy with a gun. We didn't think it was appropriate. That reinforced to me the stereotype that a lot of the national and international media tried to put on (the story) — the Southern gun culture, Bubba with the chewing tobacco and

gun and all that sort of thing. And that's not true," Troutt said.

Troutt said the newspaper has received not a single call criticizing its coverage. The only suggestion that the newspaper may have been out of line came from Mitchell Wright, who objected to the fact that the newspaper sold its photographs to Sygma, a distribution company. Troutt said that was done so the newspaper would not be besieged with requests from magazines, overseas news organizations and others seeking photos.

"(He) heard rumors that we sold the pictures and made big money. We have told him that we got \$12,500 for the things we shot," Troutt said. "But the company took not one dime of it. We split it among the staff."

As important to the community as the *Sun's* coverage was, the respect the newspaper holds in the community and its commitment to educating its readers on the ways of the media also played a crucial role in minimizing the potential for a media disaster when the story broke.

From government officials to average readers, there exists in Jonesboro a great understanding of the role of the media, the importance of getting information out to the public and the difficulties that reporters face. "I credit that to John Troutt," Sadler, the media specialist for the state police, said. "There is tremendous trust in that paper."

"If there is anything I can get violent about, it's freedom of information and the right of the press and the public to know what's going on," Troutt said. "Everybody around here knows that if they try to hide something, we are going to court. ... [*The Sun*] will sue just about every time somebody tries to keep public information secret."

Troutt said it also is important that the newspaper carry a lot of stories about the media, their role and the way they work. "The press is very important. That makes what it does — good and bad — legitimate news."

Talk show producer eludes security, enters hospital room

About four or five days after the shootings, wounded teacher Lynette Thetford was recovering in her hospital room at the St. Bernards Regional Medical Center when she received an unexpected visitor.

"A lady from the 'Montel Williams Show' came to the hospital room with a student, Emma Pittman," said Thetford's husband, Carroll. Emma Pittman was the student whose life had been saved by another teacher, Shannon Wright, who was fatally wounded.

"She identified herself as working for the 'Montel Williams Show' and she stayed for probably 30 minutes or so," Carroll Thetford said. "At the end, she said she wanted Emma Pittman and Christina Amer (another student) to go on the 'Montel Williams Show,' and she asked my wife if she'd call the Amers to see if they would let the two go with her to New York. Of course, we weren't going to do that."

At the time of the visit, the hospital was off limits to the media.

"I think [the woman] said she was a little bit related to Emma" to gain entry, Carroll Thetford said. She came alone, without a camera crew. The suggestion that Mrs. Thetford might intercede with the Amers did not come until the producer had been in the room nearly a half hour. "I think she was trying to use us," he said.

Lynette Thetford was wounded protecting one of her students from gunfire. Christina Amer later told reporters that she was that student.

When the producer's request was refused, she left, Carroll Thetford said. "If she had stayed any longer, we would have told her to leave."

A receptionist for the "Montel Williams Show" in New York identified Suzanne Bass as the producer who was in Jonesboro for the program. "I really cannot speak with you about anything. I can't speak to you," Bass said when asked about the hospital incident. "I did my job, and I'm not going to say anything more."

— Cheryl Arvidson