

Reporting benefits from openness of officials

'One bad apple' can sour a community's opinion of the media

BY CHERYL ARVIDSON AND GENE POLICINSKI

Someday, when he is old enough to understand, Clayton Wilson's mother will give him a scrapbook filled with news stories about his 11-year-old sister, Britthney Varner, so he can learn more about who she was and how she lost her life so tragically in a barrage of gunfire outside Westside Middle School.

"She just thought he was wonderful. She worshipped that baby," Suzann Wilson said of her daughter, who died along with three other girls and a teacher on March 24. Authorities say Andrew Golden, 11, and Mitchell Johnson, 13, opened fire on their classmates from a nearby woods after drawing them outdoors with a false fire alarm.

Mitchell Wright, whose wife, Shannon, was the teacher killed in the attack, will be able to give their son, Zane, now two-and-a-half-years-old, videotapes of two interviews he did with network television shows about his wife and her heroism. When the shooting began, Shannon Wright threw herself in front of a student, Emma Pittman, sustaining fatal wounds while saving the youngster.

If "Good Morning America" and "PrimeTime Live" had been interested in a "how do you feel" interview, Wright said, "I wouldn't have done it. But when they approached me with that (heroism) angle, I felt I owed it to her. I owed it to my son."

In the countryside a few miles outside Jonesboro, where the victims of the Westside shootings and the suspects lived, the Rev. Benny Baker of the Bono Church of Christ has reached more people with his ministry than he ever dreamed possible. Two months after the tragedy, Baker had received more than 16,000 pieces of mail, from every state in the union and 28 foreign countries, and about 1,300 e-mails. "I can't even count the phone calls," said Baker, whose congregation includes the Wrights and the families of two other vic-

tims of the attack.

And Gretchen Woodard, the mother of suspect Mitchell Johnson, sets aside two hours a day to answer the "literally thousands" of cards and letters she has received from the community and from all over the United States.

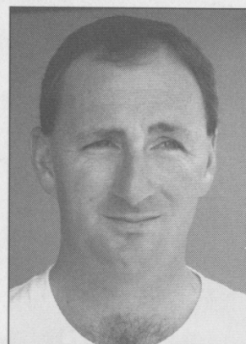
"It has touched my heart," Woodard said, her eyes filling with tears. "It's therapy to me. They took five minutes of their lives for somebody they didn't even know. That overwhelms me."

Those are some of the positive consequences of the media madness that descended on Jonesboro and the surrounding rural areas after the shots rang out at 12:30 p.m. on a Tuesday.

That those individuals can find something good to say about the hundreds of articles and countless hours of television coverage devoted to the Jonesboro shootings speaks volumes about how the media performed.

Just as news of the day eschews the ordinary for the unusual or significant, a discussion of media performance tends to focus on those reporters who cross the line of appropriate behavior, even though countless reporters behaved admirably and professionally in their pursuit of the story.

Virtually everyone interviewed for this report gave the majority of reporters who came to Jonesboro relatively high marks for accuracy and fairness, taste and sensitivity. But the roughly 10% who pushed too hard or behaved callously are



Mitchell Wright: "When [television programs] approached me with that (heroism) angle, I felt I owed it to ... my son."

Freedom Forum staffers

Cheryl Arvidson and **Gene Policinski** went

to Jonesboro in May to gather material for this report. Arvidson is a veteran political and investigative reporter and a former Washington bureau chief for the *Dallas Times Herald*. Policinski has been a journalist for 30 years, working in print and electronic media as a reporter, editor, anchor and program host. He is one of the founding editors of *USA TODAY*.

The first 24 hours

There was nothing extraordinary about the way the news of the March 24 Jonesboro school shootings first got out.

On the scene within minutes of the 12:30 p.m. shootings were reporters from *The Jonesboro Sun* and KAIT Channel 8, an ABC affiliate and the only television station in town. Just 71 minutes later, The Associated Press bureau in Little Rock filed its first newswire report. Within three hours, reporters from nearby Memphis, Tenn., and Little Rock were arriving.

But then print and broadcast reporters from around the nation and from around the world — Japan, Britain, Germany, Hong Kong — flooded into the northeastern Arkansas city of 51,000. By nightfall hundreds of reporters, photographers, camera crews, producers, correspondents and stringers were in town.

Yet the very first signals of the tragedy came to local reporters from two very standard sources:

- The sound of sirens from emergency vehicles headed for Westside Middle School.
- Police broadcasts overheard on newsroom radio scanners.

From the personal recollections of reporters, photographers, medical and law enforcement authorities, police and hospital records, published articles and television broadcasts, this is the story of how the first 24 hours of news coverage of the Jonesboro tragedy unfolded:

12:20 PM At Westside Middle

School, students and teachers are in their fifth-period classrooms or at lunch. Construction workers are on the roof. Sometime late in the morning, a half mile from the school, two boys park a white van in a cul-de-sac. Dressed in camouflage — not unusual in an area where hunting is a major sporting activity — they walk into the woods.