

Jonesboro residents praise local coverage

National media mostly seen as rude, arrogant, inaccurate

Local media coverage of the Westside Middle School shootings was mostly balanced, fair and in good taste, residents of Jonesboro said at a forum April 13. But they criticized the national media.

About 300 residents gathered at the "Speak Out," a discussion sponsored by The Freedom Forum, *The Jonesboro Sun* and Arkansas State University, in downtown Jonesboro.

While many said that the media, particularly local outlets, covered the tragedy fairly and were professional as they gathered information, others complained that the journalists were rude, arrogant and reported some parts of the story inaccurately.

Sandra Worlow said the overwhelming media presence on the day of the shooting was intrusive and insensitive. "When you drove onto the Westside campus, it was horrible," Worlow, a social worker, said. "There were satellite vans everywhere. When a child and [a] family would get out of the car to come to the gymnasium (for counseling), there'd be cameramen and people ... shoving [microphones] in their faces."

Many people who needed help stayed away to avoid the media gantlet, Worlow said.

Diane Holmes, another local therapist, said she had heard children talking about being offered money by members of the media in exchange for interviews. Children shouldn't have to "deal with that ... on top of the whole tragedy," she said.

Benny Baker, minister of the Bono Church of Christ, agreed that the media showed their worst side on the day of the shootings. Not only were they intrusive, Baker said, they disseminated inaccurate information. One radio report "had (teacher) Shannon (Wright) dead at 4 o'clock." She died later that evening, he said.

The attitudes of some reporters drew strong criticism, as well. Former resident Wayne Hoffman, in town for a visit,

said reporters "came in and (assumed) instantly they had perfect understanding of the community." He said television correspondents were particularly arrogant. "They determined that this community needed a certain ... type of healing," he said. "That's not what reporters do. Reporters report facts. ... They're not clinical psychologists."

But Robert Langford said he saw another side of the news media when he overheard their conversations in a local restaurant. "They were concerned with the community. They weren't news hounds. ... They were very caring people."

Some at the forum said journalists denigrated the community with stereotypical characterizations. Residents of Jonesboro were portrayed in many stories as "inbred, back-hills people, poorly educated," Deborah Hall said. "[The press] said that we have given our children guns and taught them how to use them so they can go out and kill people. This is not a fact."

Sarah Wilkerson-Freeman, assistant professor of history at Arkansas State University, said, "To watch our own community reflected ... and realize how different it was from our actual experience, and then realizing, 'My God! What else that we have seen through the media can we really believe?' ... It was an extremely intense, horrifying experience."

The media also missed some major aspects of the story, said Dave Grossman, author of "On Killing," a book that draws a link between violence and television. He said that when the media turn criminals and suspects into celebrities of a sort, it prompts others to commit similar crimes. He cited the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek*, which shortly after the shootings featured photos of a suspect.

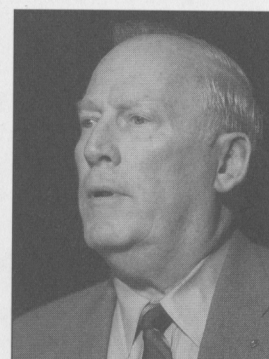
Cataloging the comments

Six broad themes encompass the remarks made at a forum in Jonesboro on media coverage of the shootings:

- The media were too intrusive.
- The media used stereotypes and inaccurately portrayed the Jonesboro community.
- There were some missed stories: the impact of television, copycat crimes, the abuse of girls.
- The media provided uninformed commentary.
- The media did a good job, were thoughtful and considerate.
- Some news reports were inaccurate.



Sandra Worlow: "When a child and [a] family would get out of the car to come to the gymnasium (for counseling), there'd be cameramen and people ... shoving [microphones] in their faces."



Robert Langford: The media "were concerned with the community. They weren't news hounds. ... They were very caring people."



Benny Baker: The media disseminated inaccurate information. One radio report "had (teacher) Shannon (Wright) dead at 4 o'clock."

— Martha FitzSimon