

Curt Hodges, *The Jonesboro Sun*

One of the first photos from the scene shows emergency personnel rushing a victim to a waiting ambulance.

the ones who are remembered.

"It's kind of like one bad apple don't spoil the whole bushel, but when it comes to the media, one bad apple gives you a bad opinion as a community of the whole bushel," Craighead County Sheriff Dale Haas said.

In interviews in early May with individuals involved in the story, it was the conduct of the media, rather than the content of their reports, that prompted the greatest criticism. There were very few instances of misinformation in news reports, and almost all of those came early on, when the story was first breaking.

Much of the credit for the overall accuracy and completeness of the media coverage goes to local and state law enforcement officials, medical personnel and the judge who presided over the initial court hearing for the boys being held as juveniles in connection with the killings. From the outset, those officials each made decisions designed to get the max-

imum amount of information out to the media — and thus to the public — as rapidly as possible.

A more secretive or less candid approach to the story easily could have changed the tone of the coverage and prompted vastly more intrusive behavior on the part of reporters, photographers, producers and broadcast crews sent to Jonesboro.

The early hours

Curt Hodges, who has been on the staff of *The Jonesboro Sun* since 1961 and worked in local television news for about 10 years before that, was heading back to the newspaper office from an assignment when he stopped at a local auto-parts shop to make a purchase. While he was there, a man ran into the store and said there appeared to be a bad accident at the intersection near the Westside school complex, because lots of ambulances and police cars were heading that way.

"I called the 911 center, and they told me what it was,"

12:30 PM Veteran reporter Curt Hodges of *The Jonesboro Sun* has finished an assignment and stops at an auto-parts shop to pick up a part for his car. Television reporter Bryant Huddleston of KAIT is in the station's newsroom.

At that moment, the fire alarm at Westside Middle School goes off. A youngster is seen running from the school. A teacher later recalls that students walked quickly out of the school in an orderly fashion.

Suddenly, several students are hit by gunfire coming from a wooded area about 100 yards away. Teacher Shannon Wright is mortally wounded as she shields a student. Within seconds, four students are dead and nine students and another teacher are injured.

12:38 PM The first frantic call for help to 911 from the school is logged at Jonesboro Central Dispatch. A female voice says: "We've got children shot at Westside High School, Middle School ... we need an ambulance as soon as possible." A second call comes in within seconds. By 12:44 p.m. there will be seven calls.

City police and Craighead County sheriff's deputies are sent to the school. Emergency calls go out to the city's three ambulance services.

12:40 PM KAIT's Huddleston overhears a dispatcher on the newsroom radio scanner saying: "We got two students down and a teacher down." His first thought is that he's hearing a Memphis police broadcast — "Jonesboro just does not have a lot of violent crime" — but then "right behind that I heard 'Westside School,' and I was in shock.

"I grabbed my bag and my jacket and ran out," Huddleston said. Seconds later, KAIT's chief engineer runs to the station's "live truck" to drive it to the school.

Sun reporter Hodges is inside the auto-parts shop when a man runs in and says "there must be something going on at Barry's truck stop," at the intersection about a mile from Westside, judging by the number of police cars and ambulances that have roared past.

Hodges calls the Jonesboro police department's 911 center and "they told me what it was ... I was about five miles from the school." He calls his office, then drives to Westside.