



**Floyd Johnson, Jonesboro police chief: His counterpart in Pearl, Miss., told him, "What you need to start preparing for is the media."**

morning, the boys' names had been published in national and local newspapers and aired on the radio and network television.

That is one of the things that was the hardest on Mitchell Johnson's mother. Gretchen Woodard says she had phone calls from friends — long before she heard anything from law enforcement officials — telling her that her son was a suspect. "I grew up believing, very naively, that if you're a juvenile, you do have certain rights. Not a lot of them, but you do have certain rights, and one of the rights is not to have your name and picture published. ... Not that it wouldn't have come out, that's not what I'm saying. But for God sakes, wait until after the hearing."

Brittney Varner's mother and Shannon Wright's husband disagreed.

"If you're going to print my child's name, you should print theirs," said Suzann Wilson, Brittney's mother. "They put themselves in the paper as far as I'm concerned. I certainly don't want them having more rights than my daughter had."

"I wondered how it got out so quick, but in this case, it needed to get out there," Mitchell Wright said.

About two hours later, after several other *Sun* staffers and photographers had arrived at the school, Hodges headed back to the newspaper. As he was leaving, he saw helicopters hired by television stations from Memphis and Little Rock circling the school grounds. Video taken from those aircraft aired around 3 p.m. (CST), 4 p.m. on the East Coast. The media circus was about to begin.

## Law and order

Not long after the first reports of the Jonesboro shootings broke, Jonesboro Police Chief Floyd Johnson got a telephone call from his counterpart in Pearl, Miss., where a teen-ager is accused of a shooting spree in a high school in October that left two dead and several wounded.

"The police chief in Pearl ... said, 'I'll come up there. I'll send some people up there. I'll give you all the information I can, but what you need to start preparing for is the media. You've never seen anything like what's going to happen.' I

thought I had," Johnson said.

Johnson was no novice to big news stories. He was a new sheriff in 1968 when a devastating tornado struck Jonesboro and left 34 dead, and he also was sheriff in 1973 when another tornado destroyed a third of the town and took three lives. He thought he'd seen it all in terms of the media, but he was wrong.

"For the most part, if you were dealing with a reporter ... one on one, they were very sympathetic, seemed to have a lot of sympathy for the folks. But I would have to compare them with a bunch of animals whenever they all get together with their cameras. They'll run into each other, they'll run over you, they'll park in the street, they'll block aislesways," he said.

Bill Sadler, the media specialist for the Arkansas State Police in Little Rock, heard about the shootings at Westside about 12:40 p.m. because one of the initial 911 calls went to the troop headquarters office in Jonesboro. He got his first media call at 12:50 p.m. and had met with the director of the state police by 1 p.m. They decided immediately that Sadler should go to Jonesboro; he was on a plane within an hour of the shooting.

"Even as I boarded the aircraft, I began making preparations over a cell phone with every media representative that I could think of who would be interested in that story on a local basis. I knew it was going to be of statewide interest, so I contacted our state news media, scheduled a 4 p.m. news conference, making notifications while en route," Sadler said. "We landed, and I went straight to our state headquarters where I received a telephone briefing and a briefing from one of the troopers who had been at the scene. Minutes, literally minutes, before the 4 o'clock news conference, I met the prosecutor and Sheriff Haas for the first time and explained to them what I felt like we were going to be able to address in that news conference based on what little information we had at that time."

When he had walked through the door at state police headquarters in Jonesboro at 2:30 p.m., Sadler said, he was handed messages from dozens of news organizations. Twenty-four hours later, hundreds of media representatives were in

**1:09 PM** KAIT news anchor Diana Davis goes on the air with the first televised report of the shooting. She says "there has been a shooting at Westside Middle School and there are reports that students and teachers are wounded." She says that the station "has a crew at the scene" and expects a live report as soon as possible.

**1:30 PM** KAIT goes "live" from Westside with a report from Huddleston. He reports the multiple injuries and describes the scene.

All of the victims have arrived at St. Bernards. Reporters begin to gravitate there, but don't yet know of a fortunate set of circumstances that will benefit the wounded. By sheer luck, emergency room chief Robert Beaton says later, morning surgeries are complete, the operating rooms have been cleaned and resupplied, and more than a dozen surgeons who have elective procedures scheduled for the afternoon already are in the hospital. That probably saves lives, Beaton says: Within 45 minutes of the first victim arriving at St. Bernards, all have been treated and admitted or are in operating rooms.

**1:41 PM** The nation and the world are told of the shooting in a news alert filed by the Little Rock Associated Press bureau. It says only what AP can confirm: There has been a shooting at the school and at least one person is dead.

**1:42 PM** The alert moves on AP's national wire. In Little Rock, news editor Kelly Kissel and AP staffers in the bureau have been working to confirm more facts. An AP reporter has been on the road to Jonesboro since the first report of the story.