

answer media inquiries.

"At that point, I knew I had a friend even though he wore the robes of a judge," Sadler said. "That's when he told me, 'We have here a situation that outweighs what may have been the intent in the way the juvenile law was constructed, and I am going to allow the envelope to be stretched a little bit. I am not going to jeopardize the integrity of the case, but the public's right to know far outweighs what protection we might typically offer a juvenile in certainly a much less serious case.'"

"You understand how right-on he was," Sadler said. "If something had happened, not that it was expected to, but if there had been some question arise — Did one of the kids get a break that the other one didn't? — what better way to defend that than just opening up?"

Minutes before the hearing was to begin, Sadler also got the judge to agree to expand his definition of "local press" so more reporters would be allowed to cover the proceedings. In addition to *The Jonesboro Sun* and KAIT, an ABC affiliate in Jonesboro, Sadler arranged for reporters from Memphis and Little Rock television stations to attend, so CBS, NBC and Fox also would be represented. Reporters for the local radio station, the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* of Little Rock, *The Commercial Appeal* of Memphis, Tenn., and The Associated Press also were allowed to cover the hearing.

"I only had one national media representative look me in the eye and say, 'Any chance the national media can get in there?' and I said, 'I think we're covered,'" Sadler said. The reporter did not protest.

## The media arrive

Kandra Johnson, a counselor at Charter Lakeside Behavioral Services in Jonesboro, arrived at Westside Middle School around 3:30 p.m. the day of the shootings. She was to help plan what sort of counseling should be provided for students and faculty, their relatives and friends and others in the community. It was decided that a team of counselors would come back at 6:30 p.m. and be available through the evening for anyone needing help.

When she left the school, there were a few news vans and

some local reporters in the parking lot. But when she returned at 6:30 p.m., it "looked like a midway at a fair."

"It was amazing. There were reporters mobbed [at] the front door of the school. They were being kept from going [inside], but that was it," Johnson said. "The reporters were there with bright lights, hand-held mikes, scratch pads. It just looked like something on TV."

At about 10 p.m., a family came in seeking counseling for a neighbor's boy. The couple who brought the 10-year-old in had twin boys of their own, who were with them.

"I don't think [the 10-year-old] actually saw the shootings because he was a little younger (than the victims), but he was there through all the chaos. He had been pretty emotional," Johnson recalled. "I talked to him and talked to them as a group. After we finished up, I talked to the parents for a few minutes and they walked outside. About two or three minutes later, I walked out of the gym, and the press had separated the adults from the children and they were bombarding this little child with questions."

One reporter "was attacking this little boy with questions," she said. "I understand that that's their job, and he was doing what he needed to do, but he wasn't taking into account that this child had no parents there. He (the little boy) was very scared and didn't know what was going on. They were asking him for his phone number and where he lived. I thought that was very inappropriate."

Johnson asked the mother of the twin boys "if they needed help getting them to their car, and she said yes. So I escorted them to the car with the press following us." Although the little boy probably wasn't "devastated by the experience, it was just insult to injury. They (the reporters) made you scared to talk to them."

Meanwhile, at the Arkansas State University campus in Jonesboro, a candlelight prayer vigil for the victims of the attack also was attracting its share of reporters.

"When I first got there, there were people standing around in a circle ... and the TV crews were standing right in the middle of the circle, filming their faces, kind of standing right in front of them," said Susan Light, a *Sun* reporter. "Some peo-

**2:37 PM** KAIT's Davis does a report with tape of Huddleston's earlier "live" accounts. The station is handicapped by having only one "live truck," which has left the school to go to the police briefing. Since live reports cannot be made while the truck is en route, KAIT returns to regular programming with the intention of going "live" again from the briefing. Some viewers and local pundits — particularly at the Arkansas State University campus newspaper — criticize the station for not staying with the story. Overnight, as "live trucks" arrive from sister stations and network crews supplement KAIT's 24-person newsroom team, the station is able to avoid another such break in on-air reports.

**2:48 PM** KAIT does the first of four "cut in" reports from the studio, interrupting programs to update viewers with new information. The station begins to get calls from out-of-town radio stations looking for "sound bites" from Jonesboro. Calls from news organizations and from viewers will increase through the day, eventually requiring management to assign four people to answer phones.

**3:00 PM** Local reporters begin noticing the first out-of-town news staffers arriving. Curt Hodges sees news helicopters from Memphis television stations and reporters from both Memphis and Little Rock.

**4:00 PM** The first briefing begins at the Jonesboro state police office. Sadler decides that even though reporters have the names of the two youths in custody, there will not be official confirmation until police and court officials have time to study what juvenile-crime statutes apply. And he will not confirm the victims' names until some inconsistencies in early reports are settled: "We knew that the news conference would be carried 'live' and we were talking about a shooting that had happened only four hours earlier."