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When Hometown News Becomes Worldwide News

Donna Alvis-Banks

Editor's Note: This reporter is a 2007 winner of a Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma Fellowship based on her reporting of the April 16, 2007, shootings at Virginia Tech. Following the same structure of other articles in this special issue, this one first describes her personal

experiences with the shootings in chronological order and offers some lessons learned while applying the knowledge and perspectives of a professional journalist.

Keywords: shootings; Virginia Tech; journalists

April 16, 2007, was supposed to be a slow news day in The Roanoke Times' New River Bureau office, a small office building surrounded by Southwest Virginia's lovely mountains.

I arrived early by reporters' standards: 9 a.m.

As I entered the bureau in Christiansburg—Blacksburg's sister town just 7 miles from Virginia Tech's campus—my thoughts were on the next day's town council meeting. I was going to spend the day catching up on land-use decisions and tourism agreements in preparation for the council's discussion of these matters.

I was dressed for an "office day." No gloves, no scarf, no hat—even though the weather outside was cold and blustery with biting winds and spitting snow.

I assumed I would stay inside all day, warm and comfortable at my computer.

The police scanner was chattering when I hustled into the newsroom, a small operation with fewer than a dozen reporters and editorial assistants. One of our three editors quickly filled me in on the news that there had been a shooting on the Tech campus.

A shooting? My mind couldn't accept the reality of such a thing.

Nevertheless, the adrenalin kicked in and I began to wring my hands.

With one word, the editor directed two young but experienced reporters to head for the scene.

From *Roanoke Times*, Virginia.

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"Go!" she shouted.

They set off.

As journalists, they were being sent to the front line of the worst school shooting in U.S. history armed only with notebooks, pens, and cell phones. A photographer dispatched from his Blacksburg home would arrive with his camera to capture images that would startle and sadden the world.

None of us were prepared for the week that unfolded.

As I stood helplessly by the scanner, the events happening on the morning of April 16 came to the newsroom in the breathless bark of frantic police officers as they swarmed the campus. There was talk of possible snipers and reports of additional gunfire.

I took off for the Blacksburg Rescue Squad, my heart racing as I tried to keep my driving in control. In downtown Blacksburg, a loudspeaker sounded an emergency warning.

Volunteer rescue workers were gathering outside the squad house to organize their response. I stood near them, shivering in the cold.

As the rescue squad captain began giving orders, he gave one to me.

"Ma'am, I need you to leave."

I obeyed. My 19 years experience at the newspaper suddenly meant little. I knew in my heart that the community I called home was facing something far bigger than anything it had ever faced.

I had grown up in Christiansburg, attended a local college, taught for 6 years at Blacksburg High School, and then switched to my journalism career. I loved to write and I loved meeting the people who

defined our community. I even embraced the challenge of reporting tragic stories, trying to infuse them with the humanity that lies beneath every heart-rending calamity.

I had written of small children who perished in house fires and car wrecks. I had written of loving parents who lost six of their nine children in a horrific gas explosion. I had written of brave police officers killed in the line of duty and of dedicated mothers who died of cancer. I had written obituaries.

But on April 16, there were not words to describe the tragedy or to bring humanity to an inhumane act.

When I arrived back at my office, the magnitude of what had happened at Tech took my breath. Thirty-three people—including the gunman—were dead.

The reporters and photographers on campus were calling in updates in a constant flow, their reports posted quickly on The Roanoke Times' Web site. Additional reporters from the Roanoke office were dispatched to our bureau to help. Editors were gathering to organize our plan for news coverage.

I was in shock.

I can't say how I made it through that first day—or those first weeks, for that matter. I believe the need to reach out and tell the stories of this horrible event outweighed my personal needs. I ate too much, slept too little, and failed to reach out to my friends and family for emotional support in those weeks.

As journalists, we are supposed to be trained for this. We must focus our attention on getting information to the public that is accurate, informative, and timely. That became a nearly impossible task as rumors began swirling on national television, the Internet, and other media outlets.

And then media began swarming into our community. To those of us representing the local media—the reporters and photographers who cover the daily happenings and interesting people of Virginia Tech—this felt like an obscene violation of our turf. Tech officials, police officers, and others that we deal with on a regular basis were suddenly overwhelmed with hundreds of news organizations seeking answers to their question and on-camera interviews. They simply couldn't talk to us.

I was proud that our editor, Carole Tarrant, sent out a remarkable e-mail to our entire newsroom early on. Her message encouraged us to concentrate on accuracy and sensitivity, not on being first.

The national newshounds, she told us, would swoop in and leave. We would still be here, accountable to our readers for every word and photo that followed.

Our Roanoke and New River staffs worked non-stop that first week, putting out special sections on the tragedy each day. We did obituaries on each of the 27 students and 5 professors killed by Seung-Hui Cho as well as stories about the disturbed killer. The editors made a conscious and well-received decision to avoid "glorifying" Cho. His photo appeared on the front page only once that week, a small head shot on the April 18 cover.

My job after piecing together the first day's breaking news story from the painstaking work of other reporters was to focus my attention on a narrative account of the tragedy. With the help of my colleague, Anna Mallory, and several other writers, the narrative ran on Sunday with a cover that featured photos of each of the 32 victims.

Our bureau chief, Mark Morrison, was invaluable as a mentor on this project. With only 3 days to compose the extensive story, he had the wisdom to help me draft an outline that would guide us as we did our reporting and writing. Mark and I worked elbow-to-elbow into the wee hours on Saturday morning.

Emotionally, I was numb. Throughout the week, I longed to grieve but the tears wouldn't come. The feeling that overwhelmed me was one of pride in the Virginia Tech students who showed such compassion and solidarity as they honored their classmates and professors.

"Go home and get some rest" my editors would tell me at the end of a long day. I would plop into bed at midnight, physically exhausted but mentally wired. When I closed my eyes and eventually began to drift into sweet sleep, the sound of "Pop! Pop!" would jar me awake.

Gunfire had infiltrated my head in a vile vicariousness.

An hour later, as I drifted off again, the ringing-ringing sounds of cell phones penetrated the darkness.

With eyes wide open, I remembered the reports of police and rescue workers who walked into the terrible scene at Norris Hall. They had talked of cell phones ringing and ringing and ringing, unanswered calls from friends and family members trying to reach the dead.

Most people don't think of journalists as first responders to a tragic event. Those of us who write the stories and take photographs are expected to push our feelings aside.

But the problem is we're human.

The response to trauma is such an individual thing. Some of the Roanoke Times' staff seemed to

have a firm grip on their emotional response, whereas others grappled with it. One of our photographers, a Blacksburg native and an optimist by nature, described a feeling of utter despair as he faced the challenge of approaching a grieving community with his camera.

Leaders at our newspaper took measures to provide support for stressed journalists. Food suddenly appeared in our newsroom and massage therapists suddenly appeared with a much-needed human touch. Several weeks into our reporting, the newspaper called Bruce Shapiro of the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma to lead a debriefing. The photographer who had experienced such despondency said his spirit was rekindled by the session.

One of the most meaningful gestures of support came from another newspaper, *The Oklahoman* in Oklahoma City. In early May, we received huge boxes of junk food from our colleagues in the heartland, along with a letter of support that we devoured as eagerly as the treats.

Finally, it felt as if someone truly understood what we were going through.

In the months since April 16, our newspaper has followed the lives of many affected by the tragedy. Not long ago, I called the mother of a slain graduate student in Pennsylvania. She was reluctant to talk to me at first and cautioned me against speaking to her husband. Then, in a rush of passion, she told me how her husband had fallen into a deep depression since her son's murder.

"I've lost my son," she said plaintively. "I don't want to lose my husband, too."

I have not written the story of her anguish. There are many more stories to be told but the people aren't yet ready to tell them. I hope I can be a conduit for them when and if they want to share.

The most important thing I have learned, however, is that I must be a human being first and a reporter second.

My editors assigned me a "mini-beat" for the next year, making me responsible for following mental health issues affecting the community in the aftermath of April 16. Our local public mental health agency currently reports a 47% increase in emergency calls and a 45% increase in the demand for outpatient clinical services for adults and children over this time last year.

In so many ways people have been affected by this tragedy. Teachers are more alert for danger signals in troubled teens. Members of the clergy feel the demands on their time and emotional energy.

Members of the community are perhaps more sensitive to bad news that inevitably happens.

On November 26, a Virginia Tech freshman committed suicide by jumping from the seventh floor of a campus building, a very public event that only added to the angst within the university community. This was a young man who had written a column for his high school newspaper after April 16.

"We live in a world seemingly dominated by randomness. But it is also a world of hope, where life can go on in the face of overwhelming loss," he said in that column.

I choose to believe that the young man meant what he said in that column and that his suicide was the reckless act of an impulsive, despondent youth.

I will also continue to cover the mental health issues that I believe are vital for readers to understand.

I am still distressed by the events of April 16 and I find myself getting angry over things such as suicides. I try not to let the little irritations bother me, though. Our tragedy has shown me that life is nothing if not fragile.

As I said, I could not cry for the longest time. A few days after the April 16 shooting, I visited the Tech campus to see the memorials students had placed for the students and professors who had died. There was a memorial on the drillfield for Cho, placed there by a student who told one of our reporters "You don't get to pick your family." The girl, believing in the power of forgiveness, said Cho was a Hokie, too.

Right before the new school year started, Tech replaced the impromptu memorials with permanent ones to honor the victims. Administrators decided to place them in the same spot the students had chosen, and they decided not to include a permanent memorial to Cho out of respect for the families of those whose lives he had taken. Still, the message of mercy had been delivered. I, for one, was touched by it.

I finally cried Thanksgiving Day. Not just a few tears such as I had been able to shed at the memorial site but big sobs that shook my body.

I was watching the Macy's Parade on TV. As Tech's Corps of Cadets marching band, the Highty-Tighties, performed for the cameras in their dress uniforms, the musicians received a standing ovation from the crowd. Their appearance was dedicated to Matthew La Porte, a cadet who was killed on April 16.

I sobbed because I thought of all those husbands, wives, children, and parents, including Cho's, who would spend the holiday hurting. I sobbed because my job sometimes sucks, as the students say.

Weary of cameras and microphones and determined reporters, Tech students posted signs after April 16 asking the media to go home, to let them heal.

I understood their frustration.

Some members of the media—particularly those who swooped into a community they knew nothing about—were reportedly callous in their quest for stories. Students spoke of cameras being shoved in their faces as they grieved. Hospital employees told tales of media representatives posing as relatives of wounded students to gain access to them. There were even rumors that food brought in for families of the victims was polished off by TV crews who assumed the food was for them.

I cannot verify these accounts because I wasn't part of the "media circus" that camped near the Virginia Tech campus. I can say that the crush of

reporters, photographers, and television crews—the sheer number of news gatherers pushing to beat the competition—made the job of the local news media much more difficult.

But I feel sorry for those globetrotting journalists who had the hard task of rushing in, getting their stories, and then leaving.

I got to stay because I am home. The New River Valley is my home.

Our newspaper staff will continue to write the stories of how so many lives here have been affected by the events of April 16. We are looking long and hard at the many issues that arose from the tragedy—issues such as mental health, gun regulations, and crisis response.

My hope is that by reporting and writing the stories we can help our community heal.