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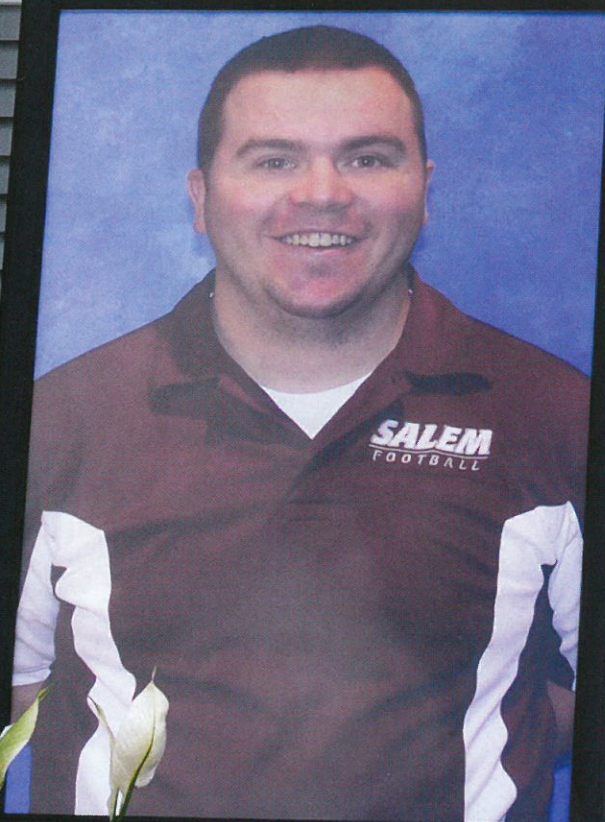
# THEIR LAST LIVE SHOT

THE TELEVISED MURDERS  
OF WDBJ-TV'S ADAM WARD  
AND ALISON PARKER

By Bruce Young



Photograph by Todd Maisel  
New York Daily News



BRIDGE!



# How Could This Happen At All?

Two young journalists, their careers on the upslope, both with a bright future ahead



*Alison Parker and Adam Ward.*

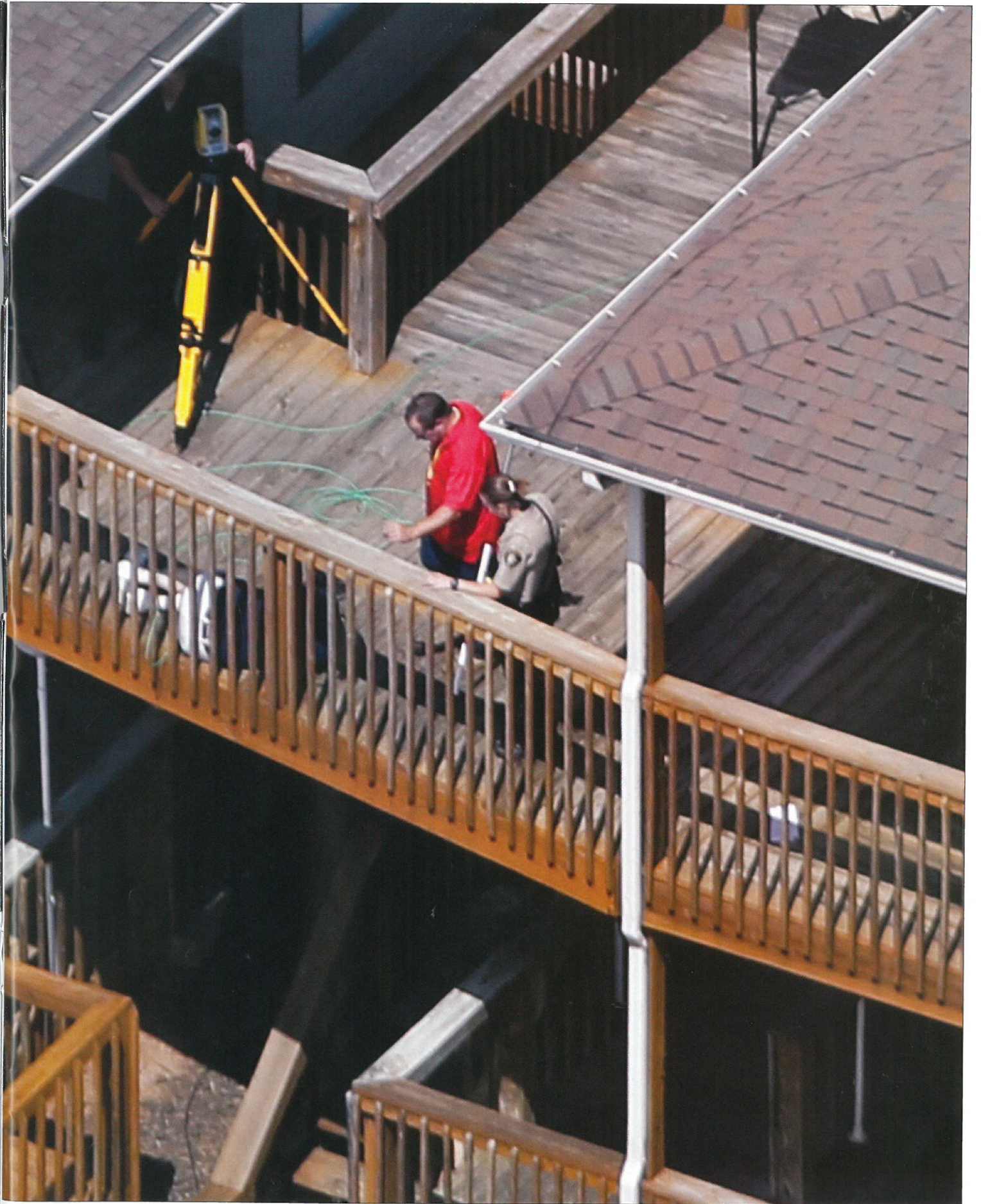
By Bruce Young

**W**HAT HANGS WITH ME, long after the killings of WDBJ-TV's Alison Parker and Adam Ward, is the sound of her screams. It wasn't the long, horror movie shriek, but a series of short screams. It was the sound of being startled and frightened, like when someone jumps out at a girl in a house of horror and shouts: "Boo!" At the time, I took it as a good sign: as long as she was screaming, she was alive. I am used to the sound of gunshots on television (I edit network footage, full of the violence of the world, every morning), but those half-dozen or so screams were both familiar and troubling, especially now that I know what they mean. It inhabits my mind.

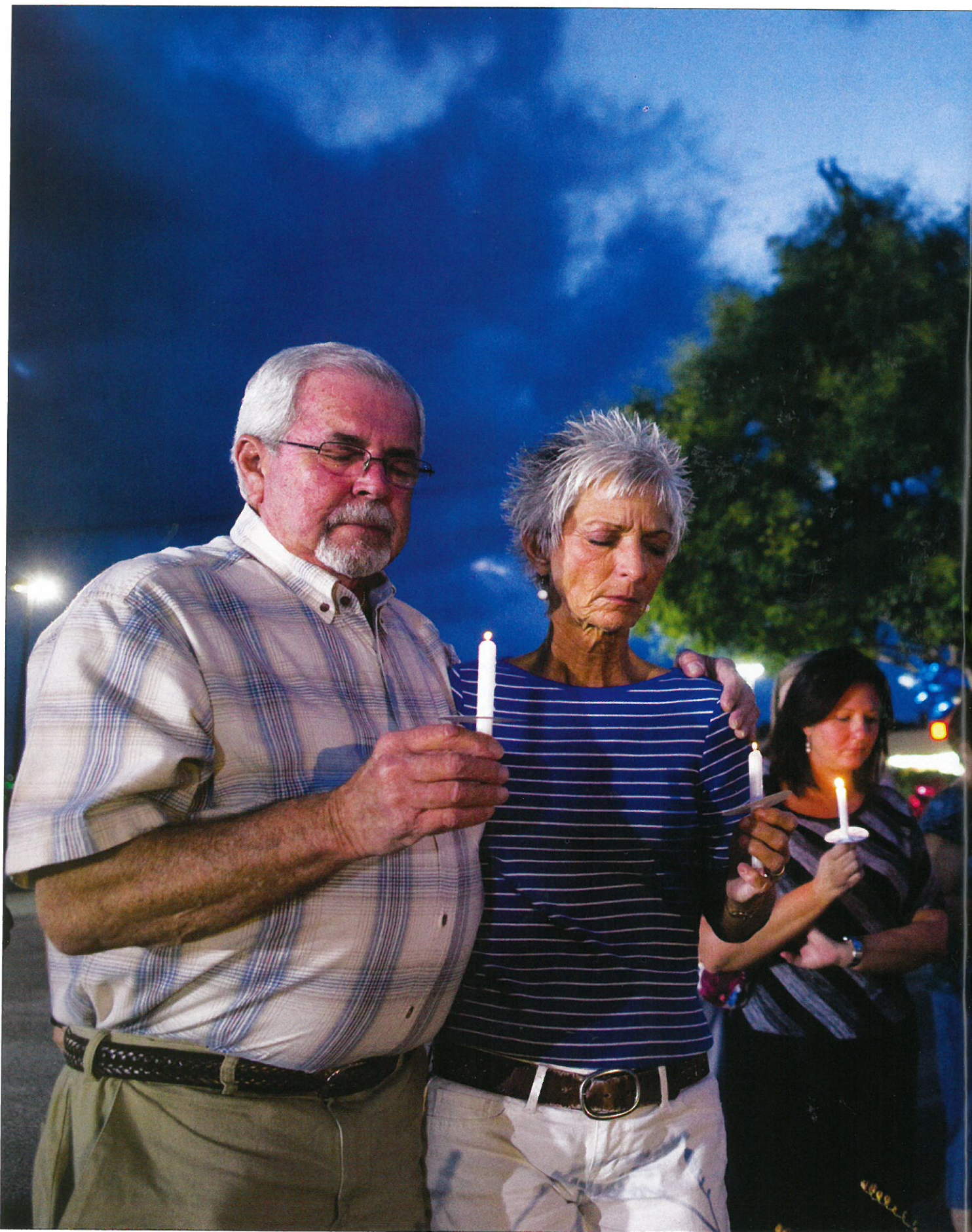
The two were doing a routine live inter-



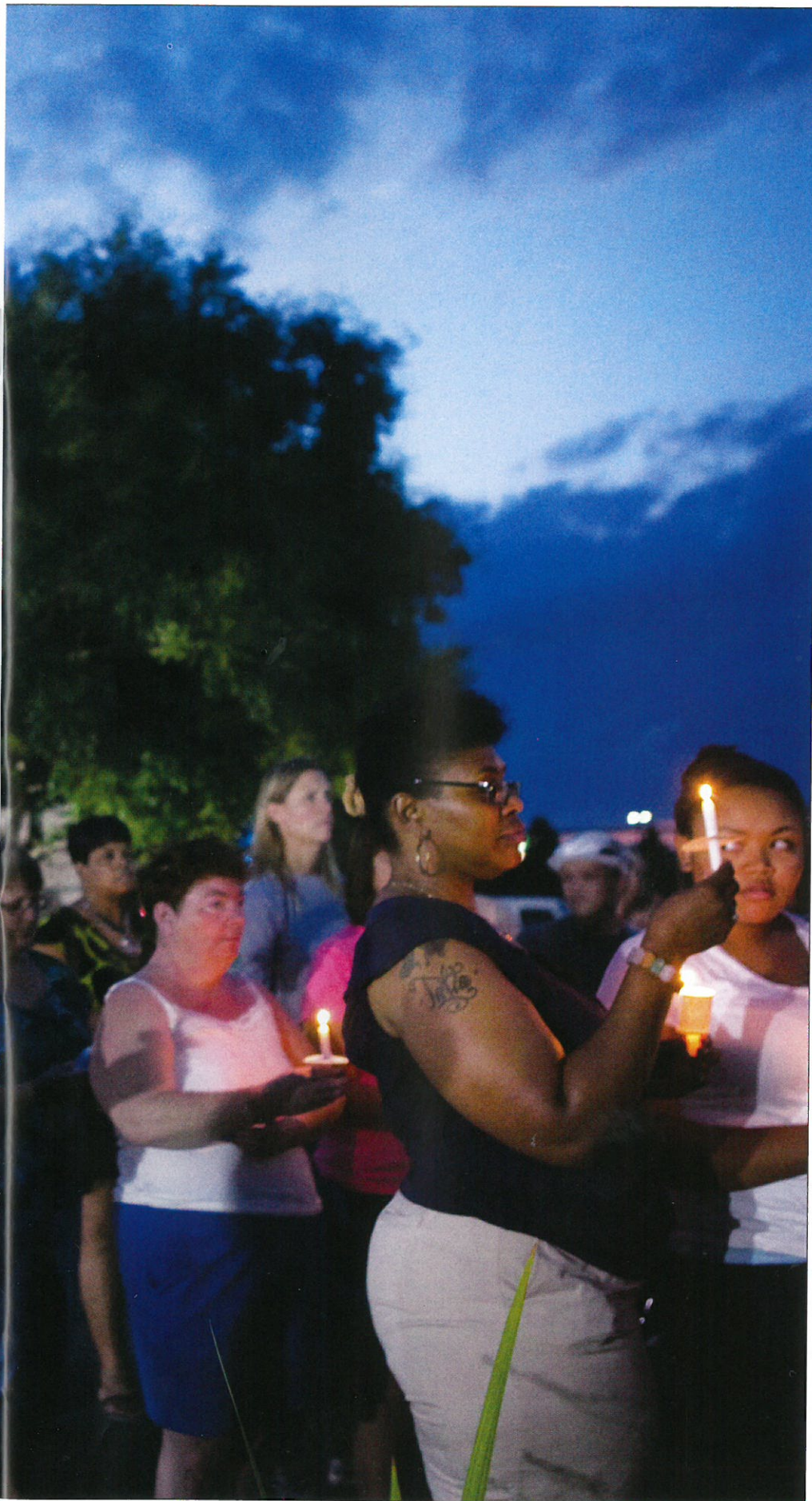
**SHOOTING SITE.** Investigators looked at the body of WDBJ-TV photographer Adam Ward after he and reporter Alison



*Parker were shot and killed during a live, on-air interview in Smith Mountain Lake, VA. Photograph by Steve Helber-Associated Press*



**SILENT PRAYER.** Buck and Carol Shepherd of Roanoke joined others in a moment of silence during a prayer and candlelight vigil for Adam Ward and Alison Parker outside



the WDBJ-TV station on the day after the shooting. Photograph by Erica Yoon-The Roanoke Times

view – an interview with local Chamber of Commerce official Vicki Gardner – on WDBJ-TV’s morning show when a former employee of the station walked up behind Ward and emptied his Glock pistol at them. Both Parker and Ward died almost instantly, while Gardner survived and recovered in hospital until she was released in early September.

They knew their killer by the name Bryce Williams from his difficult time at the station. As police closed in on him that afternoon during a chase, he shot himself and was airlifted to a nearby hospital where he died. Hired in 2012, he didn’t last a year working as a reporter for WDBJ-TV, where he often argued with other reporters and photographers.

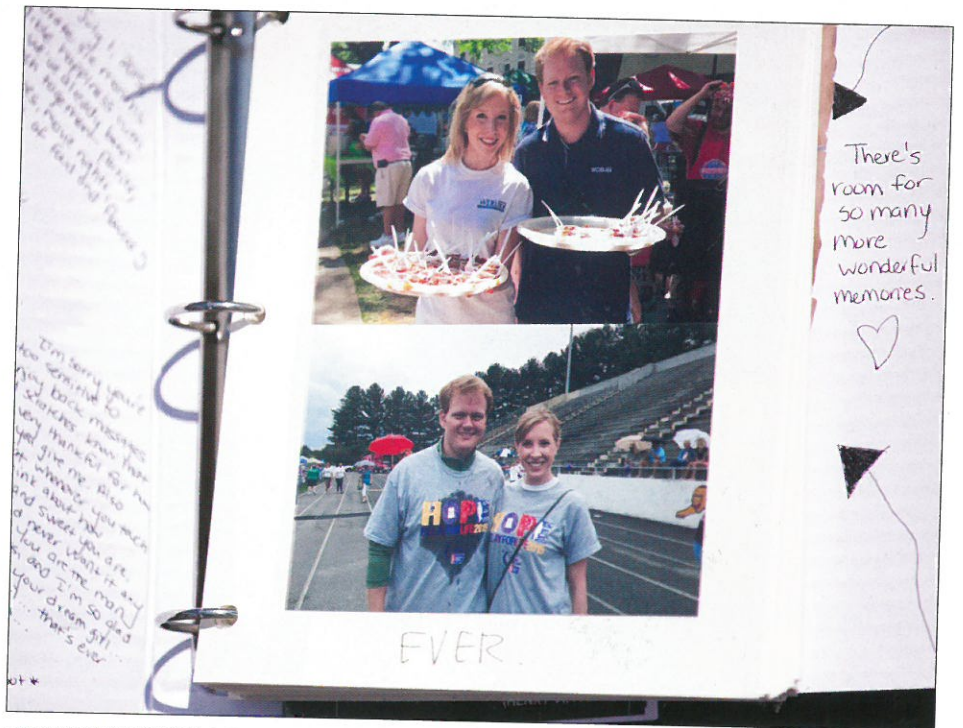
The stories were common enough at the time, and are easy to find now as in retrospect the pattern of erratic behavior is increasingly revealed. Williams – his real name Vester Lee Flanagan – would take quick offense to the slightest correction. One friend told me how he jumped between Williams and a female reporter inside the cramped interior of a live truck to protect her as the tall, heavysset man stepped toward her, shouting. Williams was infuriated because she had asked him to take his cell phone conversation outside while she worked. Others told of rage at comically insignificant or incomprehensible provocations, often ending in accusations of bigotry, such as the time he took the phrase “in the field” (as in, “We have someone reporting in the field ...”) as a reference to race and slavery.

The stories tumbled out during his months at WDBJ-TV, absurd, sometimes surreal, often involving accusations of racial prejudice. It was all so amusing at the time, watching from the comfort and safety of another newsroom.

**THE THING IS**, I held Ward’s job – that exact job, WDBJ-TV’s morning field photographer – for a year or so before moving over to do the local Fox affiliate’s morning show at WFXR-TV. I think it was Adam who replaced me. But I have to admit, this connection in no way troubles me. I didn’t have to deal with the workplace annoyance that the killer was, and the whole thing really seemed in that way distant from me.

To be honest, I must note that I didn’t personally know any of the characters that well. Ward was working in production when I was at WDBJ-TV, running the in-studio camera, getting promoted to the actual photojournalist job only as I was leaving. Both Parker and their killer were hired after I left. It is a small world we work in, and even smaller in a relatively tiny city like Roanoke, and so we run





**MEMORIES CUT SHORT.** WDBJ-TV news anchor Chris Hurst paused, overcome with emotion, while holding a photo album that was created by Alison Parker as a keepsake of their growing love. She had made the album for Hurst as a six-month anniversary gift. **Photographs by Erica Yoon-The Roanoke Times**

into each other often on the streets and generally get along amiably. But I don't want to create the illusion that they were some great friends.

But those screams hang on. That poor girl.

It is a shocking and startling event. We watched it more or less live in the newsroom, just before starting our own morning show. Someone came in saying that "something" had happened on the WDBJ-TV live report. Another local journalist quickly posted a recording on his Facebook page, and we then acquired a copy ourselves. Frankly, I thought it was a drive by – a few wild shots that scared everyone, and then we'd all move on.

What I didn't know – and wouldn't know for a while – was that across town the people in the control room were listening to a horrible silence. For those unfamiliar with the technicalities of television the reporter has what is known as an IFB – it's that earplug they wear – where the director and producer can talk directly to them from the control room. When you're in the field as Parker and Ward were, it's usually plugged into a cell phone that has been dialed into a special phone line back at the station. After something unexpected, the producer would probably get on the IFB saying, "What the hell was that?!" And the reporter would call in with an explanation and

maybe an apology. Then they'd all move on.

But on that Wednesday morning, all the control room heard was silence.

**ACROSS WDBJ-TV'S** newsroom, editor Mike Episcopo had been monitoring the microwave feed. While the director instantly punched away from the live shot, switching viewers to a surprised Kimberly McBroom, the morning anchor, in the studio, Mike still had the feed up on his screens.

Ward's camera had tumbled to the ground with him, laying on its side, and his hand had fallen into the shot, unmoving. "C'mon," Episcopo whispered to himself as he watched the seconds tick by on Adam's wristwatch. "Move. Just move."

Over the IFB speakers, the voice of producer Melissa Ott became increasingly anxious. She and Adam were engaged to be married, and this was her last day at WDBJ-TV. She was moving on to Charlotte – a better job in a bigger market. Congratulatory balloons still hung in the newsroom from the staff's farewell celebrations. "Honey," she asked into the silence. "That was scary. Answer me. You have to answer me."

Back across town, in our newsroom, we were all struggling to find out what happened ourselves. The police are typically difficult and



**SMALL COMMUNITY IN SHOCK.** *In the afternoon on the day of the shooting WSET-TV reporter Whitney Delbridge hugged WDBJ-TV news anchor Melissa Gaona (facing camera) outside the station as Justin Ward, the WDBJ-TV New River Valley bureau chief, looked on. Photograph by Erica Yoon-The Roanoke Times*



**SOMBER MOTORCADE.** People lined parts of the funeral route and gathered around the gates to the Blue Ridge Memorial Gardens cemetery to watch the funeral procession of photojournalist Adam Ward as it traveled down Airport Road on September 1. **Photograph by Erica Yoon-The Roanoke Times**

unwilling to commit. At first, they would say there was an “incident,” then after an agonizing period, a “shooting,” then a “shooting with injuries.” And that’s when it went from just another story to something truly serious. Now it wasn’t some weird, wacky “Thing” that happened, like accidentally falling off the stage or saying an obscene word on air. But how serious?

You send people to the scene, but it’s nearly an hour’s drive away from the station. The police have nothing further to say – they are “investigating.” Side rumors are flying. But most of all, as a journalist, you are in breaking news mode.

It’s like how a doctor disassociates from a patient. You don’t spend a lot of time thinking deeply about the subject and what it means; you just gather the information, get the picture, find out what happened and organize it to make an understandable report. The whole scene was on the one hand surreal – we’re more than familiar with the people, the place, and that sort of thing doesn’t happen to people you know in places like that – and on the other, very businesslike.

It’s only later that the philosophy seeps in.

At WDBJ-TV’s studio, however, the impact was immediate. Melissa Ott, desperate to know what had happened to her fiancé, burst out of the control room and headed toward the microwave feed station where Episcopo was still waiting, hoping for some sign of life on his screens. “I said, ‘Stop right there,’” he told CBS afterward. “I still had the picture blown up of his watch ticking.” Police had been called, and all they could do was wait.

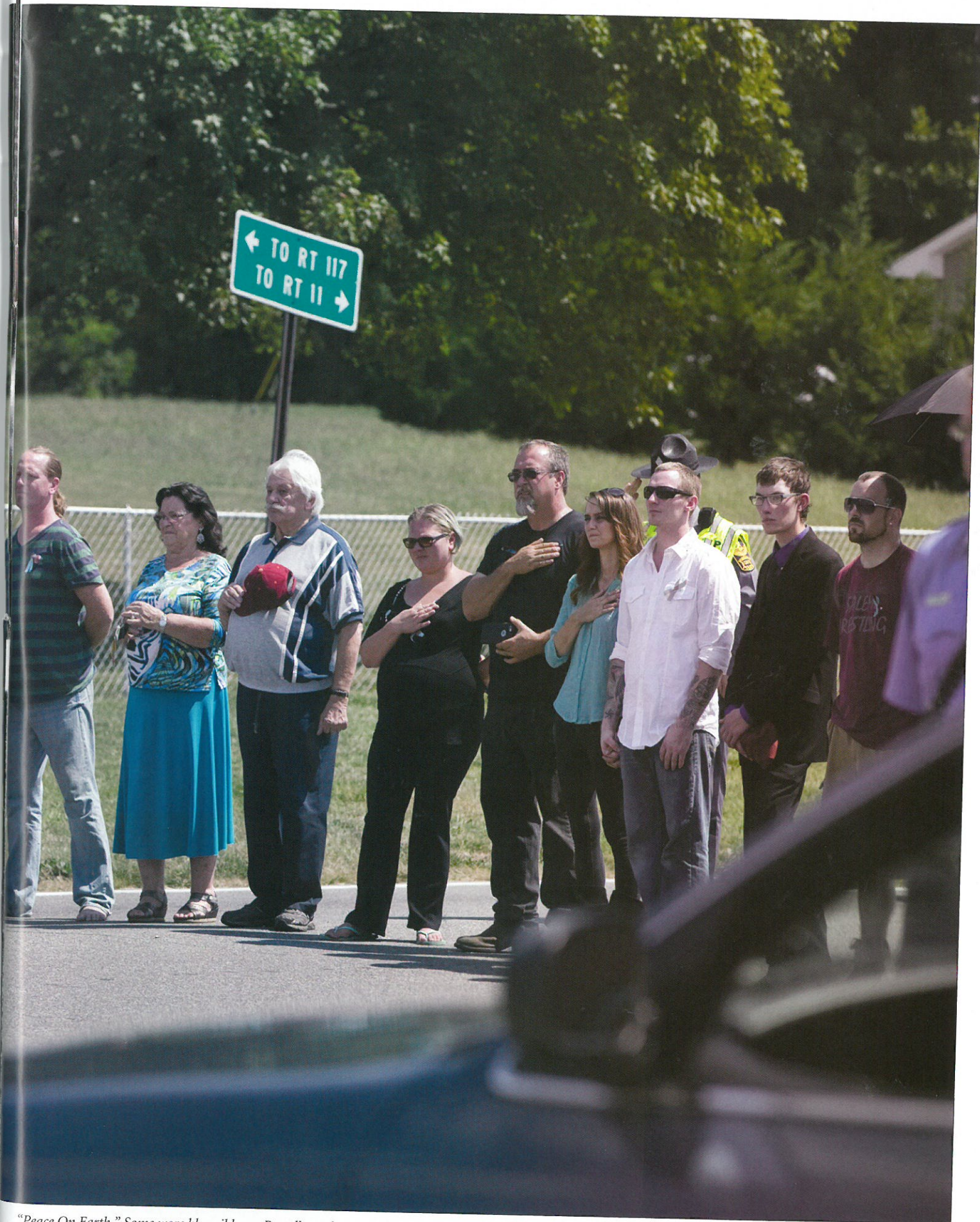
In the meantime, Episcopo had grabbed a freeze-frame that seemed to catch the shooter as the camera fell. Looking over his shoulder, chief photographer Lynn Eller said, “That’s a pretty big guy. Do you think that’s Bryce?”

Ironically, Eller – with whom Williams had had repeated conflicts, and blamed as the source of a conspiracy against him – had volunteered earlier to work that morning for Ward, who was rushing off after his shift to interview for a job opportunity in Charlotte. Ever helpful, Ward had refused.

**THE FUNERALS WERE** somewhat ad hoc affairs. What else can be expected? No one makes plans like that in their twenties. The parents, in their shock and grief, asked for privacy. Parker’s service was held completely away from public view, while Ward’s funeral in a huge, local Baptist church was packed, with hundreds of well wishers gathered outside and along the route to the cemetery.



**RESPECT.** Some held hands or hats over their hearts. Grim faced, a young girl held a hand-lettered sign that said,



*"Peace On Earth." Some wore blue ribbons. But all stood motionless as the hearse carrying Adam Ward's body passed by. Photograph by Erica Yoon-The Roanoke Times*





**FACING PAGE:** WDBJ-TV's Kimberly McBroome (center) and news director Kelly Zuber (blonde, in background) hugged friends and coworkers after a prayer service.

**Photograph by**  
Natalee Waters

**ABOVE:** The Salem High School football team entered a private event where Adam Ward's family gathered to honor their son.

**Photograph by**  
Heather Rousseau

**AT LEFT:** Alison Parker's father Andy (on right) and mother Barbara (in center, hugging) were consoled after the prayer service.

**Photograph by**  
Natalee Waters

At the graveside, where only family and close friends gathered, photographers from the other television stations in the Roanoke/Lynchburg market stood in tribute as Ward's casket was carried up from the hearse, their cameras at their feet. It was a gesture we wanted to make, something to show the family how widely he was liked and respected.

It was just part of a heartening gathering of support from the television family and the community in general. Outside of WDBJ-TV, where national and international media had gathered in the hours after the shooting, tributes flowed in – flowers, signs, balloons, and cards, and candles – piling up deeply on a long, low embankment along the station's driveway. Inside, messages of support flowed in from others in the industry, pictures of live crews and news staffs holding signs reading, "We Stand with WDBJ." They printed them out and posted them, practically filling the walls of the newsroom. Local restaurants and businesses sent food to the station.

Soon, we'll have all moved on ... if we haven't already. After all, in Syria this happens almost daily. Being a journalist at all in Pakistan, in Russia, in Mexico, in too many places, comes with the expectation of personal risk. I don't blame the world for losing interest. But it will stick with us for a while.

And we are left with many questions, but not a lot of answers.

How will this affect the live shot culture of today's newscasts? Though a number of stations (including mine, where the morning news reporter had pitched the same story as Alison's, but was redirected to another) suspended some live reports for a while, they are sure to reassume their constant appearance.

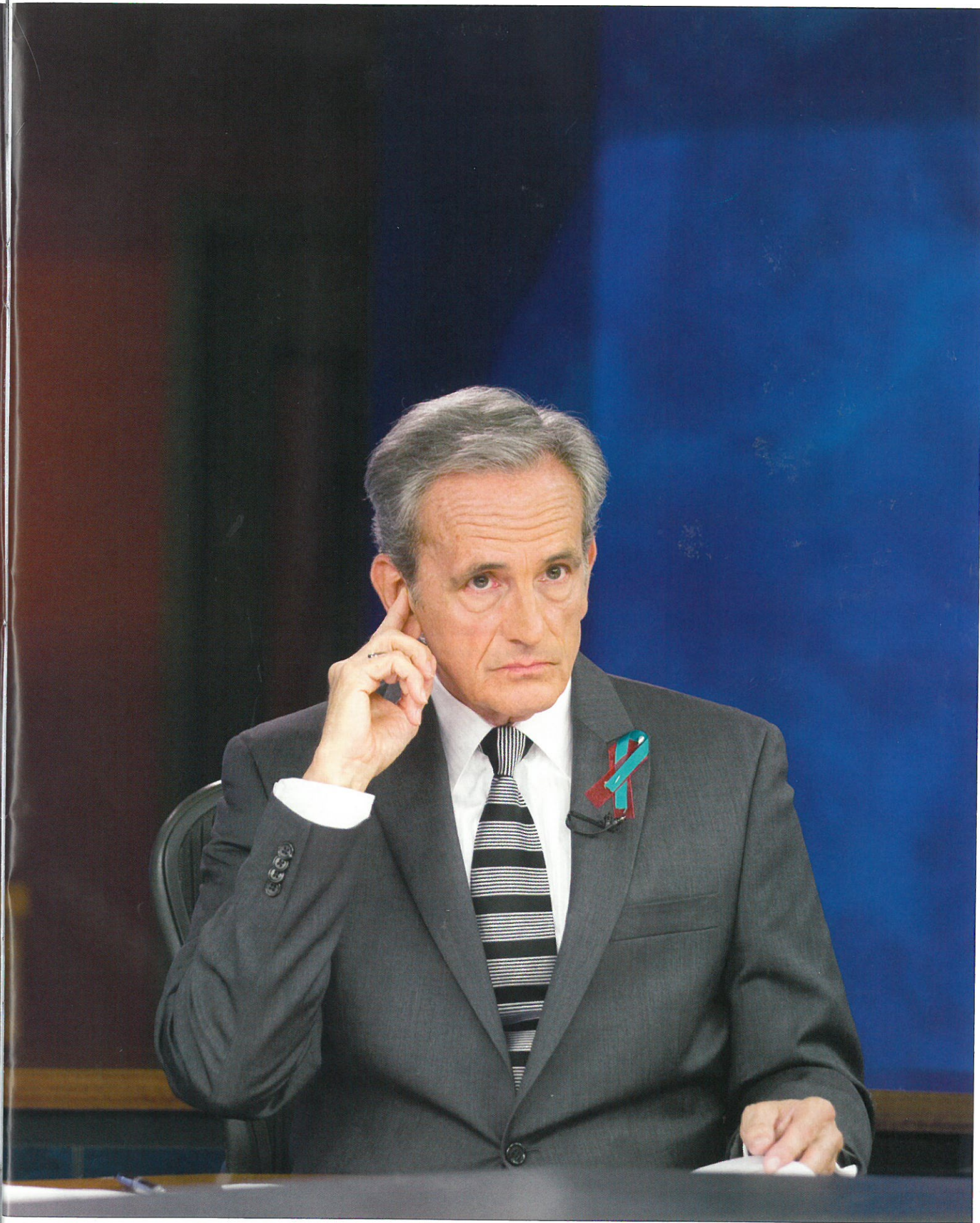
Are they safe? Anyone who has done live shots regularly has stories of fans and photo bombers, smart alecks who want to lean in and shout obscenities, or drunks who want to share their thoughts with the world. Lately these encounters have taken a more sinister turn, with crews in California being robbed of their gear and others encountering dangerous situations.

"There are a lot of people who have been harassed and interrupted in their work," Al Tompkins of the Poynter Institute told an online publication, *The Wrap*. In a story on this question, they reported, "Almost every reporter and photographer interviewed by *The Wrap* recalled at least one life-threatening situation."

As we see more and more live shots, made easier through the use of cell-based technolo-



**ALL-HANDS.** Former WDBJ-TV staffers and journalists from other stations pitched in to help while the Roanoke



staff mourned. Retired Keith Humphry (above), a WDBJ-TV anchor for 31 years, got ready to do the six o'clock news. Photograph by Erica Yoon-The Roanoke Times



**MEDIA ON MEDIA.** The day after the murders the story dominated national news; the media flocked to the scene. Photograph by Todd Maisel-New York Daily News



**SUPPORT.** Governor Terry McAuliffe and his wife, Dorothy, paused to console Chris Hurst, Parker's boyfriend. Photograph by Stephanie Klein-Davis



**A MUTUAL LOSS.** *Judy Deel, who had been Adam Ward's third grade teacher, hugged Rebecca Boone, Ward's kindergarten teacher, before they entered a private gathering at a school where Ward's family and friends received guests to honor their son's life. Photograph by Heather Rousseau-The Roanoke Times*

gy like Live-U and TVU, and more and more one-man-band reporting, are we creating an environment where – instead of a rare and shocking tragedy – threats to reporters and photographers will become a real and commonplace thing?

As we do these reports, and then replay the footage, just how much and what do we need to show? Most outlets chose not to show the actual shooting of Parker and Ward, once the initial surprise and novelty of it wore off, and many have ignored the killer's own video of it, posted on Twitter and Facebook as he fled police. But was this international news just because it was done live on television? If Vester Flanagan had vented his delusional frustrations on his former employer by rushing the well-secured front doors of WDBJ-TV, off camera, or struck in-between their on-air appearances, would the BBC have called for information and pictures as the story was still playing out?

**HOW COULD THIS** happen at all? Journalism is a career full of disappointments for its practitioners. Many of us labor feeling unknown and

unappreciated, putting in long hours for little money, only to hear the public grumble about the "lamestream media." And corporate management often treats us like cattle – assets to be shoved here and there, or disposed of, depending on consultant's mystical opinions or this month's sales figures.

It's easy to harbor resentments and grudges. Injustices and insult are not hard to find. But most of us soldier on, doing it for a range of intangible needs and reasons: The desire to do good, to bring the Truth to light, or maybe just to know more about the world and what happens in it. It's hard to understand how someone could harbor those grudges like a succubus, a psychic tumor, eating away at him inside.

There were also a burst of blogs and essays on how familiar all this is ... all of it until the shooting started. How we have been there, in the early morning light with some sleepy official. How bizarre, how jarring it became when that turned into sudden, incomprehensible death. Perhaps, I ask myself, unpleasant though it is, it's a feeling I need to hold on to for the next time I roll up on someone else's

crisis, so I better know the chaos and horror that's just been visited on their lives.

But finally, in the end, in the echo of those short, terrified screams, what stays with me is their youth, or rather the lives interrupted. I remember that time: when you're getting everything in place. You have found what you want to be, and you're on the upslope of that career, nothing but sunshine and the summit of achievement ahead of you. Both had decided to marry, having finally found the partner for that journey. (When Ott returned home that day, she found that her wedding dress had been delivered.) And then ... nothing. It's done. All that potential, all that hope and ambition and joy. The future is no more. It's heartbreaking. ■

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*Before that he was a morning show photographer at WDBJ-TV and a still photographer covering the White House for Reuters and UPI in Washington, DC. His movie "Stolen Years" is about 11 of the survivors of Joseph Stalin's Siberian Gulags.*