

## FACING ADVERSITY IN A SMALL TOWN

*by Fred Hobbs*

9/11 is an unforgettable symbol of the tragedy that unfolded on that day in 2001 in America. The world knows the details, recorded and recounted for posterity.

Ironically, thirty years earlier, on September 11, 1971 a small community in western Colorado experienced its own local tragedy. It was not caused by an international terrorist group, but proved a sorrowful and heart-breaking example of accidents that can happen to good people.

In this case the good people were eight members of the junior varsity football team of Gunnison High School and one of their coaches. The relatively new school bus in which they were riding was descending the highway over 11, 312- foot Monarch Pass. At first, the passengers noticed the smell of smoke. Then, the brakes began to malfunction and eventually the transmission went out.

The bus careened down the mountain road, running out of control at speeds 50, 60 and then 70 miles an hour. As it raced through the tiny community of Garfield, Colorado, the bus driver swerved to miss two parked cars. The bus struck a pole, rolled over and split apart. Eight players and the coach were killed instantly. Twenty-two others were hospitalized, some with serious injuries.

As a Denver television reporter at the time, I was dispatched along with photographer Steve Kady to cover the memorial service for the victims. Virtually every one of the 4,600 residents of Gunnison took part in the many tributes to the kids and their young coach gone so soon.

A community-wide memorial was held in the field house of Western State College, the only facility in the town big enough to accommodate the large contingent of mourners. The caskets of the victims were laid out in a row, each of the nine of them covered with a floral arrangement that spelled out the first names of the eight boys and their coach.

As young, but fairly seasoned journalists, the photographer Steve and I had covered all sorts of stories...fires, crimes, other accidents, but this event touched a special chord of sentimentality and emotion that we hoped we could convey through our filmed coverage. Poignant oral tributes were pronounced, but when an organist began to play softly a familiar hymn, Steve and I decided instantly to depart from the use of the usual TV news jargon about "breaking news", "grinding crashes" and "horrific experiences" and let the music and the simple beauty of the scene tell the story.

Fortunately, one more part of the ceremony helped that endeavor immensely. Though it was a non-sectarian service, a nun, dressed in the traditional habit, stepped forward and began to sing in a beautiful contralto voice, the inspirational melody "You'll Never Walk Alone."

As she finished and the organ "played out" the rest of the song, I softly ad-libbed into the microphone, something along these lines: "And so, the community of Gunnison pays its respects to these fine young men"...(and then I recited the first names of each while Steve

pointed the camera at their individual floral tributes.) We held back tears as we left the scene, moving on to the next assignment on the news beat. I am sure neither of us will ever forget that day when a town united in tribute, sadly illustrating that accidents *do* happen to good people.