

Dateline NBC in Quincy for Wallin-Reed Trial

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A Dateline NBC crew interviews defense attorneys Richard Young, left, and John Ohlson outside the Plumas County Courthouse minutes after the jury announced its verdict. Photo by Dan McDonald

Keith Morrison walked with a sense of urgency down the Main Street sidewalk in Quincy. He had a date with the judge. “I need to go apologize to Judge Kaufman,” said the Dateline NBC correspondent. “I guess we had a mix-up.” Morrison was preparing to do some final interviews for a special Dateline story about the Wallin-Reed murder case.

He wanted to personally apologize for his camera crew turning Judge Ira Kaufman’s courtroom into a movie set shortly after the trial concluded on Sept. 26.

Two hours earlier, a jury found Gregory Chad Wallin-Reed guilty of first-degree murder. He was convicted of shooting 20-year-old Rory McGuire in the head with an AR-15 assault rifle in 2011 after catching McGuire and his friends stealing his solar lights.

NBC tried to be as low-profile as possible during the trial, securing permission and filming most interviews away from the public eye.

But this time somebody goofed.

The NBC crew set up cameras, lights and microphones in the courtroom without the judge’s knowledge.

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Other than the courtroom glitch, people who were interviewed by NBC said the crew was generally respectful and sensitive. They were dealing with a traumatic event that changed many peoples' lives for the worse.

NBC will broadcast a special two-hour Dateline segment about the murder case to a national audience on Friday, Oct. 18, at 9 p.m.

Morrison and a team of NBC producers began researching, shooting video footage and conducting interviews in June.

Morrison and the show's producers conducted 11 interviews — including the attorneys, law enforcement officers and friends and families of both McGuire and Wallin-Reed.

McGuire's mother, Carol Starzer, said she had mixed feelings about being interviewed by NBC. She said she didn't feel exploited, but said she might feel differently after watching the episode on TV.

"I realize they were just trying to get a job done," Starzer said. "I would have been offended if (NBC) didn't try to get something from us, and just reported what the Wallin-Reeds said."

NBC also interviewed Wallin-Reed in the Plumas County Jail before the trial began.

Morrison said he was surprised the jury took just three hours to find Wallin-Reed guilty of first-degree murder.

"It was a quicker verdict than I expected," he said. "I had been led to believe it could go either way. I think a lot of people felt that way."

He said the verdict didn't change the way Dateline planned to tell the story.

"The jury result doesn't make that much difference to us," Morrison said. "(Dateline is about) getting into the details of the story, and meeting the characters and learning about them."

Dateline, which used to be NBC's flagship newsmagazine, now mainly focuses on unusual true crime stories. Morrison said the Wallin-Reed case fits the show's the profile.

"It's a very rich story, in that it presents two sides of a kind of a stand-your-ground idea," Morrison said.

"You know, here's a family which — reasonably or unreasonably — had become terrified of what was out there in the dark," he said. "The fact that the police were far away, they didn't really have a way of calling for help if something happened."

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“And the father (Wallin-Reed) felt that he needed to defend his family — at least that was his story — and portrayed these young men as really bad people.”

Morrison said the young men’s side of the story was equally compelling.

“It’s a completely different way of looking at the story,” he said. “You have some young guys who were pranksters. It’s a little bit like ‘American Graffiti,’ you know. Kids do (steal solar lights).

“And so the whole understanding of the circumstances flips on its head.” Morrison said. “It gives people a chance, I think, to see the humanity of both sides of a polarized argument ... and then watch it come to a conclusion.

“We are dealing with an important issue of whether or not we can really defend ourselves with a weapon.”

Plumas County District Attorney David Hollister wasn’t thrilled about NBC covering the story. He was strongly opposed to having television cameras in the courtroom.

“It brings out the worst in everyone. It just does,” Hollister said prior to the trial. “You put a camera in the courtroom, and then witnesses put on a show and people start showing up because they want to be on TV.”

However, Judge Kaufman only allowed NBC to shoot footage during the trial’s opening statements, closing arguments and the reading of the jury’s verdict. Unlike the O.J. Simpson trial, witnesses weren’t filmed while testifying on the stand — essentially eliminating the possibility of another sensationalized Kato Kaelin episode.

After the trial, Hollister said he was impressed by the way the NBC crew conducted themselves.

“They were knowledgeable and true to their word,” Hollister said. “We had one brief glitch (the courtroom mix-up) that worked out in the end.”

Hollister said he was also impressed by how much Morrison knew about the case.

Unlike some network television personalities, who just show up in a studio and read from a prepared script, Morrison spent a lot of time researching the case details himself. He didn’t rely on notes when conducting interviews.

“Keith always works that way,” said NBC Assistant Producer Kaila Ward. “He works hard to learn about every detail of a story.”

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Ward was a constant presence in the courtroom. She traveled from NBC's 30 Rockefeller Plaza office in New York and essentially became a Quincy resident for a month.

Ward took notes on a laptop computer during the entire trial. She coordinated many of the interviews for the production.

On Tuesday, Oct. 1, Ward joined Morrison and about 20 other NBC editors and producers back at the 30 Rock studios to begin the editing process.

According to NBC press manager Monica Lee, it will take about three weeks to condense 40 hours of material into next week's two-hour report.

Morrison takes a very active role in producing the finished product. He is sensitive to the impact the show could have on the people involved — particularly the five surviving Susanville men who were in the fleeing car the night Wallin-Reed opened fire.

"Some of those boys are pretty freaked out, still," Morrison said. "I interviewed one of them, for example. He was so wracked with nerves that he could barely speak just trying to tell the story."



Dateline NBC correspondent Keith Morrison interviews Plumas County District Attorney David Hollister hours after Gregory Chad Wallin-Reed was convicted of first-degree murder Sept. 26.
Photo courtesy Plumas County District Attorney's Office