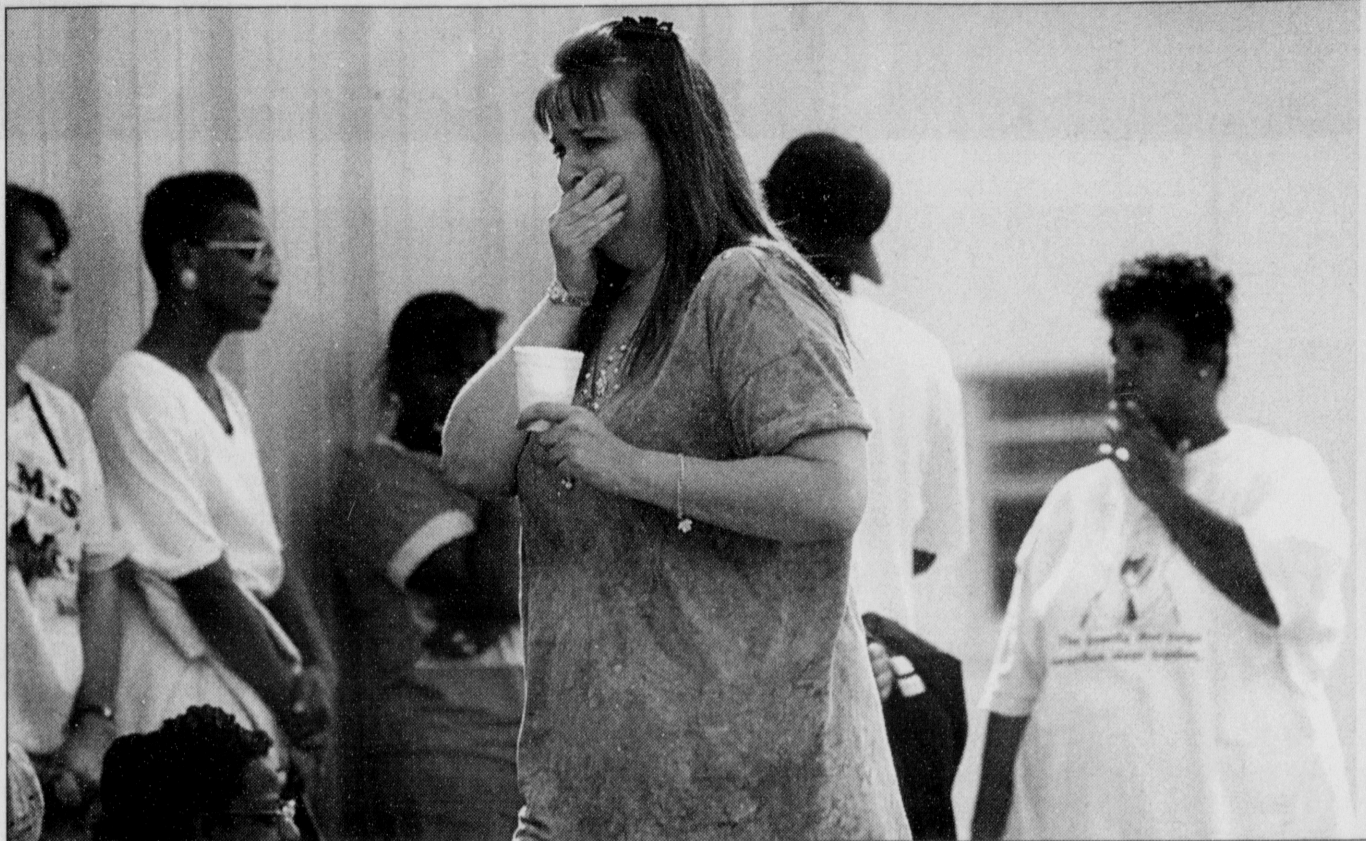


Staff photo by Scott Webster
A worker from the Phelon plant reflects on the tragic events which ended the lives of four co-workers.



Staff photo by Scott Webster
A distraught worker is overcome with emotion following the shooting at the R.E. Phelon plant.

Black ribbon drive planned today

A black ribbon drive will be held tonight for the victims of the R.E. Phelon shooting.

Volunteers are needed to tie and distribute the ribbons to individuals and businesses in Aiken County to be displayed in memory of the victims of Monday's tragedy. Wal-Mart has donated the

ribbons for the drive.

The drive will be held at 6:30 p.m. at Holiday Inn Express beside Applebee's on Whiskey Road.

The hotel donated its hospitality suite for use in the ribbon event.

For more information, contact Alecia Lee at 648-6335.

This time it wasn't somewhere else

By THOMAS SMITH

It was the kind of thing they saw on the six o'clock news, the kind of thing that always happens to somebody else.

At approximately 3 p.m. Monday a lone gunman walked into the R.E. Phelon plant on University Parkway and began shooting. By 3:15 p.m. the plant had been evacuated and employees gathered on the embankment across from the scene to watch, wonder, and count their blessings. Even after the suspect was captured and law enforcement personnel began the long process of tying up the loose ends, a substantial number of people waited and watched, trying to make sense of it all.

Some had been going in to work. Others were just getting off their shift and heading home. For all of them, however, the memories of the last few hours were much too vivid. One such individual was punch press tool and die operator Will Shaw.

"It was just after 3 and I was getting ready to go home. I was out in the hallway checking on some parts, and off to

my left I saw a couple of flashes," he said as sirens wailed in the distance. "Actually I heard four or five shots before that and I saw a couple of flashes. Somebody said, 'That's a gunshot,' and then I saw a dude walking toward me and another guy."

"He pointed the gun toward us and fired two shots, and I got the hell out of Dodge," Shaw said. "I didn't see much more than that, but I saw more than I wanted to."

Some, like Shaw, were in the line of fire. Some were nearby and caught glimpses of events that will stay with them forever. Still others knew only that something was happening, and they had to run for their lives.

"I heard five loud noises — I didn't know they were shots at the time — and I looked over at a coworker," said Stan Kiser. "Then I walked out from behind my machine and saw him holding the gun, shooting. I couldn't tell if he was shooting somebody, but I did see him hold the gun, firing."

The versions varied from cluster to cluster. Some saw the gunman, others heard the shots. One thing linked them

"You just don't think this kind of thing is going to happen to you."

- Phelon employee

all. Whatever their physical proximity to the devastation, their emotional proximity was scant inches away.

Some stared across the street in disbelief while others paced back and forth. Some sobbed, not from fear, but for the very fact that they were alive.

Yaskia Smith watched and waited for her boyfriend, also a Phelon employee. She heard about the outbreak on the radio, and came to the site, uncertain, but hopeful that theirs would be a happy reunion. That was, indeed, the case.

Tommy Thompson and his wife

waited for news of their son, their uncertainty even more unbearable. They knew their son had been one of the victims. What they waited for was word on whether or not he survived.

Words would not come, and the anguished silence was almost tangible — a grim precursor to the tragic news that their son did not survive.

While some offered silent prayers of thanksgiving, others looked at the future with a different view than they had hours before.

"This is really scary," said one employee who asked not to be identified. "I am really scared about going into work tomorrow. We've had bomb scares off and on for a couple of months; now, I don't know."

"I'm just real scared. A lot of people are. You just don't think this kind of thing is going to happen to you."

As the afternoon wore on people continued to tell their stories, a litany of fear, shock, and disbelief.

"I heard something, and I thought it was something over in tool-and-die backfiring. Then I saw the men run-

ning and I saw him with that gun, just a shooting," said Brenda Gunter. "He didn't say a word. He was just shooting."

Carrie Morgan waited for word of friends who worked at the plant. Others around her watched, waited, and repeated the latest news in all its various forms. Some accounts accurate, some close.

"It's a sign of the times," said engineering lab technician, Clyde Hoots. "People just figure they're dead already, that things can't get much worse. Who knows why somebody does something like this?" he said as he watched the rush of law enforcement, media, and survivors.

"Welcome to the big time." When the siege was over, four were dead, three wounded, and five suffered minor injuries. The suspect was in serious condition, and some 200 people struggled to come to terms with the kind of thing that you hear about on the six o'clock news.

The kind of thing that happens to somebody else.

Aiken High School affected by events

By BILL BENGTON

Monday's killing spree at R.E. Phelon forced radical change in the afternoon routine at nearby Aiken High School, as the school provided a shelter for individuals suffering from mental and physical impact, and those who came to provide relief.

Beginning at about 5 p.m., dozens of people also used the school as a place to pick up their friends and family members who worked at the shooting site.

The gym was mostly cleared by about 7:30 p.m., with only a few medical professionals and American Red Cross volunteers and staff members remaining. This morning, things were physically back to normal, said David Caver, principal at Aiken High.

The school, located about a half-mile from the R.E. Phelon plant, was used as a safe gathering place for Phelon employees, to provide workers and their families and friends with a central location to meet, collect their thoughts, get medical help and counseling, comfort each other and learn more about the situation.

"The members of the Red Cross and the emergency teams were there taking care of the

employees," said Dr. Linda Eldridge, district superintendent, recalling the scene which began to develop about an hour after classes were dismissed.

Law-enforcement officials also used the school as a place to collect information from those who had witnessed the violence that erupted at about 3 p.m., and ended with the suspect's capture more than two hours later.

"Everyone had not gone home, but a majority of individual families were coming to pick up their fathers, mothers and wives and husbands who had been housed there," Dr. Eldridge said.

She said schools are a central part of the area's emergency-preparedness plan, particularly in rural areas, where schools are often the largest secure structures, equipped with telephones, utilities and other items for meeting basic needs in such situations.

The superintendent and Caver were among school leaders at the gymnasium, along with coaches and other administrators helping individuals find their way around and get access to counseling, if needed.

"I had several comments from folks who told me that it was a good location for them to be

housed. They could at least have cold drinks and have folks counsel with them," Dr. Eldridge said.

"All the law enforcement agencies were there, working so hard," she added. "I was real proud of Aiken's response to an emergency."

Caver cited volleyball, football, Naval Junior ROTC and cheerleading as normal afternoon activities that were under way when the mass relocation began. A few students were also practicing basketball at the time, he said.

He also offered a few words of thanks in the wake of the bloodshed and ensuing recovery effort.

Caver described local EMS and ambulance crews as "very professional in the way they did business, came in and took care of things."

The medical professionals clearly appreciated having the gymnasium area opened for their use. He described them as "a great group to work with."

The school district holds emergency-simulation drills each year, to remind employees of the procedures to follow in such fast-response situations as hazardous weather, civil disturbance and criminal intrusion.



Staff photo by Scott Webster

Phelon workers console one another in the aftermath of Monday's shootings.

R.E. Phelon has been corporate resident of Aiken since 1980

Staff reports

The R.E. Phelon Company expanded its operations and moved its headquarters to Aiken County in 1992 because officials believed Aiken to be a good environment for business and living.

The company makes small ignition systems and flywheels for lawn and garden products and chain saws.

The plant located on University Parkway opened in 1980. It is now one of the county's major employers with approximately 450 people on the payroll.

The Phelon plant was honored in 1996 by S.C. Gov. David Beasley with the Job Creator Award. The award is given to 100 companies in the state that have shown significant growth.

Phelon was founded in 1945 by

Richard E. Phelon and was headquartered in Longmeadow, Mass., before moving its base of operations to Aiken County.

Phelon operates plants in Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic and Lamar, Wisc., and its sales cover domestic and international markets. Its products are used in such well-known lawn and garden product lines as Poulan, Homelite and Briggs and Stratton.