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Sunday, February 10, 2008

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Local reporter on Texas UFO case leaves newspaper; integrity of local, national news media explored

By *Steve Hammons*

February 09, 2008

The local newspaper reporter in Stephenville, Texas, who helped cover a UFO sighting case there is no longer working at the Stephenville Empire-Tribune newspaper, effective last Thursday, Feb. 7.

Journalist Angelia Joiner had been covering the UFO story which broke early in January and brought national and international news media representatives and researchers to Stephenville, other nearby small towns and the surrounding region.

Mainstream media such as the Associated Press, CNN and other major TV networks and newspapers covered the incident with great interest. The international press also paid special attention to the UFO sightings in Stephenville and towns in the area.

Media personalities such as CNN's Larry King and NBC's Today show host Matt Lauer explored the sightings on their shows.

Steve Hammons



Hammons was born and raised in the Cincinnati, Ohio, region. He has worked as a researcher, journalist, instructor, counselor, juvenile probation peace officer and public safety urgent response specialist. He graduated from Ohio University with studies in communication (journalism focus) and health education (psychology focus). In his two novels, MISSION INTO LIGHT and the sequel LIGHT'S HAND, a San Diego-based joint-service military and intelligence team of ten women and men research emerging special topics. This "Joint Reconnaissance Study Group" follows paths of



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Public Information

In Stephenville, Joiner was a staff writer at the small-town newspaper there. She did an excellent job of researching and interviewing local residents who were surprised, curious and concerned about the very unusual objects they reportedly saw.

As national and international interest in the case grew in January, Joiner was contacted for information as the reporter on the scene with some of the best knowledge of the local community.

Her articles helped inform not only local residents who relied on professional reporting for their community, but also

assisted other Americans and people internationally understand that Stephenville people and residents in the area were down-to-Earth, solid and of good character.

The factual and level-headed journalism Joiner provided helped the national news media understand and respect the citizens in these communities. This resulted in some of the most serious and credible reporting in the national media on such an incident in recent memory.

The AP article was carried in hundreds of papers and news outlets. People like Larry King and Matt Lauer talked about the subject with intelligence and open minds.

All these outcomes were related in part to the high level of credibility of local witnesses who were courageous enough to come forward and the professionalism of local reporter Joiner and her colleagues in the national and international news media.

However, some of these witnesses and Joiner seem to be paying a price for doing their civic duty and communicating about an incident that appeared to be very significant, and could even have affected the public safety of the communities in the area.

CENSORSHIP AND "NEED TO KNOW"

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According to information obtained for this report, management at the Stephenville Empire-Tribune did not want further coverage in the paper of the sightings by local citizens of something that appeared to be highly unusual. Pressures may have been placed on newspaper management to discontinue articles on the subject.

According to the newspaper's Web site, "The Stephenville Empire-Tribune is a mid-morning paper published six days a week by Erath Publishers, Inc., a Consolidated Southwest Media company which is owned by American Consolidated Media. The Empire-Tribune is a member of the Associated Press, Texas Press Association, West Texas Press Association and the Inland Press Association."

Publisher Rochelle Stidham and Managing Editor Sara Vanden Berge were contacted for their comments for this report but did not immediately respond.

Did the paper's management face pressures to end coverage of the UFO sighting by a local peace officer, respected businessman and pilot and reportedly dozens of other local citizens? Did they back away from accounts of local citizens who said they were apparently being threatened for talking about what they saw?

Is this a case of media censorship or self-censorship and political correctness? Is it about professional courage and moral integrity? And, can the newspaper now be trusted by the community to cover important aspects of public health and safety, local political activities and other sometimes sensitive topics?

These seem to be questions for the citizens who read and subscribe to the paper and advertisers who use that newspaper.

The corporate owners of the Empire-Tribune (Consolidated Southwest Media, American Consolidated Media) and the professional news and journalism organizations with which the paper is affiliated (Associated Press, Texas Press Association, West Texas Press Association, Inland Press Association) might also want to review developments there.

As for the former reporter Joiner who had covered the concerns and accounts of local citizens so professionally, life goes on.

She appears to be confident that she did the best job she could have for her community as a responsible local journalist who realized something important had happened to her fellow citizens, neighbors and friends.

"I appreciate the opportunity I have had at the newspaper," Joiner said. "A story of this magnitude drained the limited resources a small newspaper has. I performed my other duties to the best of my ability."

Even as the national and international media interest calmed down somewhat, other ominous developments were occurring in the Stephenville area.

A local resident stated he had received threatening phone calls and threats of implied bodily harm or death for talking publicly about what he saw.

An intruder had also appeared on his rural property at 1 a.m., causing the resident to be concerned about the safety of his family.

See my Feb. 7 article: ["Texas UFO witnesses threatened for talking to media?"](#)

As Joiner was covering this more serious aspect of the UFO sighting case (in articles published Feb. 3 and Feb. 4) which appeared to be a law enforcement and criminal matter affecting public safety, she was reportedly told by newspaper management to back off.

"My directions were to move on to something else," Joiner said.

The reason given to Joiner for this was, "because our readership had grown tired of the UFO stories."

However, Joiner was still a contact person and resource for community residents, researchers, news media representatives and others.

While trying to obey management's directives to cover topics other than the UFO sightings and related developments, Joiner said, "It was a difficult task to achieve. I was still receiving a surprising number of e-mails and phone calls on the subject."

"I tried to direct those calls and interviews to after hours or during lunch hours. And I forwarded e-mails to my home so that I would not be giving newspaper time to the

subject. I honestly tried to do as they had asked."

The apparent irregularities and journalistic priorities of what was starting to emerge at the Empire-Tribune probably also started to dawn on Joiner as she realized things were not going in a good direction at the paper.

She gave her two-week notice, then was told to leave immediately.

"I had given notice when I realized my boss was unhappy with my performance, but was unexpectedly asked to pack my things and leave Thursday," she said.

Joiner apparently felt that people in her community had "a need to know" about what was going on when respectable citizens came forward with their accounts and subsequent serious incidents reportedly involved the safety of and threats to a local family.

GOING FORWARD

The Stephenville UFO sighting incident is not the first and will not be the last. The responses by local and regional public safety officials to such incidents have also occurred before, and will again. Local, national and international news media professionals are also part of the picture, past, present and future.

Americans wearing the military uniform of our country and our intelligence professionals are certainly also parts of the puzzle involving UFOs and how our society deals with an apparently sensitive and complex situation. Their respect and support for good American citizens will remain crucial in the days ahead.

Many of the residents of the Stephenville region are just such good Americans. Reporter Joiner knew this because she knows the people of her community.

Local journalists typically work on topics involving all kinds of community activities: the local schools and hospitals, area peace officers and public safety personnel, businesses and employers, civic groups and organizations. And when they do, reporters often feel a sense of responsibility to do their best for their neighbors and their communities.

This works in reverse too, at the local and national levels. Our newspapers, TV and radio media, Web-based news and other similar information platforms are sometimes only as good as the standards we expect of them, and the support we give to honorable and ethical journalists.

Like the old saying, "In a democracy, citizens get the government they deserve," the same can be said about our

news media. We get the newspapers and news media we demand, deserve and support.

If we continue along a path of the ["dumbing down"](#) of Americans, as many have alleged, the fabric of our communities and our nation may deteriorate.

If we search for truth, integrity and honor within ourselves, our media and our government officials, we may just find that too.

The citizens of the Stephenville region, and all the rest of us, must decide about the directions we want to take. Do we want to continue being dumbed down? Do we want to stick our head in the sand and close our eyes?

Or, do we want greater respect as American citizens and intelligent human beings who have the ability to understand sensitive, complex and, yes, even highly unusual and unexpected situations?

When events occur that affect public health and safety, public information, our rights and responsibilities as citizens, what are our roles and those of our institutions such as local and national government and the news media?

These are questions that, it appears, must be faced and dealt with if our communities, our society and our nation will continue to thrive.

NOTE TO READERS: Readers interested in this article may also want to read a related piece posted Sunday, Feb. 10: ["Quantum leap breakthrough for human race emerging?"](#) Hammons is a former reporter for newspapers in the San Diego area. He covered public health and safety, the "police beat," U.S. Navy and Marine Corps topics, Pacific Ocean and beach area stories and other subjects. He held press credentials from the U.S. Navy in San Diego and the San Diego Police Department. Hammons studied communications and journalism at Ohio University, Athens, Ohio, home of the prestigious Scripps College of Communications and E.W. Scripps School of Journalism, recognized as two of the top such programs in the United States. Hammons is also author of two novels – MISSION INTO LIGHT and the sequel LIGHT'S HAND. Readers can browse the novels online at the publisher's Web site (links below) where the books appear exactly as they do in print. Once at table of contents, click on each chapter to go directly to that chapter.

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