

# Courtroom Security

by John D. Whitaker

I can only hope that the cold blooded murder of three innocent people last week in an Atlanta courthouse will serve as a wakeup call the citizens of Natrona County. A man who was being tried for the rape of his girlfriend overpowered a security officer, grabbed her weapon and then shot her. She survived, but the man then shot and killed a judge, court reporter and another sheriff's deputy before escaping into the community. He disarmed at least one other deputy in the process, and if the jury or some of the witnesses had been in the courtroom he would likely have murdered some of them. It appears that at some point later in the day the man shot and killed a federal officer before being captured. It seems like justice is under attack by violent and crazy people all over this country. If you believe that this could never happen here, you are very mistaken.

I think we should be clear about what courtrooms are. We all learned in civics class that courtrooms are sacred places where the citizens of our community come to find justice. That is what they are, but over the years I have come to see our courtrooms more as a place where the unsolvable problems of our society get solved. This can be an ugly business. We expect our judges, lawyers, juries and court personnel to handle the problems that can't be fixed anywhere else. The reality is that far from being perceived as a sacred place, some people view our courtrooms as places where violent angry people come to feel frustrated.

Usually, when people come to court they are not happy about being there in the first place. They have come because they have been arrested or they are a party to some civil dispute. Very few believe that they have done anything wrong. When they lose the case, they associate the loss with the people involved in the process. Here, the faces of the judges, jurors, witnesses or the lawyers on the other side become the face of an amorphous justice system that has done them wrong.

We need to rethink how we protect everyone in our



courtrooms. I went to a hearing the other day and walked straight into the judges office. I could have been carrying a rocket launcher, and no one would have known. The Natrona County Sheriff's Office does an excellent job of providing security given the resources they have, but based upon the enormous increase in the volume and severity of the cases our courts are processing, it is just a matter of time before we have a catastrophic event in one of our courtrooms.

It would be easy to have shotgun toting sheriff deputies at every doorway in the courthouse, but this would create such an intimidating atmosphere that there would be no such thing as a presumption of innocence. Defense attorneys have long

argued that having a client in leg irons with heavily armed deputies around scares the jury. This becomes an implied message that the person under such security must be very dangerous, whether he really is or not. Cheyenne has a fully staffed security entrance that everyone must pass through to gain entrance to the courtrooms. Once inside the security area a far more toned down security presence is permitted. There is no such system in Natrona County, and people are permitted to walk right into the courtrooms without any pre-screening security. Onlookers are permitted close and easy access to prisoners because the courtrooms are so small that people are on top of each other. This is a design problem, not a staffing problem, and it is just a matter of time before the unthinkable happens. There have been numerous incidents in the recent past where our judges have been in heated exchanges and even physical confrontation with criminal defendants. Some domestic relations cases are a direct result of violent physical abuse, and there is no reason to think that it will stop when the perpetrator enters a courtroom.

Before you shrug this off as a problem that does not affect you, remember that you may wind up as a witness, spectator or juror in court when a real rodeo breaks out. I would encourage all of our citizens to support building a new and safe courthouse. Until this is done, we are all at risk.

**The Wyoming State Bar does not certify any lawyer as a specialist or expert. Anyone considering a lawyer should independently investigate the lawyer's credentials and ability, and not rely upon advertisements or self-proclaimed expertise. This informative column is brought to you by John Whitaker who practices personal injury and criminal law throughout Wyoming. He can be reached at JDWTL@aol.com or by calling his office in Casper at 265-6204.**