Uplink

THE FORUM FOR COMPUTER-ASSISTED REPORTING

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Work is killing me!

Lax labor laws imperil Texas teens

by Sarah Baxter
MICAR

Four teenage girls are murdered in an Austin yogurt shop, where two of the girls routinely closed the shop alone at night.

During a single year, more than 13,000 Texas teenagers suffer burns, sprains and other injuries, often ignored by their employers.

Countless other teenagers fall asleep in school or fail their classes after staying up half the night at jobs where they work more than 40 hours a week.

Nancy Stancill, special projects reporter at the *Houston Chronicle*, analyzed nine-track tapes to uncover these and countless examples of how Texas teenagers pay the price for living in a state with one of the weakest child labor laws in the country.

The tapes, from the Texas Worker's Compensation Commission, revealed 13,328 injuries to Texas teenage workers from January 1989 to October 1992. The injuries included 15 deaths.

Stancill became interested in the story after learning that Texas' child labor law, on the books since 1981, had never been enforced. The law required inspectors to monitor children's work, but the state ha never actually hired any such inspectors. The Texas Employment Commission was given responsibility for the law in 1990, but the legislature never allotted the money to enforce it.

The law sets 14 as the minimum working age, but Stancill found some teenagers who said they started working when they were as young as 10 years old. The law also allows 16- and 17-year-olds to work unlimited hours, causing many to fall behind in school, and placing some in danger when left alone to close shops at night.

Even if an employer is caught violating the Texas child labor law, Stancill discovered, the maximum penalty is a $500 fine.

Stancill's first request for the records was ignored. "They said the information was confidential," she explained. "Some of it was, but most of it wasn't."

After proving she was entitled to the records under the Open Records Act, Stancill convinced the state to comply with her request. In fact, officials didn't even charge her for the records. But the commission refused to reveal the names of the injured children or their employers, citing concerns about privacy.

The commission did provide detailed information describing injuries to teenagers and the types of businesses involved. But in a measure to protect the identity of specific employers, the commission refused to identify even the county of the employer, and instead identified employers by region.

Stancill was given names of some businesses that had been cited for violation of child labor laws by the U.S. Department of Labor. But the department only revealed businesses inspected by special strike forces.

Since the department normally checks for child labor violations when inspecting a business for some other reason, Stancill felt revealing only those businesses cited for violation by strike forces would be unfair.

"They claimed there was no way to extract all the company names because they weren't filed the same way," she said. "So it wasn't the full picture."

After analyzing the data using EX IQ, Stancill found the majority of injured teens were hurt in restaurants and grocery stores. The most common injuries were sprains and cuts, but there were also amputations and deaths.

The figures provided Stancill with a solid foundation, but she needed to talk with the injured teenagers themselves. She started by interviewing high school teachers and guidance counselors to help her track down students who suffered injuries or long hours at their jobs.

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Reporters find FEMA's secret funding of fallout shelter

Government contracts reveal $2.9 billion plan

by Matt Reavy
MICAR

"The source detailed a massive secret plan involving hundreds of high-tech communications vehicles, including one truck weighing 24 tons, all designed to make the government a moving target during a nuclear war."

With every major news organization in the nation expending hundreds of hours to cover the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), you might wonder how $2.9 billion could slip through the cracks.

Larry Lipman and Elliot Jaspin of the Cox News Service found out earlier this year when their recent computer-assisted reporting venture uncovered that for every dollar spent responding to natural disasters, FEMA has quietly shelled out $12 on plans to keep the government running during a nuclear war.

It wasn't that other media outlets hadn't gone to the right people, said Jaspin. They just didn't know which questions to ask.

Only after he and Lipman confronted a source with information they had obtained during a six-month analysis of computer tapes from the General Services Administration (GSA) did they learn what only a few FEMA officials and 20 members of Congress had known all along -- that for the past 11 years, FEMA has spent billions on a top-secret nuclear war program set up with the help of former White House national security aide Oliver North.

"It was like putting a key in a lock," said Jaspin. "There was the great beauty and value of what I've been babbling about for years."

The story grew out of a suggestion from Cox member newspaper *The Palm Beach Post*. In the wake of Hurricane Andrew, the newspaper contacted Lipman and asked for a story on FEMA.

Lipman and Jaspin got to work shortly thereafter, downloading FEMA payments from a tape of government contracts above $50,000 handed out over the past four years. The tape is available for $100 annually from the GSA.

In reviewing the data, they noticed a number of payments to the Harris Corp. and several other national security contractors.

"At that point I was really baffled," said Jaspin. "I didn't know what FEMA would be doing with national security contracts."

The pair went to FEMA with the information they had uncovered and a request to view the contracts. Agency officials rejected the appeal, citing national security concerns.

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Tech tips

Nine-track tape drive provides easy and dependable backup

by Elliot Jaspin
Cox News Service

My computer crashed.

It was not really a crash. It was more like the big chill. One moment the computer chips were merrily processing data. The next instant they were suspended in cyberspace -- the electronic equivalent of chicken suspended in an eternal aspic.

The little tape backup unit that had come with the computer was no help. Despite hours of coaxing and several software upgrades, the tape backup unit continued to view its job with the glacial disdain of a headwaiter.

The answer to my woes was the nine-track tape drive. While we view these drives as a way to shovel mainframe data on to our PCs, they are able to perform several other valuable functions.

The software that comes with the drives sold by Computer Logics, for example, includes utilities that can backup a hard disk and copy tapes. Both programs are relatively easy to use and very dependable.

Tired of listening to the internal tape back up unit hoot, hum and whistle to no great effect, I put a blank tape on my nine-track drive and switched to my directory of utilities. A program, aptly named "Save", copies the contents of my hard drive to magnetic tape. In an era of graphical interfaces, mouse buttons and dialog boxes, it has all the appeal of a battered Ford truck with a loose muffler.

On the command line, you type "Save c:*.*/s". This tells the program to copy all the contents of the root directory. The "/s" switch says to copy all the subdirectories. When you need to restore the files to disk you type in the companion program, "Load", and the data comes flooding back. It may not be pretty but it has one major advantage. It works and it works

In the time it took to format a tape cartridge, I had copied all the files from my 660 megabyte hard disk to three reels of tape.

The cognoscente will point out a number of caveats. Reels of tape are awkward compared to a little cartridge. The Save and Load utilities do not handle data compression. And there is that ugly command line interface. All true and completely beside the point. Tape backup programs can be many things but they must above all else be super reliable and reasonably fast. And that is where these utilities shine.

The other essential are two utilities Dupin and Dupout. If you need to copy a tape, this is about as simple as you can get. Put the tape you want to copy on the drive, type "Dupin" followed by a file name, and an exact duplicate of what is on the tape will be copied to your hard drive.

When Dupin is done, mount a blank tape on the drive with the plastic read/write ring installed and type Dupout and the name of the file. The program copies the disk file back to the tape and a duplicate tape is made.

The only cautionary note is to check the amount of free space on your hard disk. If you don't have room to hold the contents of the tape, housecleaning is in order.

"The answer to my woes was the nine-track tape drive. While we view these drives as a way to shovel mainframe data on to our PCs, they are able to perform several other valuable functions."

Enthusiasm for computer-assisted reporting is keen although broadcasters are leery of cost vs. retu[illegible]n

by Michelle Smawley
Associate Producer, The Crusaders
Los Angeles

"Electronic journalism is the frontier for TV investigative reporting. We are going to be able to do stories we have never been able to do in the past."

Mary Field was excited by the possibilities. The investigative TV producer had just spent an intensive week at MICAR's computer-assisted reporting training seminar. When she returned to her station, WGN in Chicago, Field came up with a story idea: to examine the windy city's property taxes.

But there was one thing Field didn't have: the hardware and software necessary to do the story. Field's news director was not convinced installing CAR technology would fit in with the station's priorities under a tightening budget. So she had to look elsewhere.

After weeks of searching, Field found a former academic interested in her subject. She had the data. He had the ability to download the information, so the two began a partnership.

Of the 134 journalists who have attended the seminar, only four have been broadcasters.

It is not surprising that Field had to go through so much effort to use the skills she acquired at the MICAR seminar. Of the 134 journalists who have attended the seminar, only four have been broadcasters. Although major newspapers have experimented with computer-assisted journalism for several years, few broadcast outlets presently use computer-assisted reporting.

Some attribute the lack of interest in CAR to the visual element required of the broadcast medium. "The thinking by broadcasters is that computer-assisted stories are computer stories and they're not," Field said.

She also credited her knowledge of computer-assisted reporting with expanding the way she visualized stories. "There have been other stories that I've done that I wouldn't have done before because of the way I now know the government stores its information."

The station put together a piece on Chicago's efforts to catch those who failed to register their cars. The city spent roughly $20,000 to employ an army of patrols which would walk the streets searching for offenders and then ticket them. WGN reported that the data was stored on tapes, and all the city had to do was run the two tapes against each other, a move they reported would save taxpayers thousands of dollars. The city changed their policy as a result of the story.

But the reality of the technology is costly by some standards. It runs about $14,000, including hardware, software, training and access to the database.

Brooks Jackson, a correspondent with CNN's special assignment unit, can relate to the cost limitations. Jackson recently shared a sample of stories researched using CAR methods with CNN management. He also proposed they buy the appropriate equipment and hire a CARspecialist to run it. The result? Management was very enthusiastic but so far there has been no money committed to the project. "International expansion is hot, so every spare nickel is going in that direction. For the moment everything domestically is on hold," said Jackson.

There's also the matter of time. Television stories run much shorter than print pieces and usually require less time to put together. Jackson said that, in an industry where every second counts, computer-assisted stories may appear to be too time consuming. "Because TV is so demanding logistically, correspondents spend all their time traveling and doing ten takes in front of the Capitol. The ratio of producers to correspondents is one-to-one. We're already stretched thin doing the kind of stories we know are there."

But the future holds promise. In fact, at a recent seminar for the Radio and Television News Directors Association, broadcast news executives appeared very excited about the technology. One news executive, who said he'd like to keep his identity secret because he'll be the first in his market to use computer-assisted reporting, proclaimed a bright future for CAR in television.

"Electronic journalism is the frontier for TV investigative reporting," he said. "There's almost an infinite amount of information which is available to the public and the media which we have in the past not even tapped. We are going to be able to do stories we have never been able to do in the past."

The news executive purchased the equipment almost as soon as he returned to work. He sa[illegible] hopes to have a new computer-assisted repor[illegible] program on line by September.

Continued from page one:

After interviewing some students Stancill found many overworked and injured teens. "Children were being persuaded — forced — into working more and more hours at risk to their grades," Stancill said.

One teenage girl Stancill interviewed quit her job in a grocery store because she was working up to 48 hours a week. Her new job, where she works 35 hours a week and often closes the store alone, is little relief.

Often when teenagers were hurt, their employers minimized their injuries and pressured them to continue working. One teenager, burned while working in a fried chicken restaurant, was given a little salve for his burn and told to continue working. The next day he went to see his school nurse who told him he had a "serious second degree burn."

One follow-up story centered upon the 115 injuries to child farm workers. Stancill found migrant children as young as six years old working in the onion fields of the Rio Grande Valley. Often the children suffered headaches and vomiting after being sprayed with pesticides.

The Texas legislature drafted bills to strengthen child labor laws, citing the figures from Stancill's analysis as one motivation.

A law to prevent businesses from hiring minors as strippers or topless dancers is also being pushed to the legislature. Currently the strippers can be as young as 17 years old.

Legislators also want to increase the penalty for violators of the child labor law, and create a database to analyze injuries to working children. But Stancill noted that the prospect of an inspection program to investigate child labor complaints is still doubtful, due to lack of funds.

"One teenager, burned while working in a fried chicken restaurant, was given a little salve for his burn and told to continue working. The next day he went to see his school nurse who told him he had a serious second degree burn."

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But one of Lipman's FEMA sources agreed to talk with the two reporters.

"It was enough," said Jaspin.

The source detailed a massive secret plan involving hundreds of high-tech communications vehicles, including one truck weighing 24 tons, all designed to make the government a moving target during a nuclear war.

Although sources from other news organizations had been covering FEMA for years, none had discovered the secret operation. Part of the reason lies in the fact that budgets for the operation totalling more than a billion dollars have appeared annually as a single line -- "submitted under a separate package."

Lipman and Jaspin also learned that nearly a third of FEMA's employees operate within the top-secret project, three times as many as work on natural disaster programs.

According to the article, which ran over the Cox News Service wire in February, FEMA spent $1.3 billion on equipment, support facilities and personnel between 1982 and 1991 in order to provide communications for government leaders during a nuclear war. The agency spent an additional $1.6 billion on related national security programs.

Despite the obvious benefits the secret communications program could have in helping victims of natural disasters, no complete mobile unit has ever been used in such fashion. Most FEMA employees assigned to deal with Hurricane Andrew last year didn't even know about the agency's capacity.

After hunting down other sources to verify the information they had obtained, Jaspin and Lipman called FEMA again and requested an opportunity to see the Mobile Emergency Response Support units, known as MERS. To their surprise, officials approved the request, as well as a full scale briefing of the project.

Program details provided by FEMA officials filled in the gaps and gave the pair enough to publish their story on February 22.

On March 1, one week after the *Post* published Lipman and Jaspin's account, a blue-ribbon panel recommended that FEMA's top-secret national security functions be turned over to the military and that a new domestic crisis unit be created to handle catastrophes.

Bits, bytes and nibbles

IRE and N & O host CAR workshop October 21 - 24

Investigative Reporters and Editors and *The News & Observer* in Raleigh, N.C., will show reporters and editors this fall how they can do their jobs with more precision, depth and power through computer-assisted reporting. About 50 top journalists and other experts who use computers to gather and sort information and write stories will demonstrate their skills and share their ideas with 400 - 500 peers during a four-day conference devoted exclusively to computer-assisted reporting. The conference will be Oct. 21 - 24 at the Radisson Plaza Hotel in downtown Raleigh.

The program will mix beginning and advanced sessions. Sessions will include:

- Equipment and software -- what's best and what to budget for
- Databases -- what's out there, where to find them and how to negotiate for them
- Going on-line
- Introduction to CD-ROM and Hypertext
- Advanced word processing techniques
- Parsing, scanning, mapping
- Visual Basic and other application development tools
- Specific story ideas to take home and do
- Polling and statistics
- Ideaware -- covering a variety of useful
- How to set up computer-assisted reporting classes in the newsroom

Hands-on training classes will cover:

- Windows/DOS
- Spread sheets
- NineTrack Express
- Creating and manipulating databases, analyzing data and programming in FoxPro and Paradox

For more information about the conference please write or call:

Investigative Reporters & Editors
100 Neff Hall
UMC School of Journalism
Columbia, MO 65211
(314) 882-2042.

■ **Top journalists from the *News & Observer*, the *St. Petersburg Times*, the *Washington Post*, New York *Newsday*, *USA Today* and U.S. News & World Report and experts from the FEC, the Poynter Institute ar the National Librar on Money and Politics will demonstrate their computer-assisted reporting skills at October conferenc**

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