

THE LOWDOWN

Sheriff Charles S. Blackwood

My mother taught me that if I couldn't say anything nice, I shouldn't say anything at all. Bernard Meltzer, the former radio host of a long-running advice call-in show, went farther down this path when he said, "Before you speak, ask yourself if what you are going to say is true, is kind, is necessary, is helpful. If the answer is no, maybe what you are about to say should be left unsaid."

Since the tragic murders of Devin Clark and Lyric Woods, I am not sure if there is any place these pieces of advice are more needed than on social media platforms. Many people posted comments that would fail Meltzer's test.

The Sheriff's Office has a social media presence for many reasons, chief among them to connect with our community. We post our press releases, provide traffic alerts, educate people about current scam activity, showcase the success of our deputies, detention officers, and staff, and let the community know when we are hurting. We find that efforts spent building this community pay dividends when we need to communicate about emergencies like dangerous weather events or road closures, and seeking assistance to identify a suspect or to help locate a missing person.

However, social media is a double-edged sword; nowhere has this been more evident than with the recent case involving the murders of Devin and Lyric. We saw many mistruths about the case posted, particularly on Facebook. Some were minor, such as the repeated fallacy that trail cameras recorded relevant footage of the crime. They did not. Others were quite harmful and damaging, full of false allegations that family members of one of the victims committed the crimes. This myth persisted even after investigators sought a juvenile petition against a 17-year-old-suspect.

Many comments were unkind. People called some commenters names or criticized the grammar of others. Many people wrote as if they had knowledge or inside information to add to the conversation, but they were incorrect about facts of the case, matters of juvenile law, the number of people involved, when an AMBER Alert can be issued, and who owned the land where the bodies were located. These assertions certainly were not necessary.

Social media has a very important place in our collective discourse, but everyone should remember these platforms are not news sites. Reporters from sanctioned news

outlets generally follow journalistic standards, among which are that facts must be checked, sources must be verified, and opinions should be reasonably identifiable as such. In other words, journalists endeavor to be truthful, timely, and transparent with what they present to the public. A person commenting on social media has no such obligations and sometimes no such intent.

In my opinion, social media comments overall likely have intensified the grief of those who knew and loved Devin and Lyric. Here at my office, plowing through comments to search for relevant information or leads has been a time-consuming drain on resources. Although we are tough and can take it, reading unkind posts about our competence, motives, and ethics as we mine the comments for useful information is not a neutral endeavor. I, for one, have never found the old adage about sticks and stones to contain much wisdom. Words do have power, and they can hurt. That said, we are thankful for those who express faith in our abilities, gratitude for our efforts, and empathy for the unspeakable difficulty of the work we do, especially when investigating a case as tragic as this one.

As is well known, we are seeking to apprehend a 17-year-old suspect. Juvenile law prohibits us from saying more. This prohibition is not a recommendation or a suggestion. It is ironclad. We know people are confused, scared, angry, and hungry for information. Even so, we are unable to share additional information with the families of the victims, we cannot talk to mainstream media outlets about details, and we will not post specifics on social media platforms. Once apprehended, the suspect will maintain an absolute right to complete confidentiality while the case remains under the jurisdiction of the juvenile court. This protection will be hard for people to accept.

Although the public is anxious to learn more details, pressure from social media does not alter the law we are sworn to uphold. When we communicate with those we serve, we do our best to be professional and kind, working always to build trust. We will continue to do so.

###