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THE IRE JOURNAL

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Cover photo by
Wendy Gray,
The IRE Journal

THE IRE JOURNAL

VOLUME 29 | NUMBER 2

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The IRE Journal (ISSN0164-7016) is published six times a year by Investigative Reporters and Editors, Inc. 138 Neff Annex, Missouri School of Journalism, Columbia, MO 65211, 573-882-2042. E-mail: journal@ire.org. U.S. subscriptions are $70 for individuals, $85 for libraries and $125 for institutions/businesses. International subscriptions are $90 for individuals and $150 for all others. Periodical postage paid at Columbia, MO. Postmaster: Please send address changes to IRE. USPS #451-670

Cuts in resources don't deter members from doing good stories

BRANT HOUSTON

As we approach the Annual IRE Conference in June, it's a good time to assess where investigative journalism stands.

First, let's look at its general state. The mainstream regional dailies are enduring an unending round of cuts. This year is worse than ever because many editors and reporters have lost hope that resources will come back unless the "business model" changes. No one is absolutely sure what that "business model" is, and some news executives tell us their surveys are showing more and more journalists leaving the profession.

Local television stations appear to find it harder to do the kinds of pieces that really serve the public. The networks have lost some of their best people – including IRE members – to nonprofit endeavors, cable channels or other industries.

Local small newspapers seem to be holding their own, especially as they improve their Web services, and the threats to their financial well-being appear less. We have to hope, however, that they will take on a more aggressive watchdog role.

Yet, all is not bleak. Our members and other journalists still find ways to do important and meaningful stories. The 562 entries this year in the IRE Awards nearly equaled last year's 564 entries, which is about the average number of entries we have received in the past few years. The quality of the work – particularly on stories about injustice – has been maintained. In fact, many entries have more context and depth because of the effective and reasonable use of databases.

Further, the entries on Extra!Extra!, which you can access from our home page at www.ire.org, continue to increase from every size and kind of newsroom.

At the same time, local television stations in Houston, Nashville, Milwaukee, Dallas, Tampa, Cleveland, Denver, Orlando, Atlanta and other cities still press forward on investigative stories.

The nonprofit investigative ventures also continue their efforts. The Center for Investigative Reporting, the Center for Public Integrity, *Mother Jones*, Frontline and National Public Radio turn out excellent work each year.

At the largest papers, the commitment to watchdog journalism has not faltered. *The New York Times*, despite the criticism it has received for its missteps, is a constant source of breaking investigative pieces and longer projects. The *Times* has built a computer-assisted reporting team that includes four former IRE and NICAR staffers and other leading IRE members, and their work has been a critical part of many investigations.

On another front, Dan Gilllmor, a longtime member of IRE and a supporter of citizen journalism, is looking at ways that new movement can be part of the mainstream and alternative journalism watchdog work.

New ideas and acceptance of other approaches have actually brought investigative journalism to new heights. The use of databases and social science methods, which we honor in March with the new Philip Meyer Awards, and the blending of them into traditional reporting helps build credibility we may have lost through the public blunders of recent years.

In addition, the improved Web searching skills we have acquired allow us to find and verify more information and defeat some bureaucratic efforts to keep public information secret.

In fact, investigative journalism is showing signs of renewed life so long as we don't always look for its pulse in all the wrong places.

It will be a hard next year or two, but we can maintain our optimism and deal with the challenging transformations of our profession. We may find that investigative journalism is, and will be, in better shape than we think. And here at IRE, we will do all we can to make sure that we keep teaching the skills, approaches and standards that will put us at the forefront of the new world of journalism.

Brant Houston is executive director of IRE and the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting. He can be reached through e-mail at brant@ire.org or by calling 573-882-2042.

Data offers information on mine, workplace safety

Several journalists have used data to enhance coverage of recent mining accidents. A prime source of information comes from the Occupational Safety & Health Administration's workplace safety database, available from the IRE and NICAR Database Library. The database contains a variety of workplace inspection and accident information, including hazardous substance accidents as well as violations for federally inspected companies in the United States and its territories.

Current as of February 2005, the data includes more than three million records of OSHA inspections. To order the data, contact NICAR at 573-884-7711 or download an order form.

The Mine Safety and Health Administration also has data available:MSHA's Data Retrieval System permits interested parties to retrieve mine overviews, accident histories, violation histories, inspection histories, inspector dust samplings, operator dust samplings and employment/production data.

Be sure to visit Extra! Extra! (www.ire.org/extraextra) for the latest investigations about mine safety. Other investigative stories about mine disasters and workplace safety issues are available through the IRE Resource Center (www.ire.org/resourcecenter).

Examination of meth epidemic wins first Philip Meyer Award

Investigations into the methamphetamine epidemic, entrenched failures at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and the loss of Florida's wetlands were recently named winners of the first Philip Meyer Awards.

The awards recognize the best uses of social science methods in journalism and are administered by the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting (a joint program of Investigative Reporters and Editors and the Missouri School of Journalism), and the Knight Chair in Journalism at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University.

The winners are:

First Place: *The Oregonian* for "Unnecessary Epidemic," a series of articles showing how Congress and the Drug Enforcement Administration missed opportunities for stopping the growth of meth abuse by aggressively regulating the import of chemical ingredients. Lead reporter Steve Suo used statistical analysis of treatment admission, drug purity, price and arrest data.

Second Place: The Knight-Ridder Washington Bureau for "Discharged and Dishonored," a yearlong series that revealed how bureaucratic delays by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs harmed disabled veterans. Reporters Chris Adams and Alison Young analyzed survey data and the VA's database of 3.4 million claims to discover that more than 13,700 vets died while waiting for their claims to be resolved.

Third Place: The *St. Petersburg Times* for "Vanishing Wetlands," which found that 84,000 acres of Florida wetlands have been destroyed since 1990, when President George H.W. Bush declared a national policy of no net loss of wetlands. Reporters Matthew Waite and Craig Pittman calculated the loss using before-and-after satellite imagery and geographic information system software.

At presstime, the awards were due to be presented in March at the IRE and NICAR Computer-Assisted Reporting conference in Newark, N.J.

A panel of five contest judges picked the winners from more than two dozen entries. The awards are given in honor of Philip Meyer, the Knight Chair in Journalism at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and a pioneer in using social science methods in news reporting. For more information, see *www.ire.org/meyeraward/05winners.html*.

Jack Anderson hailed as muckraking leader

Jack Anderson, a muckraking syndicated columnist, was credited with revitalizing investigative journalism with his Pulitzer Prize-winning work on the Nixon Administration and its illegal activities during the 1970s.

Anderson died in December at his home. He was 83.

"In some ways he was a throwback to an earlier era of journalism," says Mark Feldstein of George Washington University. "But he also helped lay the groundwork for the resurgence of investigative journalism that came about during the 1970s."

Anderson was present at IRE's inaugural meeting in 1975. By then, he had completed most of the work that he will be most remembered for.

He began his reporting career at the age of 12, editing the Boy Scout page for the *Deseret News* in Salt Lake City. He was a foreign correspondent during World War II, but it was shortly after the war that he began working for Drew Pearson on the column that would become his life's work, *Washington Merry-Go-Round*.

Feldstein, who is writing a biography of Anderson, says that from the 1940s through the 1960s, Anderson and Pearson were investigative journalism's leaders.

"He (Anderson) held the muckraking banner aloft in an era when Washington journalism resembled stenography that deferred to those in power," Feldstein says.

Among other scoops, Anderson revealed the CIA plot to assassinate Fidel Castro and Howard Hughes' secret donations to the Nixon and Humphrey campaigns. He released the infamous Dita Beard memo that revealed ITT's payment of $400,000 to the Republican National Convention in return for an advantageous antitrust settlement. His 1972 Pulitzer Prize for National Reporting

CONTINUED ON PAGE 38 ➢

MEMBER NEWS

Erin Hoover Barnett and **Steve Suo** of *The Oregonian* won first place for Investigative Reporting (over 50,000 circulation) in the C.B. Blethen Memorial Awards for their five-part "Unnecessary Epidemic" series. ■ **Michael Casey** has been promoted to environmental writer with The Associated Press in Bangkok after serving 3 1/2 years as a general correspondent in Jakarta, Indonesia. ■ **Alfredo Corchado, David McLemore,** Tracey Easton and Laurence Iliff of *The Dallas Morning News* received one of four $1,000 finalist awards from the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists. Their series documented the violence related to drug trafficking along the U.S.-Mexico border. ■ **Ian Demsky** has left his position as a general assignment reporter at *The Tennessean* and is a staff writer at *Willamette Week* in Portland, Ore. ■ **Robert Dreyfuss**, a freelance investigative journalist who writes for *Rolling Stone*, *Mother Jones* and *The American Prospect*, has published his first book,"Devil's Game: How the United States Helped Unleash Fundamentalist Islam," (Henry Holt/Metropolitan Books, 2005). ■ **Katherine Eban**, a freelance writer in Brooklyn, was awarded a 2006 Alicia Patterson Fellowship. She will research and write about "The Interaction Between Public Health and Homeland Security Issues." ■ **James Greenhill,** staff writer for the National Guard Bureau, public affairs, has a new book, "Someone Has to Die Tonight," (Pinnacle True Crime). ■ IRE board member **James V. Grimaldi**, along with Susan Schmidt and R. Jeffrey Smith, all of *The Washington Post*, has won the 2005 Worth Bingham Prize for an investigation of the lobbying practices and influence of Jack Abramoff. The prize is awarded for investigative reporting into matters where the public interest is being neglected or deliberately ignored. ■ **Dave Gulliver** has left his computer-assisted reporting position at *The Virginian-Pilot* to become a reporter at the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*. ■ **Holly K. Hacker** and Joshua Benton of *The Dallas Morn-*

CONTINUED ON PAGE 38 ➢

Send Member News items to Pia Christensen at pia@ire.org and include a phone number for verification.

Mark your calendars for the 2006 IRE Conference in Dallas/Fort Worth

BY IRE JOURNAL STAFF

Dangerous investigations in Mexico and on the border, digging into politics and money, probing disasters before and after, and dealing with government threats to reporters will all be part of the 2006 IRE Conference in Dallas and Fort Worth, June 15-18.

The conference will honor the work of our IRE Award winners, but also the journalists in New Orleans and the region who have worked through incredible conditions to produce public service journalism of the highest order.

In addition, the conference will push forward the work of "IRE Español," our effort to better assist Latino journalists in the United States and in Latin America. One track of bilingual sessions will deal with investigative stories that are most important to those journalists and non-Latino reporters also covering those stories.

As always, the conference will include:

- A special judicial investigative track on Thursday
- A day of panels on computer-assisted reporting and hands-on training sessions throughout the conference
- A special broadcast track
- Panels and a luncheon for our increasing number of international members
- The first-day-on-the-beat sessions that are popular every year because they help journalists who want to do in-depth stories on a beat they are just starting
- Panels on better writing, editing, and presenting of investigative stories
- Panels on probing business, both local and multinational
- Sessions on doing better Internet searches
- A brown bag lunch with media lawyers to ask questions on legal issues in an informal setting

Elections upcoming; absentee ballots available

Seven seats on the 13-member IRE Board of Directors are up for election this year at the 2006 IRE Conference in Fort Worth, Texas, on June 17.

The board serves as the governing body of IRE and generally meets three times a year to discuss and vote on IRE business. One of the meetings is at the Annual IRE Conference in June. The board periodically has conference calls.

Directors serve on committees and task forces made up of board members and appointed non-board IRE members.

The seats are for two-year terms and incumbents may seek re-election to the board. A board position is unpaid; board members and their news organizations are expected to pay all, or a substantial amount, of travel expenses to board meetings. Candidates must be IRE members in the professional or academic category. However, only one academic member may be on the board at a time, according to IRE's Articles of Incorporation.

Board members are expected to help fundraise and contribute financial or other resources to the organization. In addition, they make sacrifices by not being able to enter the IRE Awards contest if they have a significant role in the contest entry.

Although members have until noon on Friday, June 16, to get on the "election-day ballot," candidates can be included on an absentee ballot that will be made available to members who are not able to attend the conference.

To get on both ballots, candidates must declare by April 3. Declaring consists of sending a candidacy statement with brief biographical information to elections@ire.org. Candidates' information will be posted on the IRE Web site.

Candidates who do not declare in time to be included on the absentee ballot can submit statements as late as Monday, June 5, for posting on the IRE Web site.

Candidates who wait until the conference to announce must deliver a one-page statement and personal biography to the IRE executive director by noon central time, Friday, June 16, in Fort Worth. These, along with the previous candidacy announcements, will be posted on a bulletin board in the main conference area.

At the Saturday afternoon membership meeting, candidates must be nominated and seconded from the floor by two other IRE members. There will be no nominating speeches, but candidates will have two minutes to address the members. The ballot at the membership meeting will include all candidates declared through the Friday deadline. Absentee ballots will be opened and counted along with the ballots cast at the meeting.

Immediately following the board elections, there will be a separate election for two IRE Awards contest judges. Those candidates will be nominated and seconded from the floor.

Board candidates wanting to appear on the absentee ballot and/or the IRE Web site, should submit a candidacy statement/bio limited to 500 words. An accompanying photo is encouraged. Send announcements via e-mail to elections@ire.org. Please include contact information.

Absentee ballots

Plan to cast your ballot in the 2006 IRE Board of Directors election.

The election will take place June 17 at the 2006 IRE Conference in Ft. Worth. Members unable to attend the conference will be allowed to participate via absentee balloting.

Absentee balloting is meant to supplement, not replace, IRE's traditional election process, which encourages membership meeting attendance as a sign of commitment to the group and to involve as many members as possible in important discussions.

Members attending the annual conference are still expected to cast their votes at the membership meeting. Only those not planning to attend the meeting – and requesting a ballot in advance – will be able to vote before the conference.

Requesting ballots

Ballots will be distributed during the June 17 membership meeting and will include the names of all candidates meeting the previous day's deadline for declaring.

Requests for absentee ballots will be accepted from April 11 to May 22 and include only the names of candidates who declare by the absentee ballot deadline. IRE members whose membership status will be current through June 30, 2006, may request absentee ballots by phone, e-mail or in person. Each ballot will be sent to the address of record for that member along with information on how to fill out the ballot properly. Please send requests to elections@ire.org. Completed absentee ballots must be received at the IRE offices by May 30.

Only international members requesting absentee ballots will be allowed to vote via e-mail.

Absentee ballots will not be available at the annual conference nor will they be accepted there.

We will have sessions on using freedom of information laws more effectively and fighting government secrecy. Specifically, we will look at doing investigations into science, health and the environment, and covering injustices such as wrongful prosecution and imprisonment.

Already some of the best print, broadcast, and online journalists internationally, nationally and regionally have agreed to speak and the list of those expected speakers will be posted on the IRE Web site in the coming weeks.

Special events will be offered, too. On Friday, June 16, we will have a tour and reception at the Sixth Floor Museum in Dallas, which features incredible information on the Kennedy assassination.

At our Saturday luncheon, we will present the IRE Awards and have a keynote speaker. On Saturday night, we will have a reception at the Museum of Modern Art in Fort Worth.

On Sunday morning, we are planning workshops on developing your career in a time of transformation in the profession, the basics of doing investigative beat reporting and how to teach investigative journalism to students and professionals.

It promises to be an action-packed conference that will improve your skills and revive your enthusiasm for investigative journalism.

IMPORTANT DATES

April 3 – candidate declaration deadline to make it onto absentee ballots

April 10 – candidates' statements will start being posted at www.ire.org

April 11 – members can start requesting absentee ballots

May 22 – deadline for requesting absentee ballots

May 30 – deadline for absentee ballots to reach IRE offices

June 5 – deadline to declare candidacy and still be posted on Web site

June 16 – deadline to get on election-day ballot

2006 IRE Conference Dallas/Fort Worth

Host:
• *The Dallas Morning News*

Primary Sponsor:
• *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*

Sponsors:
• Chicago Tribune Foundation
• The Poynter Institute for Media Studies, Inc.
• National Press Foundation

Conference Hotel: Renaissance Worthington Hotel, 200 Main Street, Fort Worth, Texas 76102

Hotel Reservations: To get the discounted rate of $146 plus tax, make your hotel reservation by May 15. There are two ways to make a reservation:

- **Online:** Visit www.ire.org/training/dallasfortworth06 and click on the hotel reservation link. Make sure you enter the group code: INVINVA
- **Telephone:** Call 800-468-3571 or 817-870-1000 and ask for the Investigative Reporters and Editors room block.

Be sure to check the conference Web site at www.ire.org/training/dallasfortworth06 to see the latest news on the 2006 IRE Conference.

Newark CAR Conference promises education and inspiration

By IRE Journal Staff

The 2006 Computer-Assisted Reporting Conference in Newark, N.J., is just around the corner – March 9-12 – and will offer more than 50 sessions and two-and-a-half days of intense hands-on training.

While neither Bruce Springsteen nor the Sopranos will be in attendance (our host *The Star-Ledger* is, however, the paper of record for the Sopranos), this conference will spin out plenty of hot tracks on CAR methods and stories, a variety of hands-on classes from beginners to advanced, and special presentations of the latest techniques. (See www.ire.org/training/newark06)

As in recent years, this year's program gets the CAR engines ignited on Thursday, focusing on the needs of the advanced CAR practitioner. Sessions will range from better intranets to Web scraping to the latest in mapping data and social network analysis. The day's speakers are top-of-the-chart professionals who are generous in sharing their knowledge.

The main conference will be packed with panels on criminal justice, money and politics, bulletproofing stories, social research methods and many other topics. The panelists will show how computer-assisted reporting helps on every beat and on a daily and weekly basis. We will have sessions that deal with every medium.

A highlight will be the presentation of the first Philip Meyer Awards for excellent work in using social science methods in journalism. Meyer, a pioneer in the field, will join us at the ceremony and reception.

Our hands-on classes will include using the Internet effectively, working with spreadsheets and database managers, mapping, programming, statistics and social network analysis.

In addition, there will be a special mini-boot camp: a series of panel sessions each morning, then classes throughout the afternoon. Designed for CAR beginners, the classes are similar to sessions conducted during lengthier boot camps at the IRE and NICAR headquarters. The classes begin with basic spreadsheet calculations and work through using CAR techniques for investigative projects or deadline stories.

It's strongly recommended that conference registrants sign up for classes before the conference begins, available through IRE's online registration process. You can start at www.ire.org/training/newark06 and follow the link for registration. Attendees also can register for classes on site by visiting staff members in the Demo Room area.

The Demo Room, too, will be a hub of activity and will feature special sessions on uses of new software and techniques for news stories. The sessions have an informal approach and often turn into freewheeling discussions among participants. You also can road test IRE and NICAR services and data from our ever-growing government database collection and staffers will be on hand to answer questions and make suggestions about how to better use CAR.

This conference also will help all attendees at every level to become better journalists and leaders in the use of new technology and reporting methods in their newsrooms. Be sure to take advantage of this great network of colleagues, whether in the panel rooms, the demo room or in the informal meetings in the hallways, coffee shop or bars.

Mike Munden | Columbus Dispatch

Don Jacks uses a pry bar to try to open the front door of a foreclosed home. He wasn't successful and had to wait for a drill to be used. Watching is Franklin County deputy William Eddy. They were there to set out all the personal property on the front yard.

MORTGAGE MANIA

Aggressive lending has long-term impact as neighborhoods suffer from foreclosures

BY GEOFF DUTTON AND JILL RIEPENHOFF
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

With one of the worst economies and job markets in the nation, it is no surprise that more people here fall behind on mortgage payments and lose their homes. But the foreclosure rate in Ohio is *three times* the national average, making this state the nation's leader in home foreclosures.

The foreclosure spike began in 1997, years before the state's economic nose dive. No part of the state was spared, not even white-collar Columbus, home to state government and the nation's largest university. The foreclosure problem cut across every type of mortgage, from riskier loans for low-income buyers with spotty credit to conventional loans for upper-middle-class suburbanites.

We wondered: How could that be? Then we found a common thread: predatory lending.

We discovered people were being lured into taking out loans they could not afford by aggressive mortgage brokers, appraisers and others who profited regardless of whether the buyers ultimately succeed or fail. It was a ticking time bomb.

Suburban blight

The four-day series, "Brokered Dreams," came into focus after mapping sheriff's sales data with ArcView.

Foreclosures in Ohio typically end with the property being sold at weekly auctions at the county courthouse. Reporter Jill Riepenhoff obtained five years of sales data from the sheriff's department, and Projects Editor Doug Haddix mapped them.

Seeing the dots – nearly 12,000 of them – scattered across the county was jaw dropping. It did not seem possible in prosperous and stable Columbus, Ohio.

Foreclosures were predictably concentrated in poor, inner-city neighborhoods. But, surprisingly, clusters of dots circled the outskirts of the city, in the newest subdivisions of suburbia.

It soon became obvious suburban foreclosures were disproportionately in neighborhoods built by Dominion Homes, a publicly traded company based here that serves as the mortgage broker for its customers.

Riepenhoff hand-searched hundreds of county auditor and recorder records, tracing sales and deed transfers to identify the homebuilder for newer houses that had gone to sheriff's sale.

Dominion was No. 1, accounting for nearly a third of all houses built since 1998, more than larger competitors.

A federal database called Neighborhood Watch that tracks default rates among lenders who make Federal Housing Administration loans proved to be a smoking gun. The database (www.hud.gov/offices/hsg/sfh/lender/nw_home.cfm) showed Dominion led the state in the number of homeowners who defaulted on FHA mortgages within two years of closing on the loans.

It also allowed us to discover that Dominion had the worst default rate in the nation among its peers – builders with their own financing divisions.

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development audits, which took six months to obtain through a Freedom of Information Act request, documented Dominion's questionable lending practices.

The company gave loans to buyers with shaky credit, income and savings. Dominion shielded from customers its ownership in a title agency that closed their loans.

The Dispatch also found that Dominion's "free" down payments also contributed to foreclosures among its customers.

Dominion rolled the cost of the freebie into the price of the house. The company funneled the down payments through a national charity that did nothing but collect a processing fee and issue the down payment "gift."

In a sidebar, we profiled the California-based charity, Nehemiah Corp. of America, and its partnership with Dominion.

Because these were FHA loans, an insurance fund bailed out lenders when the mortgages went bad. Dominion faced no financial consequences when foreclosures hit.

The story "Suburban Blight" focused on one neighborhood, where one of every six houses was either in foreclosure, bankruptcy or both.

Residents of the Galloway Ridge subdivision who were able to pay their bills found themselves surrounded by vacant houses with weed-infested yards. They were stuck in a neighborhood where their brand-new houses were worth less than they paid for them, while Dominion was still building houses in the 804-lot development.

Flipping frenzy

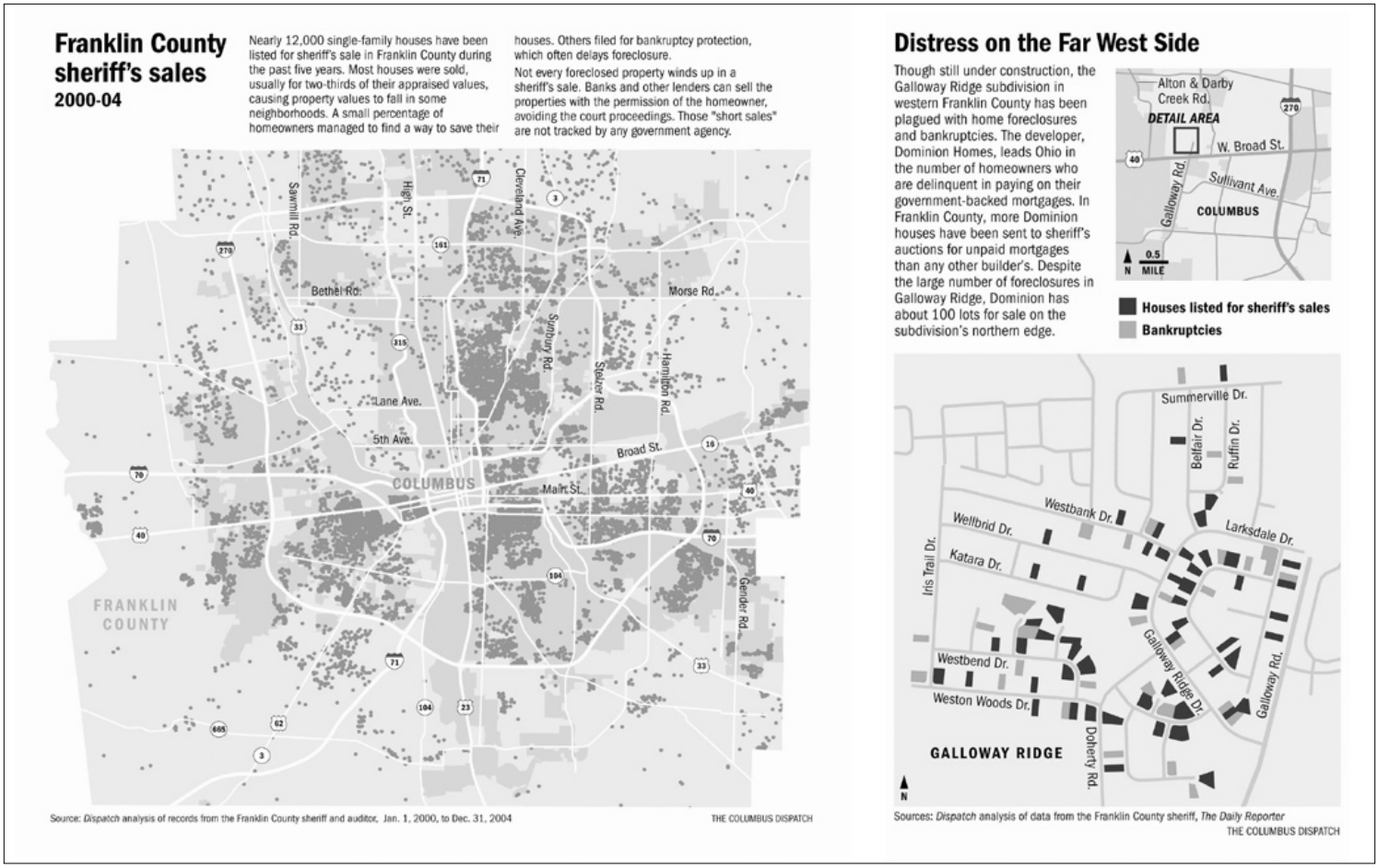
Real-estate speculation and predatory lending have ravaged poor neighborhoods for years. But we had never seen or heard of anything quite like the deals involving Stillwater Capital Partners, the focus of one day of the series.

Last year, Stillwater began showing up in county records as the lender holding the mortgages on some of the city's worst vacant houses. By crunching county sales data from the auditor's office and deed transfer data from the recorder's office, reporter Geoff Dutton ultimately identified nearly 400 vacant houses in Columbus financed by Stillwater.

Further digging uncovered more than 100 others around the state, mostly in Akron.

Stillwater's 90-day rehab loans were designed to help investors buy, fix up and quickly resell houses. But many of the purchases appeared to be flips to begin with – property that had been quickly resold at large markups after few if any improvements.

With some of the Stillwater loans now more than



a year past due, the houses appeared untouched, boarded up and overgrown with weeds.

We learned Stillwater was a New York City firm catering to wealthy investors. The Ohio loans provided the basis of a Stillwater hedge fund, a loosely regulated investment pool requiring at least $500,000 to participate.

The fund wrote more than $30 million in rehab loans in Ohio in less than two years. Fees and interest from the loans helped to generate a 14.56 percent return in the first 14 months for the hedge fund, according to Stillwater's reports to investors.

Stillwater's Web site advised investors that much of the income from its funds could be tax-deferred through the firm's use of offshore accounts in the Cayman Islands.

Stillwater officials refused to comment. Following our initial inquiries, the company also shut off its Web site to anyone without a password.

Stillwater was a striking example of how flipping had grown in scope and sophistication, beyond even what our sources had realized. It left neighborhoods littered with vacant and rundown houses.

Mortgage-lending experts who met this year in Washington, D.C., singled out Ohio as a trouble spot, with foreclosures and flipping feeding a cycle of urban blight.

While not necessarily illegal, flipping can involve defrauding lenders with inflated appraisals and phony

Mike Munden | Columbus Dispatch

Ernie Howell,left, and Jeff Workman carry a sofa out of a foreclosed house. They work for a company from Springfield,Ohio, that specializes in mortgage foreclosure set-outs. As soon as the crew and the deputy leave, local residents can have what they want.

buyers. Columbus ranked seventh nationally in a Mortgage Bankers of America fraud study.

For subprime loans — high-cost, nontraditional loans such as Stillwater's — Columbus ranked third for fraud.

The legacy of flipping, legal and otherwise, can be seen throughout Columbus. A city "blight abatement" crew boarded up 656 abandoned houses last year to keep away drug addicts and squatters, and it spent more than $400,000 to mow overgrown lawns.

The epidemic of vacant houses is not merely an accident of a troubled economy. The story about Stillwater showed how wealthy investors and local dealmakers were perpetuating and profiting from the misery.

Asleep at the switch

The articles about Dominion Homes and Stillwater evolved separately.

Eventually, it became clear they shared fundamental connections.

Both fueled Ohio's foreclosure explosion. Both involved brokers and middlemen who had big financial incentives to close questionable loans and had little accountability.

Ohio's lack of oversight also allowed both to flourish in a way they probably could not have otherwise.

This became another key part of the series. Ohio's laws were notably weak in some areas, and enforcement lacking.

Mortgage brokers were paying less in fines even as state officials documented more wrongdoing. Millions in broker licensing fees, meant for state enforcement, had been spent instead on keeping the state budget afloat.

Borrowers in Ohio are especially vulnerable because the state hides from consumers key information about brokers, does not require appraisers to be licensed and does not cover mortgage lending under a law prohibiting deceptive sales practices.

Further, Ohio is one of only two states to exempt mortgage lending from its consumer-protection law. And, while the state runs criminal background checks of mortgage brokers, we learned convicted felons can – and do – get licenses. State investigators had a huge and growing backlog of complaints against appraisers.

State legislators several years ago resisted calls to impose stronger regulations, wanting to give existing laws time to work. But our reporting suggested they were not working, and in the time since lawmakers last debated the issue, Ohio claimed the nation's highest foreclosure rate.

New angles

Since every other large newspaper in the state had covered predatory mortgage lending, we knew our approach had to be different. With Ohio's new No. 1 ranking for foreclosures, we had a fresh hook.

Most important, we did not focus on people who lost their houses to foreclosure. Instead, we featured their neighbors and others left behind to suffer the consequences, people who could not simply be dismissed as foolish or irresponsible borrowers.

Also, foreclosure problems had been viewed primarily as an urban issue, but we mapped statewide data and found foreclosures were actually rising fastest in suburban and rural areas. So, in a state where the legislature is controlled by suburban and rural legislators, this was a significant shift.

On the second day of the series, Republican and Democrat state legislators said they were introducing separate bills to include mortgage lending in the state's consumer-protection law that bans deceptive sales practices.

HUD conducted an unscheduled audit of Dominion. The results have not been disclosed, but the company announced plans to help homebuyers who fall behind on their mortgages.

Gov. Bob Taft, in what he called a first step, promised to add 14 staff members to the Commerce Department to investigate complaints against mortgage brokers.

Geoff Dutton and Jill Riepenhoff are The Dispatch's projects reporters. Dutton has been with the newspaper since 2002, Riepenhoff since 1985.

PREDATORY LOANS

Mortgage fraud concentrated in poorest areas, gangs net millions from the white-collar crime

BY DAVID JACKSON
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

This project started with a tip about a mentally disabled man who lost his home to mortgage swindlers.

David Shank flushed with shame as he told me: "I think I was taken for a ride, I really do." The 46-year-old lost the home he owned free and clear after a fraud-laced $94,000 mortgage was arranged by a real estate executive who had served prison stints for the violent rape of a child and for truck hijacking.

Over a six-month investigation, I documented hundreds of similar cases and learned how mortgage fraud is raking cities like Chicago, robbing vulnerable people of their homes and draining billions of dollars from the U.S. economy.

Drug-dealing gangs, including Chicago's Black Disciples, have adopted the white-collar crime, using mortgage fraud to solidify their control over street corners, launder money and gain safe houses, the records and interviews showed.

Giant lending companies were enmeshed in massive fraud schemes through the negligence or collusion of their own executives. Associates First Capital Corp. – once the largest sub-prime mortgage lender in the United States – poured about $9.6 million into 81 fraudulent Chicago home loans in less than a year, our investigation found. As that scheme was unfolding, Associates merged with Citigroup to become part of its market-leading CitiFinancial division.

The reaction to our five-part series was swift. Citing the *Tribune's* report, U.S. Sen. Barack Obama called on the Senate Banking Committee to hold hearings on "the growing predatory practice of mortgage fraud." Cook County prosecutor Richard Devine announced a package of legislative reforms. State Sen. Jacqueline Collins launched a series of hearings on Illinois' regulations that resulted in an array of initiatives. More than 100 people contacted the *Tribune* with pleas for help and with credible tips about instances of suspected mortgage fraud. Police brought in cases they said their superiors ignored. Homeowners mailed creased eviction notices. Loan executives detailed corruption by their colleagues.

I hope it will be helpful to show how we came to understand the scope and impact of mortgage fraud, and how we tracked predators skilled at concealing their identities.

More widespread

When trying to understand the nature of any crime – from domestic battery to police brutality, serial murder or complex investment scams – a good first step is to compile an inventory of all cases processed through the courts during a two- to 10-year period, then read each case file.

In most jurisdictions, including Illinois, mortgage fraud is not identified as a crime per se – the cases are typically charged under forgery, theft or mail fraud statutes. I made formal and informal requests to federal, state and county authorities, asking them to identify any Chicago-area mortgage fraud prosecutions since 2000. Eventually, these official and unofficial sources led me to federal and Cook County cases involving 107 defendants. Poring through those files, I got an invaluable primer on the crime – how it was done, who did it and who got hurt. While the *Tribune's* Real Estate section had published several excellent stories alerting readers to the emerging menace, mortgage fraud was far more widespread than we had assumed.

From the case files, patterns quickly emerged. The vast majority of victims seemed to be poor and black. To verify that impression, I culled from court files the addresses of the 524 Cook County homes used in the indicted schemes, and entered these addresses and other case information into a spreadsheet. *Tribune* reporter John McCormick – who blends computer skills with investigative experience – used mapping software to pinpoint those addresses, then applied government and real estate industry databases to analyze their social geography.

McCormick culled U.S. Census Bureau data on the surrounding census tracts. He integrated those census records with Home Mortgage Disclosure Act data from more than 200,000 Chicago mortgage applications for owner-occupied, single-family home purchases from 2000 through 2003, then the latest year available. (The Federal Financial Institutions Examination Council makes that HMDA data public, but we purchased our files from NICAR.) Adding a third layer, we bought a commercial database listing address-specific information on the 25,916 Cook County foreclosures initiated during the three-year period from 2002 thru 2004.

We sorted Chicago's 865 census tracts into three categories: the 664 tracts untouched by mortgage fraud; the 201 with at least one fraud case; and the 41 high-intensity tracts that had at least 10 frauds per 1,000 owner-occupied housing units and at least two frauds. From the interlocking layers of computer records, a stark picture emerged. Compared to the city as a whole, the census tracts where swindles occurred had higher poverty rates, a lower percent-

Fraud exposed

Across the country, mortgage fraud cases soared during the past five years as home loans became easier than ever to get and identity theft blossomed as a criminal enterprise. The swindling crews use high-tech forgeries and face-to-face cons to take control of property, then secure hefty mortgages they do not intend to repay. The crime strikes poor and minority areas hardest, undermining efforts to revive neighborhoods. But the economic impact ripples out, as lending companies pass on their losses to other customers and local authorities contend with the public safety costs of boarding and patrolling abandoned buildings.

Our series got a jolt of energy by offering intimate portraits of alleged swindlers, including several who had not been charged with crimes linked to mortgage fraud. Among them was the financial consultant who orchestrated Shank's fraudulent mortgage: Ex-convict Edwin G. Evans trolled for deals in a pinstriped suit and Lexus LX 470 SUV.

age of homeowners versus renters, more foreclosed homes and higher mortgage rejection rates. In the tracts hit hardest by fraud, 39 percent of the residents lived in poverty – nearly twice the citywide rate – and 96 percent were African-American. Simply put, mortgage swindlers target homeowners who have a tenuous hold on their properties.

That statistical portrait of the crime's impact gave impetus to our effort to profile the perpetrators.

Finding perpetrators

One of journalism's highest arts is profiling people who do not want their names in print – especially con artists who use aliases and unregistered shell companies. Space permits only a few observations:

1. When combing LexisNexis, Factiva, Google or other software systems that allow you to search vast databases, master the basic rules of Boolean search strings. Let's say for example that I am tracking Mr. John Public, who once maintained an office at 1234 Main Street in Yourtown. He might have used many aliases and operated under several corporate names.

I'll use LexisNexis in this example, although I know that expensive service is not widely available. My first query to Nexis' people-tracking database will read: "(john w/2 public) and (1234 w/2 main) and yourtown." Translated, that means: Show me any records in which the word "john" appears within two words of "public," and the sequence "1234" appears within two words of "main," and the word "yourtown" also shows up.

This query will likely yield Mr. Public's other associated addresses and names, which I can churn in subsequent searches. I'll use a similar search string to query Nexis court, corporate and land records, liens and news clips. Obviously, modifiers such as "w/2" and "()" will differ from system to system, so spend time reading the help tips and mastering any "advanced" search techniques.

2. At the beginning of any effort to profile a reluctant or elusive subject, try this: Spend 90 minutes reading through the blue-lined government pages of your local phone book, asking as you encounter each local, county, state and federal agency: Would my subject have any contact with this office? Would he or she pay a water bill? Hold a dog license? Apply for a business-tax-abatement? And so on. This simple drill forces the reporter to take a fresh look at records sources.

3. A basic checklist applies to all property-oriented stories. Look at land records filed with your county recorder or register of deeds; property tax records, which are typically maintained by the county treasurer; assessments of the land's value filed by a county assessor or local tax authorities; building and construction permits, as well as local inspections for housing or fire code violations; efforts by property owners to contest or reduce their property taxes (depending on the jurisdiction, these may be filed in circuit court or with a local taxing authority); and, of course, run the addresses and names you have through the plaintiff-defendant index of every court – bankruptcy, federal, landlord-tenant, civil, criminal, even domestic relations.

4. Finally, use each cache of records not as an end in itself, but as a blueprint for further interviews. Contact every person whose name appears on the paper you gather – you never know who will open up. An identity thief who took part in the scam explained the fraudulent Shank mortgage to me. "If you are still making money selling drugs, you are an informant or about to be busted," Christopher Scott told me. "Mortgage fraud is the thing to do now."

"The New Street Hustle" project can be seen at www.chicagotribune.com/mortgage. David Jackson has worked at the Chicago Tribune since 1991, except for a yearlong stint at The Washington Post in 1998. He shared the 1999 Pulitzer Prize for public service with two other Post reporters and a computer analyst, and was twice a Pulitzer finalist at the Tribune.

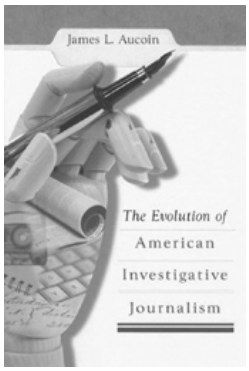
Modern investigative reporting influential in bettering society

BY STEVE WEINBERG
THE IRE JOURNAL

At a time of great pessimism about the state of investigative journalism, James Aucoin is refreshingly optimistic – and one of the reasons he sees a bright future is because of IRE.

Aucoin, who teaches journalism at the University of South Alabama in Mobile, used to hang out around IRE while a Ph.D. candidate at the Missouri School of Journalism and is well-versed in IRE's history. In his book, "The Evolution of American Journalism," he writes in the introduction:

"Leading the practice of investigative journalism into new territory while retaining the practice's traditional standards and values is typical of the work IRE has undertaken from its first days in a small, crowded office in Indianapolis nearly 30 years ago. The organization has heeded the experience of the muckrakers in the early 20th century, who saw their influence wane as shoddy workmanship among some of their brethren weakened the entire practice. In the early years of the 21st century, IRE continues to coax the practice to higher ground. By endorsing a vision of investigative journalism as a practice capable of blazing a perceptive path out of the muck of modern life, IRE is repositioning modern investigative reporting as an influential participant in making a better society."



The Evolution of American Investigative Journalism
By James L. Aucoin
University of Missouri Press, 242 pages, $37.50

At the end of the book, he observes: "Throughout its existence, IRE has worked to create the social practice of investigative journalism. It has contributed to a self-consciousness among investigative reporters and editors that allows a conceptualization of the practice that is separate from the news organizations. Consequently, instead of looking to the institutions for leadership in the skills and ethics of investigative journalism, reporters and editors look to IRE for the guidance, and through this communion of practitioners, investigative journalism is extended and refined, and therein, the practice continues to define the qualities of great journalism."

Other highlights of the book include:

Chapter One: The Tradition of Exposure in American Journalism

Aucoin travels back to 1690, when Benjamin Harris published his Boston newspaper *Publick Occurrences Both Forreign and Domestick*. Then he moves efficiently through the 18th and 19th centuries until 1900, when S.S. McClure started planning his eponymous magazine that would feature the muckraking of Ida Tarbell, Lincoln Steffens, Ray Stannard Baker and others. But muckraking pretty much died out by World War I, to be revived occasionally by Paul Y. Anderson at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*; syndicated columnist Drew Pearson; Carey McWilliams at *The Nation* magazine; Clark Mollenhoff at *The Des Moines Register*; Jack Nelson at the Atlanta *Constitution*; George Seldes and I.F. Stone as newsletter publishers and a few others.

Chapter Two: The Reemergence of Investigative Journalism, 1960-1975

Voila! The modern era of sustained investigative journalism has arrived, courtesy of controversies spawned by the civil rights movement, government lies tied to Cold War paranoia, the Vietnam War, Watergate, and shameful corporate behavior.

Chapter Three: Defining the Practice, 1960-1975

Is all journalism investigative journalism, thereby making the adjective unnecessary? Should all journalism be investigative journalism? Aucoin delves into the debate about what made investigative journalism distinct within a newsroom, a debate yielding numerous answers from investigative reporting practitioners and academics charting their course. The central dilemma of the messy but productive debate: Should investigative journalists focus on corruption within government and the private sector case by case? Or should they ferret out, explore, explain and expose systemic shortcomings? No rules emerged, but the debate forced everybody to think through where they had been and where they were going. Bob Greene at *Newsday* spoke loudly for the corruption approach, then practiced with great skill what he preached. Donald Barlett and James Steele at *The Philadelphia Inquirer* became the poster boys for the systemic approach.

Chapter Four: The Founding of IRE

Longtime readers of *The IRE Journal* will find this history familiar. For those not paying attention during the mid-1970s, or not even born, the chapter is a useful short course.

Chapter Five: The Arizona Project – IRE's Unique Contribution to American Journalism

The Arizona Project, following the murder of *Arizona Republic* reporter Don Bolles, meant lots of publicity for IRE during 1976 and 1977 – not all of it favorable. In retrospect, the Arizona Project seems like the proper response to Bolles' murder. Aucoin's account is fast-paced and clear.

Chapter Six: IRE and the Mainstreaming of Investigative Journalism

Aucoin mixes the mainstreaming of IRE in its new home at the University of Missouri with examples of investigative reporting carried out by IRE members across the nation.

Chapter Seven: A Social Practice

The final chapter is heavy on the moral philosophy developed by philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, who is well known within his discipline for describing the ways a social practice develops, then persists over the decades. Some of the paragraphs are heavy going for those unused to books that derive from Ph.D. dissertations. Still, the abstract paragraphs are surprisingly approachable.

Finally, on another subject, I'd like to add to my investigative books of 2005 list that ran in the last issue: "Trump Nation" (Warner) by Timothy L. O'Brien and "Poisoned Love" (Pinnacle) by Caitlin Rother.

Steve Weinberg is senior contributing editor to The IRE Journal and a former executive director of IRE.

LOOSE LIPS

Interviewing techniques prompt sources to talk on the record in police scandal

By Eric Nalder
Seattle Post-Intelligencer

One of the linchpins of investigative reporting is getting interviews from key sources – but accomplishing that can be difficult when the sources are hostile and/or involved in illegal activities.

Still, it can be done, and it can be done on the record. The key is using some interviewing techniques that involve a lot of preparation and homework, some friendly but tough persuasion and, above all, dogged persistence.

That's how we got the story of the backroom deal that set King County Sheriff's Detective George Daniel Ring free after charges of police corruption. Initially, important insiders refused to talk. But in the end, we had on-the-record accounts from an ex-hooker, two prostitution madams, a drug seller, police investigators, an FBI agent and deputy prosecutors.

We even got Ring to talk to us, and he was no ordinary source. He had served two decades as a cop in intelligence and vice. He had a top-secret federal clearance and access to the region's most sensitive undercover case information. He also provided protection for the King County executive and led a regional police intelligence organization.

Last year, Ring was indicted for theft, official misconduct, stalking and promoting prostitution after a three-year sheriff's investigation that at one time included the FBI and the Seattle police. But those charges were dismissed just days before the trial, and the lawman was handed a handsome retirement package instead. Spokesmen for the sheriff and prosecutor declared it a good deal for everyone. Why? Because it guaranteed a bad cop would retire rather than fight a case he might win.

Weeks later an anonymous caller told me investigators and deputy prosecutors working the case were incensed, but no one was likely to talk on the record because "the word inside the sheriff's department is nothing embarrassing is to come out."

After dozens of interviews, in August we published a 14,800-word, three-day series called "Conduct Unbecoming: How a disgraced sheriff's deputy beat the system" (http://seattlepi.nwsource.com/conductunbecoming). My co-author was Lewis Kamb, the editor was David McCumber and Paul Shukovsky assisted us. Mike Barber helped, too, and Phuong Cat Le is co-authoring follow-up stories.

We found Ring's troubling behavior was far more extensive than the charges implied and pointed to deeper problems in the sheriff's office. Frontline investigators and a prosecutor told us on the record that the case should not have been killed.

Public reaction was enormous, especially given the details of Ring's settlement: a $10,000 payment, nearly $200,000 in attorneys' fees, an enhanced retirement and a permanent expunging of the state charges against him.

In the aftermath, the FBI has opened a new investigation and an embarrassed sheriff's department has turned over a laptop computer to the feds that might contain encrypted evidence.

Tough customers

Some initial information came from Ring, though he tried to steer us. We also obtained documents. But the heart of this story came from well-prepared interviews, for which we used techniques outlined in my IRE tipsheet called "Loosening Lips: The Art of the Interview" (see sidebar).

We deeply researched everyone *before* the interviews. We allowed background statements, but notified subjects they would be re-interviewed later for on-the-record statements. We visited people at home and patiently re-contacted those who initially declined. We discouraged official muzzling by promising matter-of-factly to describe muzzling in the story. We repeatedly asked: "How do you know that?" We worked to penetrate people's memories.

Ultimately, we got an in-depth story from a broad range of witnesses and records. We were able to quote an FBI supervisor who said his agency was kicked off the case two years after being invited by the sheriff to assist. We had two sheriff's department investigators, a Seattle Police sergeant and the lead deputy prosecutor who was preparing for trial – all criticizing the decision to drop charges.

We also had on-the-record quotes from two escort-service madams who had questionable dealings with Ring and his ex-wife, who had been a stripper. We had a sheriff's deputy who, for fun, videotaped Ring having sex with a prostitute.

Ring was willing to talk even more after an earlier visit to his front porch, but he had talking points – even handing us a list. In such cases, I interview people sequentially. The porch visit was an introduction. At the second interview we listened to Ring's entire story with on open mind. At the third interview, we patiently de-constructed the parts of his story that didn't jibe and brought up other issues, following a rehearsed sequence (and still keeping an open mind). Ring twisted a plastic bottle into a spike and vibrated his foot like a jackhammer during the process. But he didn't bolt.

As for Seattle's two biggest madams – Rhonda Wallace and Lisa Gorrin – no one gave us any hope they would talk since they are more averse to reporters than to cops.

Kamb appeared unannounced and well-prepared at Wallace's house one afternoon where he was lucky she answered the door. He flashed a smile, and eased his way into her living room with casual chatter about the case that piqued her curiosity. She refused to be photographed, but, drawn in, she talked on the record anyway, perhaps relieved that we would not take her picture. Later, she asked that her comments be taken back off the record, but we don't make such deals.

Gorrin was a tougher customer. She's an intensely private woman in her late 40s, with frayed nerves, living barricaded in a house guarded by a locked gate. She greeted my knock with silence and my cell phone call with the shopworn phrase, "f--- y--." Her lawyer called later and underlined the point.

Weeks later – after she heard from a bunch of folks about our persistent questions – she returned my most recent call.

"I don't want to be in the paper," she said.

"But you will be," I told her, explaining that her name appeared in various records.

Then I proceeded to tell her *her* story. She corrected a couple of things, and filled in the blanks. She felt better that I understood the case. Slowly, she agreed to tell her story on the record.

Equally tricky was the woman who allegedly

sold drugs to Ring. Never assume people won't talk. Personal trainer Lynn Higman wasn't home when I visited but I chatted with her roommate. I wasn't half a mile away when Higman called my cell phone. A key was my demeanor – I conveyed that I expected her to cooperate. She immediately began relating her experiences with the FBI and Seattle police investigators. She was incensed Ring had not stood trial, but didn't want her name in the paper.

Once we got together, she felt better after I carefully repeated everything she had told me. I spoke as though it was a *fait accompli* that she would talk on the record, and I was pre-armed to assess her truthfulness because of my research.

No muzzling allowed

Some sheriff's supervisors in this case sowed fear among investigators and prosecutors to keep them from speaking with me – but I saw that as an advantage.

Sheriff Sue Rahr has a reputation for vindictiveness and when I questioned her about it one day, her spokesman proclaimed that anyone in the sheriff's department is free to talk with reporters. I held him to that, and after having him personally assure investigators they could speak to me on the record, they did.

King County Prosecutor Norm Maleng issued a straightforward gag order, saying only his spokesman and his chief criminal deputy Mark Larson would handle inquiries about the case. I informed Maleng's spokesman that we were prepared to use the term "muzzled" in our story. My interview with the lead deputy prosecutor was immediately arranged.

For the FBI, I needed a guide, which was why justice department beat reporter Paul Shukovsky accompanied me on every interview. He has great rapport, and credibility, for which I was grateful.

Eric Nalder, a reporter on the investigative team at the Seattle Post-Intelligencer, has received two Pulitzer Prizes and two IRE Awards, including the 1994 book award for "Tankers Full of Trouble." He has worked for the San Jose Mercury News and The Seattle Times.

To get the best interview, remember to:

- **Do your research**. Whether you have five minutes or five days, research the person and the topic. Run the name on the Internet or check the clips. Talk to the person's cohorts. Read court records. A well-researched question is a better question. A well-researched interviewer is empowered.
- **Plan ahead.** Make a tactical plan. Discuss it with colleagues. Who should you interview first? Where will you interview the person? How much time will you have? Will you tape or not? The best place is usually where the person is doing the thing you are writing about. However, whistle-blowers and reluctant targets are best contacted at home. You might calm a nervous source by taking him or her for a walk. A lunch appointment requires a person to spend at least an hour with you. A phone interview is the least desirable, but also the most common.
- **Get organized.** Write single-word clues on the flap of your notebook to remind you of issues you want to cover. Organize paperwork so you won't fumble as you talk. Prepare a comprehensive all-purpose question for cases in which the door might slam in your face. Prepare the photographer and the fellow interviewer so you will work together.
- **Focus.** Imagine a successful interview. Warm up like an athlete. Be skeptical but never cynical. Believe and you will receive.

When dealing with reluctant people:

- **Just go for it**. Having worked yourself into a friendly, courteous and aggressive frenzy, approach your subject as though you belong there. Straightforward introductions are best. Be open and unafraid. Never lie.
- **Don't stop.** When the door is closing in your face, find common ground. "By the way, I notice you've got a poodle. I've got a poodle. Weird dogs. Just the other day ..." The idea is to get a person talking about anything and eventually they will talk about what you came for.
- **Draw them in.** As a person begins hanging up the phone, quickly offer to explain what you are working on, what you know about or what you have been told. Prepare for this ahead of time.
- **Get them talking**. Bring a list of other people to the interview. A payroll. A phone book. Your own list. Go down the list with the interview subject. People are more comfortable talking about others. In doing so, they will reveal more about themselves and their organization, and point you in other directions.
- **Tell them it's no big deal**. Respond to "I can't comment" by explaining that you need their help, that talking with you is no big deal, that you are talking with others and that you are here to learn (only, of course, if all this is true). Say all this with a soft, but relentless momentum. Massage objections into possibilities. Propose alternatives. Do not argue. Steer. Keep the conversation rolling. Respond to the "I'm afraid to comment" with a little sympathy and a lot of reassurance (if those reassurances are honest). Listen to concerns and understand them. Propose easier "assignments" such as: "Just describe your job" or "Tell me about your town." You'll get to the harder stuff later.
- **Admit it looks bad in print**. If public officials or other big shots tell you "no comment," respond by explaining how bad that sort of thing looks in print. "Let's find a way to talk about this. Tell me about this one aspect, for instance ..." As a last ditch effort, explain that you will be doing a story whether they cooperate or not (if that's true). Explain that you want to get it right. Offer to call back shortly before the story runs to describe what will be in the story. (In the process, get all the contact numbers.)
- **Look for detours.** If a person will not talk, go to others in his or her office or to associates. You will get more information, and by doing this you will loosen them up.
- **Avoid anonymity**. Don't blithely accept information "on background." Even if it means going back several times, persuade people to go on the record. (Absolutely "off-the-record" information is useless, since you can't use it under any circumstance. Avoid it. It's a waste of time.)
- **Try, try again.** If a subject insists on talking "on background," make a formal agreement and explain that you will try later to get them to talk on the record. Take notes. At the end of the interview, or at a follow-up interview, pick out quotes that are not too damning and say: "Now what about this thing you said here. Why can't you say that on the record?" If they agree to put that comment on the record, go to another one in your notes and say: "Well, if you can say that on the record, why can't you say this?" And so on. I have gotten an entire notebook on the record this way. If they insist on anonymity, however, you must honor it.
- **Stand behind it.** Emphasize that people are more believable when they put their name behind what they say. It's the American way: A robust public debate.
- **Be perfectly clear.** There are cases in which someone tells you part of a story and then balks. Or you already know part of a story and can't get the rest. Try saying, "Look, you've already told me this much (or, I already know this much). You had better tell me the rest. I mean, you don't want me to get it wrong. I sure don't want to get it wrong.

This information is from Tipsheet No. 2076, available in the IRE Resource Center (www.ire.org/resourcecenter).

CITY ASSETS

Financial meltdown prompts reporting of flawed San Diego real estate records

BY BROOKE WILLIAMS AND DANIELLE CERVANTES
THE SAN DIEGO UNION-TRIBUNE

There was a lot to investigate in the city of San Diego, including the fact that the city was on the verge of bankruptcy, unable to borrow money or provide residents with basic public services. During one week, there were three different mayors.

So we put together a core of full-time investigators and launched a series of watchdog reports aimed at the city's financial meltdown. We decided to begin with the city's real estate assets after some city council members mentioned selling city property to help ease the pain.

Specifically, we wanted to determine the location of city-owned land, how it was being used and what it was worth. We wanted to know how the land benefited its owners – the public – and how it figured into the city's portfolio of assets and liabilities.

What we found was a seriously flawed inventory, not only missing land property records, but including properties the city did not own. Further, we found the records often did not reflect how city-owned land was used.

To answer some of our most basic questions, we knew we had to build our own database.

Finding discrepancies

Our stories on the city's land use were called "Land of Confusion" and would take us more than two months to complete.

We were confronted with an initial list of property from the city that was incomprehensible. It did not include parcel numbers – only vague addresses – and contained duplicates. It was outdated. We wondered how we could ever verify the accuracy of the city's list.

Metro editor Lorie Hearn, who oversaw our project, suggested we call the county assessor's office. We were delighted to discover the county also had an inventory of city-owned property, listed by parcel number, which would be critical for cross checking. So, we requested another spreadsheet from the city – this time with parcel numbers – and then imported both the city and county spreadsheets into one Access database so we could join the tables by parcel number.

Once we joined the tables, we found many discrepancies. Some parcels on the city's list were not on the county's list, and vice versa. Still, before we could address them, we had to resolve problems with the parcel numbers.

The county assessor had changed some of them, and the city had not updated its records. We had to make sure parcels apparently missing from the city's database were not simply the result of having old numbers on file.

John McCutchen | The San Diego Union-Tribune

Junk covers a lot that was donated to the city in 1995 with the understnading that proceeds from its sale would go to the Balboa Park and San Diego Library endowment funds.

Roni Galgano | The San Diego Union-Tribune

Entrance of the La Jolla house owned by the city.

Next, we were able to narrow in on about 500 questionable parcels on the city's list. We researched deeds, titles, tax records, parcel maps and assessment histories to locate the true owners of the land.

To find out what actually was happening on the land, we got together with photographers John McCutchen and Roni Galgano, put on our boots, printed out parcel maps and satellite photographs and trekked to the properties.

Here are some highlights of what we found:

- The city owned a rat-infested house among multimillion dollar properties in La Jolla. It had been vacant for more than a decade.
- A lot that a woman had bequeathed to the city to benefit parks and libraries was covered with trash.
- Parcels on the city's list that it did not own often were listed because the city had a nearby easement or helped to finance the property.

Graphic artists Brian Cragin and Matt Perry used geographic information system software (GIS) to illustrate what we found. A full-page info graphic with a map, charts and statistics helped readers get a sense of what property the city owned, how it was used – and how much was not on its inventory.

The day after the story ran, several city council members called for the resignation of William Griffith, director of the city's real estate department.

Two mayoral candidates criticized the department's handling of taxpayer assets, and one held a news conference outside the city's rat-infested house in La Jolla.

Griffith sent an 11-page memo to the city council and several news outlets accusing the *Union-Tribune* of failing to accurately portray the department's records management. He stated the department would publish a complete inventory of real estate assets on its Web site.

He announced his resignation less than a week after the story ran.

Access denied

A number of factors contributed to this project's difficulty, including the nature of the field reporting and a lack of cooperation from the city's real estate department.

Each time the *Union-Tribune* asked for the number of parcels the city owned, the real estate department provided a different total.

Also, Griffith refused telephone interviews and backed out of agreements to meet with us in person.

While he gave other *Union-Tribune* reporters immediate access to property files and other documents, he stonewalled us.

He insisted that we e-mail him a list of questions, and then he treated it like a Public Records Act request. Instead of answers, we received a standard letter from the city attorney's office saying it was reviewing our request.

Further, we had to divide our attention among the struggle for access, the county assessor's office, the data at our desks and the properties out in the field. No matter how much time we budgeted for visits, it was never enough.

Even with multiple maps and a good knowledge of the city's geography, we got turned around and hit fences. Sometimes, we could not be positive we were at the right spot.

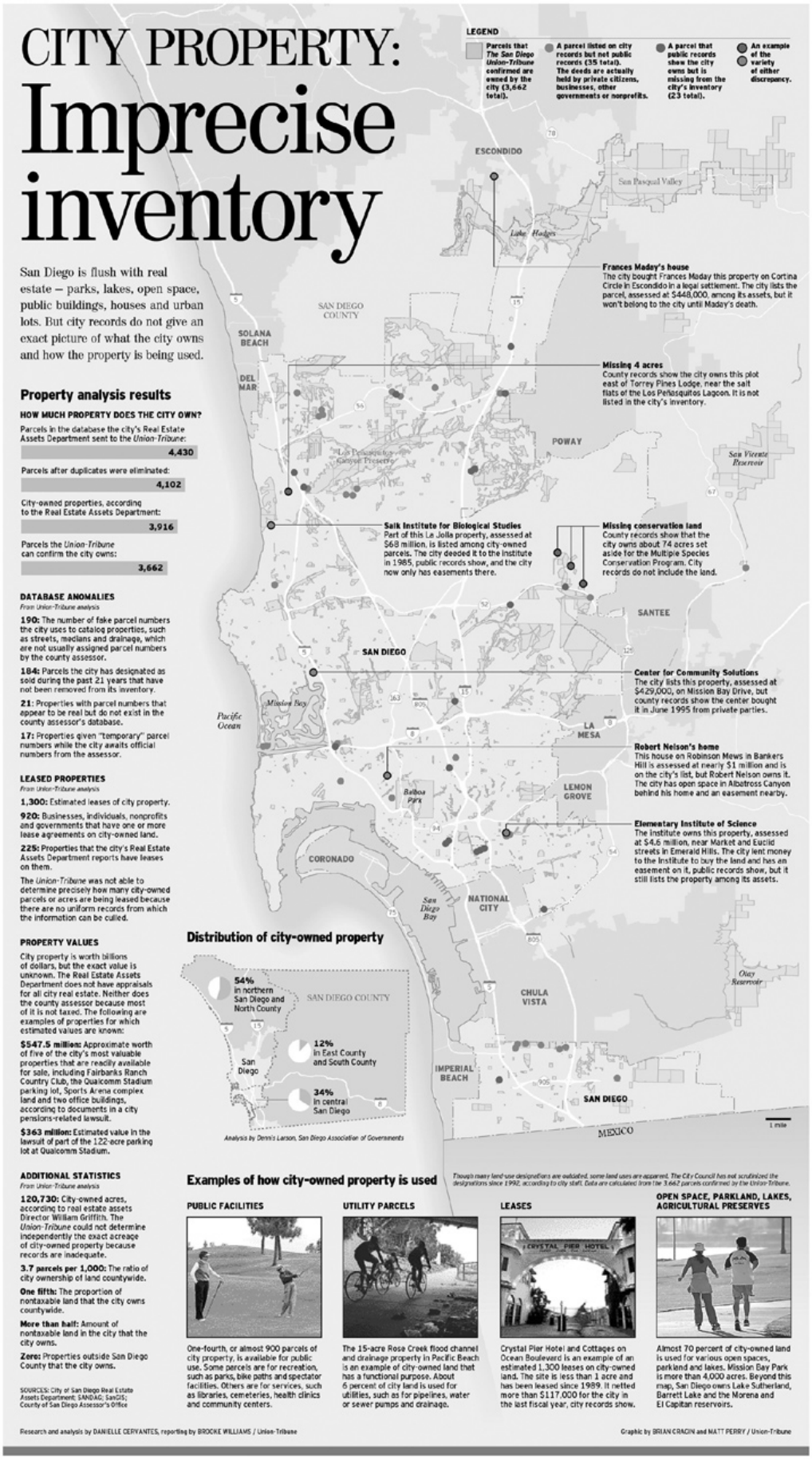
If you are thinking of doing a similar story:

- When you request a government's inventory of land, ask for unique identifiers, such as parcel numbers or lots.
- If the database shows the use of each property, check it. We often found them to be wrong.
- Develop sources at a title research company. They can look up the complete history of parcels in a few minutes. It could take you days at the assessor's office, and you still might leave empty-handed.
- Visit the properties and talk to neighbors, who often know the history. Bring a parcel map and a satellite photograph with you.
- Look for any litigation relating to city property.
- Obtain the financial disclosures of officials in the real estate department.

Also, it is a good idea to have the right tools for the project:

- To map parcels, we used a free Internet service called SANGIS, which is affiliated with local governments. There might be a similar, quasi-governmental agency that provides online parcel mapping service in your area.
- For satellite photos, we used GoogleEarth, a free program with images from across the world. Be careful, though, because the photos can be quite old.
- Haines Criss+Cross Plus Real Estate and Nexis are helpful tools for looking up property records, though they are expensive and not always accurate. Nothing beats tracking down the title.
- To investigate businesses operating on city land, we reviewed articles of incorporation filed with the California Secretary of State and annual reports and proxy statements filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission. For nonprofits, we obtained Form 990s. We also looked at litigation.
- To create a map of all city-owned parcels, the graphic artists used ArcView, Freehand and Illustrator.

Brooke Williams has covered American Indian casinos and city government since joining The San Diego Union-Tribune in 2004. Danielle Cervantes is the research analyst at the Union-Tribune and does computer-assisted reporting and demographics.



TEACHER FAILURES

All 1,500 FOI requests fulfilled in investigation of tenure system

BY SCOTT REEDER
SMALL NEWSPAPER GROUP

"They can't fire him – he's got tenure."

How many times has that been whispered among parents at a PTA meeting or by educators aggravated by a colleague's shortcomings?

But is it true?

That's what I spent six months investigating as the Illinois statehouse reporter in Springfield for a chain of medium-sized newspapers owned by the Small family. As part of that investigation, I would file 1,500 Freedom of Information Act requests, create two databases, search campaign finance records and interview those affected by the tenure system and its flaws.

Stunning numbers

In 1985, the Illinois Legislature passed a major education reform package designed to bring greater accountability into the classroom and make it easier to fire incompetent teachers.

Among other things, the intent of the legislation was to mandate that all teachers be routinely evaluated, streamline the dismissal process for incompetent teachers and create a formal remediation system to improve underperforming instructors.

At the time, these measures were heralded in the press as landmarks. But reporters have seldom revisited these "reforms" after their passage.

When I took a closer look, I found:

- Of an estimated 95,500 tenured educators employed in Illinois, an average of only seven have their dismissals approved each year by a state hearing officer.
- Of those seven, only two on average are fired for poor performance. The remainder is dismissed for issues of misconduct, often involving sexual or physical abuse of children.
- Only one of every 930 job-performance evaluations of tenured teachers results in an unsatisfactory rating. And only 50 percent of those receiving bad ratings actually leave the profession.

Under Illinois law, only Chicago Public Schools has the authority to overrule a hearing officer and fire a teacher. For the state's remaining 875 school districts, school boards can only recommend to an arbitrator that a teacher be dismissed. I found that in the past 18 years, 94 percent of Illinois school districts have never even attempted to fire anyone with tenure. Further, in the past decade, 84 percent of Illinois school districts have *never* rated a tenured teacher as unsatisfactory.

Those numbers were stunning. But they were difficult to obtain because the state does not track evaluation data or keep track of the number of tenured teachers facing dismissal.

To get the data I filed about 1,500 FOIA requests with all 876 Illinois school districts and the Illinois State Board of Education. Through lots of persistence, I was able to achieve a 100 percent response rate from every governmental entity contacted.

But before sending out my first batch of FOIAs, I had to devise a strategy to yield the information I needed. (Illinois has a relatively weak public records law that excludes most personnel documents from public view. And, teacher job performance evaluations are sealed away in personnel files.)

I sat down with a veteran education labor lawyer who walked me through the evaluation and dismissal process. We looked for a place where the evaluation process left a footprint in the public domain.

The Illinois school code mandates whenever a tenured teacher receives an unsatisfactory evaluation, a formal remediation period must follow. And, since a teacher is rarely placed into formal remediation without a school board vote because firing a tenured staff member is an expensive endeavor, I filed public records requests for all school board meeting minutes in which a teacher was placed into remediation.

In the handful of school districts that do not involve school boards in the process, I was able to obtain the information by filing requests for other documents or simply pestering school superintendents and personnel directors to provide the data.

Political clout

I found that job performance evaluations have evolved into ritualistic endeavors where most school districts rated even their worst teachers as solid performers.

To determine the number of tenured teachers fired, I filed public records requests with the Illinois State Board of Education for every arbitration decision involving a tenured teacher in the past 18 years.

After spending about 10 days holed up in a room at the state board of education, reading each of these decisions and tabulating the results, I created a database of teacher terminations. A second one looked at performance evaluations.

I also began doing a lot of "shoe-leather reporting" to put a human face on the series. I interviewed a woman who said she had been impregnated by her assistant principal when she was 14. Although a blood test showed a greater than 99 percent likelihood that he was the father, a hearing officer ruled there was insufficient evidence to dismiss the man.

He continued in the classroom for another nine years, until a DNA test showed an even greater likelihood that he was the father and his teaching certificate was suspended – but not revoked. He has since been ordered to pay child support.

The state's tenure laws have been zealously defended by the state's two dominant teacher unions – the Illinois Education Association (IEA) and the Illinois Federation of Teachers (IFT).

Terry Herbig | Small Newspaper Group

Maxsilmillion Quarles was a 14-year-old seventh grader when she says she became pregnant by the assistant principal of her junior high school. Though a tenure hearing officer spared the assistant principal's job, a judge ordered the man to pay child support after a DNA test.

Time management

As the statehouse bureau chief, I divide my time between editing and reporting responsibilities.

I waited until the legislative session was complete before I began working on this project. Another reporter who works in my bureau shouldered the bulk of daily reporting that I ordinarily would be doing. But I continued my editing responsibilities.

So what is my secret to managing time? Working really long hours.

I worked straight through a number of weekends; I didn't take vacation and even found myself inputting data on a laptop computer in a hospital maternity ward as my wife and newborn daughter slept nearby.

A search of campaign finance records found that the IEA had contributed $10.5 million to statehouse campaigns during the past 12 years and the IFT had contributed $5.5 million. The teacher unions ranked first and third among political contributors in Springfield.

Using their political clout and union power, it has become so difficult to dismiss a teacher that a school district can reasonably expect to pay $100,000 in attorney fees alone. One rural Illinois school district attempted to fire a teacher in 2000. So far it has spent more than $400,000 in attorney fees on the cases involving this teacher – and it is still pending in court.

To avoid expensive litigation, Illinois school boards have engaged in secret deals in which they pay teachers to quit. In almost all of these cases, teachers are promised to receive at least a neutral referral if another school district were to inquire about their performance.

Although it would appear the state FOIA makes these settlement agreements public record, attorneys for the two major teacher unions have routinely demanded confidentiality clauses in these settlements to stop information from being released to the media.

I was tipped off about a particularly interesting settlement agreement involving a southern Illinois school board.

When I filed a public records request for a copy of the settlement agreement, the request was denied as the school district cited the contract's confidentiality clause. My company immediately filed a lawsuit against the school district and obtained a court order requiring the settlement agreement be turned over.

What we found was stunning.

In return for an educator's resignation, the school board agreed to:

- Remove any reference to an Illinois Department of Children and Family Services investigation from his personnel file.
- Remove all unsatisfactory job evaluations from his personnel file.
- Pay him $30,000.

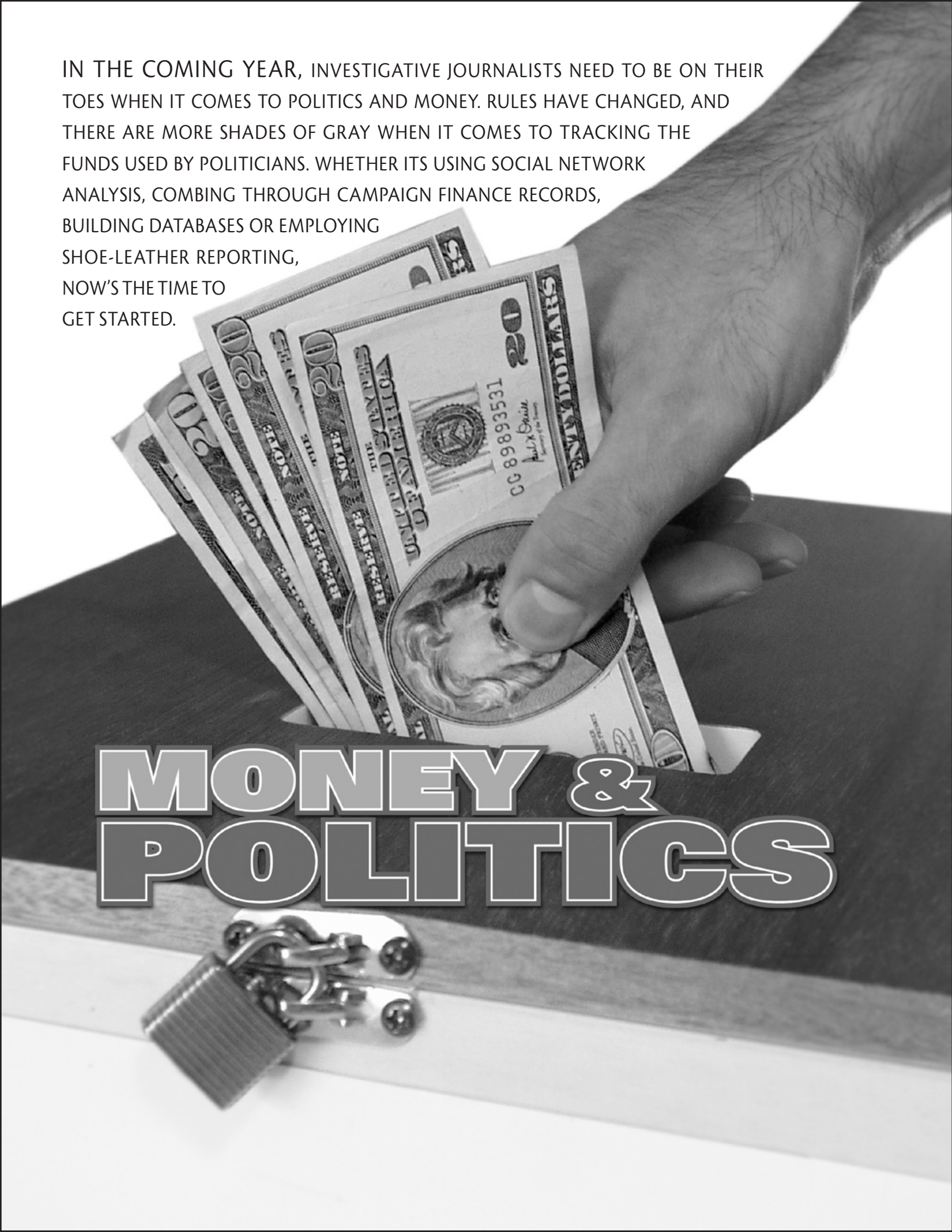
These types of hush-hush deals have become an outlet for school districts wanting to avoid the difficult and litigious process of firing a teacher. But such measures defy the most basic level of government accountability.

The entire series can be viewed online at: www.thehiddencostsoftenure.com.

Scott Reeder opened the statehouse bureau in 1999 to provide custom coverage for Small newspapers in Kankakee, Ottawa, Moline and Rock Island.

Scott Reeder | Small Newspaper Group

Former Geneseo school teacher Cecil Roth leaves the Rock Island County Courthouse. So far, his former employer has spent more than $400,000 in attorney fees in cases involving this teacher who they first sought to dismiss in 2000.



MONEY & POLITICS

IN THE COMING YEAR, INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISTS NEED TO BE ON THEIR TOES WHEN IT COMES TO POLITICS AND MONEY. RULES HAVE CHANGED, AND THERE ARE MORE SHADES OF GRAY WHEN IT COMES TO TRACKING THE FUNDS USED BY POLITICIANS. WHETHER ITS USING SOCIAL NETWORK ANALYSIS, COMBING THROUGH CAMPAIGN FINANCE RECORDS, BUILDING DATABASES OR EMPLOYING SHOE-LEATHER REPORTING, NOW'S THE TIME TO GET STARTED.

Clement Britt | Richmond Times-Dispatch

William Goodwin is one of the most influential people in Richmond's business community. He and his wife have given almost $75 million to Virginia Commonwealth University alone, and he has played a huge role in creating the engineering school and preparing for its expansion.

POWER BROKERS

SOCIAL NETWORK ANALYSIS HELPS SHOW RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN BUSINESS, CITY

By Dave Ress
Richmond Times-Dispatch

"C'mon," they said, when we started asking why Richmond's city-owned nursing home hired a management company owned by its board chairwoman. "Everyone knows Marilyn."

Reporters at the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* were intrigued by the attitude of the city's leaders. Not everyone did know Marilyn, but it seemed that everyone who *mattered* knew her.

Our initial thought was that it was another example of the cozy relationship between government and business that's pretty typical in Richmond. But Managing Editor Louise Seals (who knew Marilyn), wanted to know more about the kinds of connections forged by Richmond's power brokers over the years.

So we decided to try to answer some basic questions: Who runs Richmond? Who makes things happen in this town? What can we find?

Special Projects Team Editor Gordon Hickey and I chewed it over. I used to be a business reporter, so I suggested following the muckrakers of the early 20th century and trace interlocking corporate boards of directors. I resigned myself (and decided to resign Hickey, too) to creating a database and then grinding through tons of SQL queries. Though that was discouraging to contemplate, I figured I would probably end up drawing lots of boxes and lines on pieces of paper, just to get it straight in my own mind.

Hickey, meanwhile, had just heard from Aaron Kessler of the Virginia Public Access Project (the newspaper-funded venture that has been shedding light on campaign donations in this state for eight years) about new programs that could do the kind of social network analysis I was dreading having to cobble together.

At the same time, special projects team reporter Michael Martz took the lead interviewing everyone we could think of who had been involved in the intersection of local government and the businesses that depend on it. By the time the project was completed, Martz and I had talked to more than 50 people.

Fingers in the pie

By this point, our Excel spreadsheet that began with the names of movers and shakers in this city had morphed into a list of more than 1,000 entries. We focused on anyone who dealt in the public arena.

We imported the whole mess into Access and I ran a query – counts, basically – of who sat on the most boards. I linked a database I had created of campaign contributions in the 2003 county elections, a city referendum on restructuring city government and another that the Virginia Public Access Project had done for us on the 2004 city of Richmond elections. (Virginia state and many county races are in odd-numbered years.)

It became quite clear that a surprisingly small number of men had their fingers in a lot of pies.

Still, we wanted to say more than that – we wanted to understand the relationships, the networks of power. How did these people make things happen?

So, we cleaned up the data and Kessler imported it into FoxPro. From there, it went to the social network software UCINET.

Kessler says that while UCINET is not, at first glance, the most user-friendly application, once you familiarize yourself with it, it is not that difficult. (Jaimi Dowdell, of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, has a tutorial to help you get started at www.ire.org/sna)

The first time Kessler asked UCINET to draw the network, it was a "hairball" – the technical term for a mess.

But even with that tangle of lines and boxes, we could start examining connectedness – the power. We began by looking at such factors as "closeness" (who is in touch with whom); "centrality" (who do you have to go to in order to get to a lot of others); and the frequency of board membership.

Displaying these power relationships visually for our readers meant more work. While Kessler says it is possible to work directly in UCINET, he opted instead to pare down the FoxPro database. As we

Clement Britt | Richmond Times-Dispatch

Beverley "Booty" Armstrong is vice chairman of CCA Industries, a privately-held investment group, and is one of the top five people who wields political power in Richmond.

peeled away the layers, the patterns we saw in the hairball became more and more obvious.

Continuing questions

Martz and I now had the tools to really push our sources for the how and why of the power in Richmond. With the social network analysis and a lot of old-fashioned interviews, we found a complicated picture, one of a handful of men with a lot of power that was not always used effectively. Nor, would it seem, were they always held accountable.

Our work further showed that there were not as many women or African-Americans in these influential networks. Michael Paul Williams, our metro columnist, explored why that was and asked questions about power and poverty and race – questions that we are continuing to ask.

Our package, "Who Runs Richmond" was so clear in showing the power brokers and their relationships that it even surprised those who thought they understood it before we published. They were surprised, too, by the how concentrated the connections were, at the small number of players and at how wide the gap was between the big boys and the wannabes.

Dave Ress is a metro reporter for the Richmond Times-Dispatch.

Clement Britt | Richmond Times-Dispatch

Jon King (left), chairman of the Chamber of Commerce, and Jesse Frierson are part owners of the Turning Basin Building, seen here behind them. King is one of the business leaders to emerge from Richmond's African American community.

GOLDEN RULE

DONORS WHO CONTRIBUTE BIG MONEY REAP THE REWARD OF POLITICAL INFLUENCE

BY RONALD CAMPBELL
THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Money and politics go back a long way in California.

The state's legendary Progressive governor, Hiram Johnson, earned his reputation by breaking the Southern Pacific Railroad's control of the Legislature.

No single interest group dominates California the way the SP did in 1910. But an *Orange County Register* investigation found that a handful of donors come close.

The newspaper documented that 100 individuals and couples poured a staggering $150 million into state and national races in the 2003-04 election cycle.

Their money recalled one governor and elected another. Their money persuaded a nearly bankrupt state to make a $3 billion bet on stem cells. Their money forced the Legislature to reverse course on worker's compensation and financial privacy laws. Their money, in six- and seven-figure checks, helped keep the 2004 presidential race close.

These are people who can change the dynamics of an election just by signing their names on a check.

Yet almost no one knows who they are. Their donations appear in different databases that can be merged only with difficulty. Even then, they often appear under many different names, masking the true size of their donations and influence.

You have heard of a few of these people. Arnold Schwarzenegger (No. 3 in the top 100) gave $10.1 million to his 2003 campaign for governor. Stockbroker to the masses Charles Schwab (No. 57) ponied up $540,000 for political causes in 2003 and 2004. "Curb Your Enthusiasm" star Larry David and his wife (No. 78) worked up $339,000 worth of enthusiasm for Democrats.

But most of the top donors are little known outside their own financial and social circles.

Opening wallets

Institutional donors usually give money to promote the interests of their shareholders and members. It doesn't take much imagination to figure out why a real estate developer or a teacher's union pours big bucks into a legislative race.

At the same time, some of the top 100 donors did appear to be advancing their own financial interests. Venture capitalists led by John Doerr (No. 9, and an early backer of Google) poured $18.1 million into the stem cell initiative. If state-backed stem cell research creates technology, it will also create huge business opportunities for venture capitalists.

But individual donors can act on their own passions. And big donors can really indulge their passions.

Take California's No. 1 donors, Herb and Marion Sandler. They co-chair World Savings in Oakland, a huge and heavily regulated thrift. You would think they would give to each party and avoid making enemies. You would be wrong.

The Sandlers gave $15.7 million to political causes in 2003-04. They poured $8.5 million into a single 527 committee, Citizens for a Strong Senate, which in turn ran attack ads against Republican Senate candidates in four states. Three of the targeted Republicans won.

Some of the top 100 donors are fixtures in partisan politics. Univision owner Jerry Perenchio (No. 7) and Stockton developer (and San Diego Chargers owner) Alex Spanos (No. 5) routinely give hundreds of thousands of dollars a year to politicians. Stephen Bing (No. 2), a real estate heir, Hollywood producer and playboy, has become one of the biggest Democratic donors in the nation in the past few years.

Others spurn politics – until an issue stirs them to open their wallets.

Henry T. Nicholas (No. 13) co-founded Broadcom, a wildly successful Orange County technology company. He expressed no interest in politics – until just before the November 2004 election, when polls showed an initiative to loosen the state's "three strikes" law was about to win.

Nicholas, whose sister had been murdered years earlier, donated $3.3 million in six days to fund a blizzard of TV ads attacking the initiative. The initiative lost.

His largesse instantly caught the attention of the political media. Most top donors are much harder to find, however.

Brute-force solution

I found that the top donors appear in three barely compatible databases.

The first database, the Federal Election Commission, was easy to tap, thanks to IRE's database library. I simply queried the database for all individual donations from California.

The second source, the Internal Revenue Service's 527 committee filings, was somewhat balkier. The IRS combines five or six tables into a single unwieldy text file. Once the California donations were isolated, I faced a second problem: Donors were identified by first and last name in a single field, rather than the "last name, first name" format used in the FEC files.

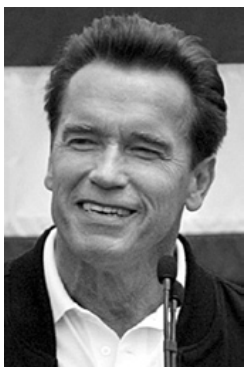
Hardest of all were the Secretary of State's files. The office's Cal-Access Web site (http://cal-access.ss.ca.gov/) is a wonderful resource for anyone digging into a legislative or statewide campaign. But the raw data behind the Web site, provided free by the ever-helpful Secretary of State's staff, was a different story.

The state database is transactional. In plain English, that means a campaign may report a donation, file an amended report of the donation and amend that report many more times. Untangling the original and amended reports took me weeks.

Then there is the problem of donor names. Since individual campaigns report donations, a donor's name may appear in several subtly different forms in the same database. "Bing, Stephen L.," "Bing, Stephen" and "Bing, Steve" are all the same guy. But my computer, of course, thought Bing was three different guys.

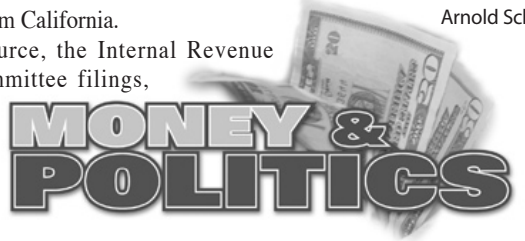
This gets to be a significant problem when you are talking about several thousand names.

I chose a brute-force solution. After combining the FEC, 527 and Secretary of State files, I identified the largest donors and put their names in a new table. In another column I entered standardized names. Eventually I nailed down 700 standard names for more than 3,600 donors.



Mark Rightmire | The Orange County Register

Arnold Schwarzenegger



Mark Rightmire | The Orange County Register

Stephen Bing

This was every bit as exciting as it sounds.

The first step was to alphabetize the list of major donors and look for slight spelling variations that would throw off the computer.

Next, I looked for spouses. Society pages are a marvelous resource here, since major political donors often are major backers of the charities that get written up in the society pages. Property records were helpful. If two people own property together, the record usually will say if they hold title as husband and wife.

Finally, I looked for privately held businesses. While I was not interested in business donations in general, I was very interested in donations from businesses that were controlled by one person. My reasoning: It doesn't really matter if an individual donor uses his own checkbook or his company's.

In a few cases this was easy. The A.G. Spanos Co. is owned by its namesake, megadonor Alex Spanos. The Irvine Co., which owns about a sixth of Orange County, is in turn owned by major donor Donald Bren.

In other cases, I had to search public records and news clips. I was puzzled by a $250,000 donation from California Management Associates LLC. All I could find was an address. Then I looked up the address in LexisNexis to see who else was there: Bingo! The Yucaipa Co., holding company for megadonor Ron Burkle.

Identifying the state's top 100 donors helped fill in the back story for the 2004 election. It also illustrated the potency of politics' Golden Rule: He who has the gold makes the rules.

To read *The Register*'s package on top California donors, go to www.ocregister.com/ocr/2005/07/24/sections/news/news/article_608922.php

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Ronald Campbell is a reporter for The Orange County Register. He started The Register's program in computer-assisted reporting. He has won the Loeb, IRE and National Education Writers awards.

Stories from the IRE RESOURCE CENTER

Looking for how others covered politics and campaign finance? Check out these stories in the IRE Resource Center (www.ire.org/resourcecenter).

- **Story No. 21833.** "The Buying of the President 2004," by Charles Lewis and The Center for Public Integrity. This book was the third in a series that provided profiles and personal histories of all the major presidential candidates and their latest campaign finance data. It revealed how special interests preselect candidates for president and influence their policies. (2004)
- **Story No. 21519.** "The Price of Your Honor," by Lucia Hwang, *California Lawyer Magazine*. Hwang's analysis of contested superior court races from 1996 to 2002 showed that, although some spending has increased, about half the winners spent less than $75,000 on their campaigns. The results showed that it is possible to buck the trend of skyrocketing campaign costs. (2004)
- **Story No. 20633.** "Freshmen Fund-Raising," by Jonathan D. Salant, The Associated Press. This computer-assisted analysis of PAC contributions to 37 freshmen House members showed they received more funds from industries and unions with issues before the committees they were assigned to than they did prior to the elections. (2003)
- **Story No. 21747.** "Money and Politics," by Chris Joyner, Edward Lee Pitts, Andy Sher, Gary Tanner and Michael A. Weber, the *Chattanooga Times Free Press*. This yearlong investigation into Tennessee political campaigns found that many candidates filed inaccurate reports, there was little or no examination of the documents and donations made for local races were funneled to out-of-state candidates. (2004)
- **Story No. 21659.** "Corporate Money in Texas Elections," by Laylan Copelin, *Austin American-Statesman*. This series exposed how Republican leaders and business interests used secret corporate donations to help finance the campaigns of the Republicans who ultimately assumed control of the state legislature. Following the newspaper's investigation, three associates of then-U.S. House Majority Leader Tom DeLay and eight corporations were indicted by a grand jury. (2004)
- **Story No. 22139.** "Suburban Money Fuels Mayor's Race in St. Paul," by Tim Nelson and MaryJo Sylwester, *St. Paul Pioneer Press*. The authors used mapping software to show the bulk of campaign contributions for the St. Paul mayoral election came from the suburbs rather than the city itself. (2005)
- **Story No. 18736.** "Caucuses: Secret Campaign Machines," by Dee J. Hall, Phil Brinkman, Scott Milfred and Doug Erickson, *Wisconsin State Journal*. This investigation revealed that four state agencies with budgets totaling $3.9 million a year were being used to campaign for legislators and candidates approved by legislative leaders. Members of both political parties used public funds for campaign purposes and the state Ethics Board has failed to stop the practice. (2001)
- **Story No. 21728.** "Silent Partners: How Political Nonprofits Work the System," by Derek Willis, Aron Pilhofer and Daniel Lathrop, the Center for Public Integrity. This story looks at the workings of the Section 527 Committees. These tax-exempt associations raised and spent almost $500 million in 2003-2004. The increase in fund-raising was driven by 53 committees that focus largely on presidential elections. (2004)
- **Story No. 21615.** "Legislation for Sale," by Sandy Theis and Ted Wendling, *The* (Cleveland) *Plain Dealer*. This investigation of the Ohio Speaker of the House uncovered a campaign fund-raising scheme in which donations were subtly tied to legislation. In the course of the investigation, there were lobbyists who said they made contributions to gain favorable treatment by the speaker, allegations he took kickbacks from vendors and secret campaign accounts for the speaker's handpicked successors. The series prompted FBI and IRS investigations. (2004)
- **Story No. 19877.** "The Prisoner and the Politician," by Jonathan Dienst, WNBC-New York. This story looked into the allegations of corruption of Sen. Robert Torricelli. The report features an interview with convicted illegal fundraiser David Chang who said Torricelli had helped him with multimillion-dollar deals in exchange for cash and gifts totaling more than $150,000. Torricelli has never been charged with a crime but the Senate Ethics Committee reprimanded him for taking illegal gifts. (2002)
- **Story No. 18754.** "How Capital One Changed State Laws," by Jennifer Peter, the (Norfolk) *Virginian-Pilot*. Peter reveals how Capital One made contributions to 62 of Virginia's 140 legislators and gave $56,000 to Gov. Jim Gilmore. Gilmore's office lobbied for a bill that eliminated fee limits on small loans aimed at low-income borrowers, and the Virginia legislature passed the bill. E-mails and faxes showed that language drafted by Capital One made it directly into law. (2001)

John Partipilo | Tennessean

A Tennessee Highway Patrol officer looks up at the state Capitol after Gov. Phil Bredesen announced a top official would resign in the wake of stories about THP missteps.

POLITICAL PATROL

PATTERN OF TROOPER CRONYISM MARKED BY FIXED TICKETS, QUESTIONABLE PROMOTIONS

By Brad Schrade
The (Nashville) *Tennessean*

A statewide scandal that led to the forced ousters of the three top officials in the Tennessee Highway Patrol began with a tip about a drunken driving stop in a rural county about 170 miles from Nashville.

It would end with stories showing a department rife with problems ranging from promotions being influenced by political contributions to badge giveaways that amounted to get-out-of-jail-free cards for political donors. We would investigate the problems through databases and interviews, getting more and more tips as we published our findings.

But back to the beginning: A police report of that DUI arrest, along with an anonymous letter explaining some of the back story, reached the desk of my colleague, Trent Seibert. The letter appeared to be the voice of someone outraged within the Highway Patrol.

It described in detail how two veteran state troopers had testified against a young trooper who had arrested the grandson of a powerful west Tennessee Democratic fundraiser and one-time patronage chief. The judge dropped the DUI charge following the two older troopers' testimony.

While the thrust of the letter was a complaint about political favoritism, Seibert found something more curious in the incident report narrative. The grandson had flashed an "honorary captain" badge and told the arresting trooper: "I'm an officer just like you. I'm a trooper too. I've got a badge just like yours. You can't treat me like this, I will tell the colonel on you."

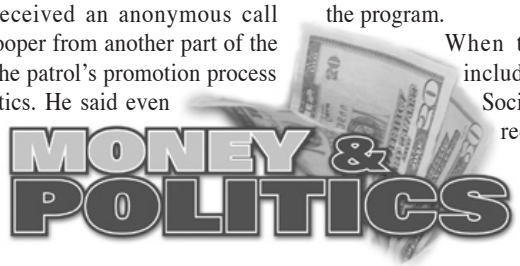
That prompted Seibert to request all records from the Highway Patrol related to the honorary captains program, which we would eventually learn was extensive.

Meanwhile, I received an anonymous call from a frustrated trooper from another part of the state, complaining the patrol's promotion process was tainted by politics. He said even low-level civil service positions went to campaign contributors and troopers with political connections. Testing, interviews and job performance did not really matter, he said

The trooper also mentioned to me the department issued official-looking badges and trooper identification cards to the politically connected and campaign contributors. Experienced troopers knew that when they stopped people with these badges, it meant they had some political ties to the upper ranks, and ticketing them could mean trouble, he said.

Later, Seibert filled me in on the letter he had received about the DUI. We thought we were onto something with these separate tips, but the Highway Patrol was dragging its feet delivering records about the program.

When the records arrived, they included a list of the names and Social Security numbers of those receiving badges since 2002,



about 360 people. With the help of our editor, Jennifer Peebles, we started Googling, searching campaign finance records, and using the Accurint and LexisNexis commercial databases to learn about these people.

The Social Security numbers were vital because they helped us verify identities in databases. (The department did not provide us with the honorary captains' addresses.) Middle initials, where they were listed, were useful in tracking people. Accurint's "People Search" feature led us from their names and Social Security numbers to their home and work addresses.

Highly political agency

It became clear that the program was a perk for political insiders, governor's staffers, celebrities and campaign donors. There were virtually no controls, background checks or program oversight.

When our Sunday story ran, response from readers was strong. Tips flowed in about other problems in the patrol. There was outrage from readers at a program that, as one critic in the story said, was clearly a "get-out-of-jail-free card."

Gov. Phil Bredesen said he was unaware of the program's size and within days he banished the badge giveaway.

But the story was just warming up.

That same week the Highway Patrol was promoting about 50 officers to various ranks, including sergeants, lieutenants and captains. We got a tip that the two sergeants who had testified on behalf of the Democratic matron's grandson in our initial tip were among those promoted to lieutenant.

The kicker: They had put down the woman's name, or those of family members, as references on their promotion applications. The family had even called the department to put in a good word for one of the troopers.

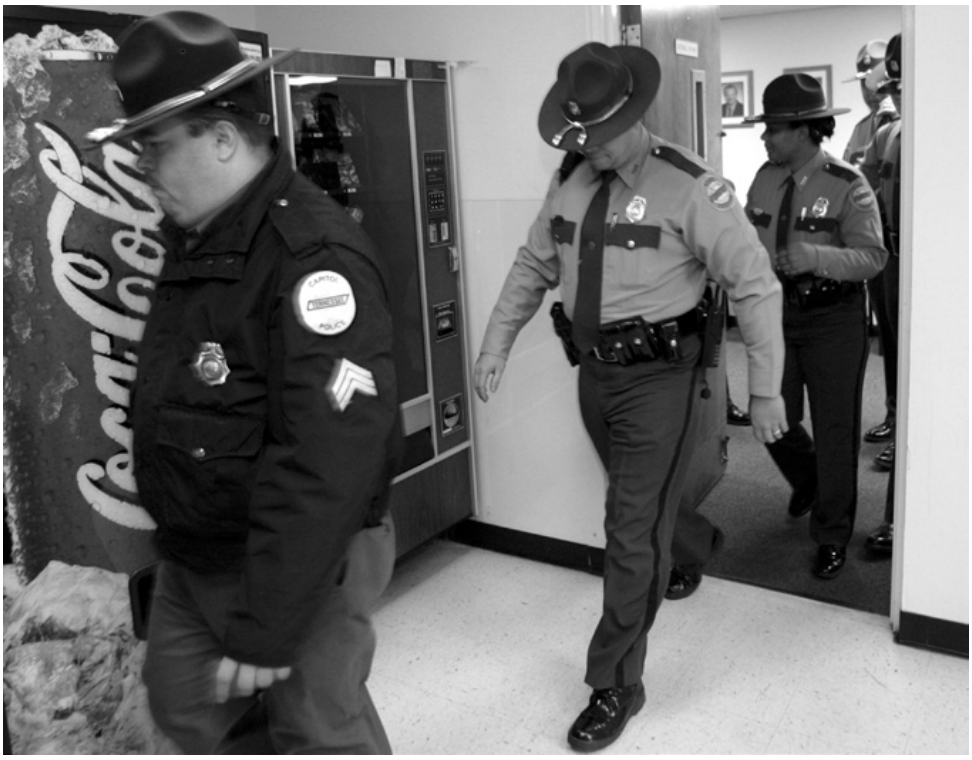
As the story moved along, sources recognized that we were serious about scrutinizing the Highway Patrol, which had a longstanding reputation of being highly political. The governor scrapped all promotions pending a review. The state safety commissioner ordered a review of the west Tennessee DUI case.

Seibert was dispatched to the location of the DUI stop, an old World War II airstrip near the Mississippi River. He combed through county records and interviewed locals. Based on what he found, we reported that the testimony of the two troopers who were later promoted was wrong – the location of the DUI arrest was on public land, and thus, the arrest should have held up in court. (The DUI charge had been dismissed on the two troopers' testimony that the land in question was privately owned.)

After nearly four weeks of writing stories, our network of Highway Patrol sources now stretched across the state. Everyone was telling us the same tale: Promotions are tied to politics and campaign contributions.

The picture that emerged from these interviews, most of them on background, was of an agency that had operated this way for years, under both Democratic and Republican leadership. The department was so secretive that information had been kept from officers about promotions and how the scoring system worked. This lack of transparency had created a great deal of suspicion and distrust among the rank-and-file. We tapped into this and

Col. Lynn Pitts, the commander of the Tennessee Highway Patrol, was forced to resign after stories of trooper promotions being given on the basis of political contributions.



Eric Parsons | Tennessean

Two Tennessee Highway Patrol troopers conceal their faces as they leave the internal affairs office at THP headquarters. The troopers were among 48 whose names turned up in criminal background checks.

gained credibility with troopers with each story we wrote.

Predetermined promotions

Once the initial flurry of stories slowed, my editors wanted me to take a hard look at the ties between politics and promotions. We focused on troopers who were campaign contributors.

We already had in hand a computer database file from the state's Registry of Election Finance showing all contributors to the governor in 2004. We then also paid for another database, a Microsoft Access file from the nonprofit Institute on Money in State Politics in Montana, listing all contributions to Bredesen's 2002 campaign.

We cross-referenced the records of contributors with a list of promoted officers we acquired from the Highway Patrol under the state's open records law.

In combing through the paper records in some officers' personnel files, we also noticed mentions of recommendation letters that had been "keyed in."

It turned out the Highway Patrol kept references made on behalf of officers in a spreadsheet, so staffers could track who was recommending troopers to be promoted or hired. We acquired this spreadsheet file under the open records law.

It was another who's who of political donors and insiders. Some troopers had as many as 20 references from politically connected people, many of them with no law enforcement expertise. Some of the references' names we recognized from the list of honorary captains that started the whole investigation.

A source also had sent me a secret list of "proposed promotions." It had been created by high-level Highway Patrol officials, and it reinforced my original tipster's claim that the promotions were predetermined. We plugged those names into a spreadsheet and cross-referenced them with our contribution list.

Spreadsheets we created showed that lower-scoring officers who had political connections were regularly recommended for promotions over higher-scoring officers.

Throughout this process I was reminded of something veteran investigative reporter Eric Nalder drove home at an IRE conference session on "breaking and entering" an organization: When investigating an organization, get your hands on any rosters, personnel files, address lists, yearbooks, newsletters and organization charts. (See Nalder's investigative tips on page 15.) They will help in myriad ways in understanding how the place works, its history, relationships, personnel and customs. For us, they were important tools in verifying campaign contributors.

Three months after the original "honorary captains" piece ran, we reported that two-thirds of Highway Patrol promotions went to officers who contributed money to the governor or had family members or political patrons who were contributors.

Of those, more than half had test scores lower than other officers who were not promoted.

That story set off a whole new wave of tips and stories. They included stories about an officer who was rehired after forging a judge's signature to fix a ticket; an officer who was recommended for promotion after helping fix a speeding ticket for the deputy governor; and how the department often turned a blind eye when its own officers got in trouble.

> "A criminal investigation into a suspected ticket-fixing scandal and other questionable activity was launched. The local district attorney has since opined that it is legal for troopers to fix tickets as favors so long as they don't derive benefit – sparking additional public outrage."

Investigations launched

"It is not a pretty picture," Bredesen said. "There is a pattern of cronyism evident in this that is clearly wrong and needs rooting out."

He ordered an investigation into the Highway Patrol and ordered criminal background checks on all 855 uniformed troopers. More than 50 had some charges in their background, some felonies.

Since then, four officers have been slated to be fired. The three top officials in the department were forced out in early December. The state Senate has begun its own inquiry into the agency, and the governor has hired an outside consultant to fix what's broken at the Highway Patrol.

A criminal investigation into a suspected ticket-fixing scandal and other questionable activity was launched. The local district attorney has since opined that it's legal for troopers to fix tickets as favors so long as they don't derive benefit – sparking additional public outrage.

The governor summed up his frustration with the situation in an interview in late November, describing why he launched the investigation into the agency.

"There is an issue for me in how the department operates," Bredesen said. "My reaction was, 'I'm getting expletive tired of *The Tennessean* doing our work for us. Let's go do some work.'"

Brad Schrade covers state government for The Tennessean.

NEW TACTICS

DIFFICULTIES LOOM FOR JOURNALISTS COVERING UPCOMING ELECTION BIDS

BY DEREK WILLIS
THE WASHINGTON POST

For campaign reporters, covering the 2006 elections may be even more difficult than the 2004 elections.

How can that be? The presidential race was the most expensive contest in history, with key roles played by a new type of organization, the 527 committee. Add in a new federal campaign finance law with sweeping effects on races up and down the ballot, and 2004 was nearly a perfect storm for reporters trying to capture the essence of today's campaigns. Nearly.

This year's elections won't have a single dominant race, but they will be shaped by the lessons of 2004. The 527 committees, state party chiefs and candidates have spent the past year raising money and refining tactics. So what should reporters expect when writing campaign stories? Here are some ideas:

- Abramoff fallout. Many U.S. House and Senate races this year will be touched by the specter of the scandal surrounding Washington lobbyist Jack Abramoff. While many candidates, overwhelmingly Republicans but some Democrats, have returned campaign contributions from Abramoff and/or his tribal clients, Abramoff still will be an issue in elections. Reporters should expect rival campaigns to dredge up any ties to Abramoff or lobbyists in general, and should be prepared to fact check these claims. In addition, there should be no shortage of news organizations checking up on candidates reimbursing corporations and groups for travel and other expenses.
- Potential new laws. Although Congress and state legislatures have not passed many significant changes to election law since 2002, the Abramoff scandal could produce new laws governing the lobbying industry and lobbyists' contacts with legislators. Some of the proposed changes could provide the public with greater information on federal lobbyists' activities and expenditures. That could increase scrutiny of state-level lobbying as well. Remember that for federal elections, the limit on individual contributions to a candidate is now $2,100 per election, due to indexing for inflation.
- Electioneering advertisements. The Supreme Court heard arguments in January on a case that could impact the ability of political nonprofit organizations to air broadcast advertisements just before federal elections. Here's how important this case is for advocacy groups: NARAL has filed a brief supporting Wisconsin Right to Life, the plaintiff in the case (Wisconsin Right to Life v. Federal Election Commission). Currently, federal law requires organizations sponsoring television or radio ads airing within 30 days of the general election that identify a federal candidate be paid for entirely with federal, or "hard," money. Look for a decision before the main primary season.
- Nationally significant state races. National political operatives refined their practices in 2005 in states like Virginia, where statewide offices were up for election. Virginia's race for attorney general, won by the Republican candidate in an extremely close election, was influenced by a 527 group called the Republican State Leadership Committee. The RSLC put more than $2 million into the attorney general race and will be involved in similar "down-ballot" state races in 2006. Depending on your state's laws, groups like the RSLC will either donate money directly to candidates or set up a state affiliate and funnel money from the national organization. So if elections for state offices have not been a focus for you, they probably should be.
- State parties. The big change in campaign finance law had a huge impact on state parties, particularly those in smaller states. After a nervous first round in 2004, state parties will have to operate without the financing that a presidential race brings. The national parties have been touting their efforts to help state affiliates raise money, register voters and hire staff; the 2006 elections will be a real test of state parties' ability to stand on their own.
- Quicker availability of campaign filings. More and more states are implementing electronic filing, which means that reporters can get their hands on the data even faster than before. That means that while you will still need to write those initial fundraising stories based on the cover sheets of reports, it should be possible to do more in-depth work in a shorter amount of time. On the federal level, all but Senate candidates are required to file electronically (and Senate candidates surely use software to track their donors, so they have the information).
- Looking to the future. While the 2006 elections are almost here, the 2008 elections loom in the distance, and potential national and statewide candidates will be laying the groundwork for their races. Is the outgoing governor setting up a new political fund? How are state legislators preparing for the potential of open House and Senate seats? Find and follow the early money, and see whether your state's laws are conducive to operating non-candidate funds.

Derek Willis is research database manager at The Washington Post.

Tipsheets

If you are interested in more tips about investigating campaign finance and politics, try these sources available through the IRE Resource Center (www.ire.org/resourcecenter).

- **Tipsheet No. 2048,** "Election year investigations: Following the money and influence." Ken McCall of *Dayton Daily News* gives 12 sources with information about campaign finance. (2004)
- **Tipsheet No. 1797,** "Campaign and politics: Donors, expenditures, and lobbyists." Dave Gulliver of *The Virginian-Pilot* (Norfolk, Va.) gives some ideas about how to find great stories in campaign finance data. (2003)
- **Tipsheet No. 1499,** "Following the Money in Virginia." David Poole of the Virginia Public Access Project explains how newspapers in Virginia formed a consortium to share an extensive database of campaign contributors to the state's $30 million gubernatorial race. This tipsheet provides examples of articles produced using the database and offers tips on how to start a similar consortium in your state. (2002)
- **Tipsheet No. 2409,** "CAR Investigations into Politics." Jonathan D. Salant of Bloomberg News gives story ideas and Web sites you should know to do stories about politics. Salant suggests examining PAC contributions to new committee chairs to see if donations from particular industries increase once the legislator has leadership of a congressional committee. Salant also suggests checking expenditures to see where campaign money is being spent. (2005)
- **Tipsheet No. 2263,** "Following the Money After the Election." Ron Nixon of the Minneapolis *Star-Tribune* looks at resources you can use to follow the paper trail long after the election. He lists contracts, bills and vote tracking, uniform commercial code filings, statements of economic interest, leftover campaign funds, gifts and trips and speaking fees. (2004)
- **Tipsheet No. 2481,** "Covering Campaign Finance and Money in Politics." This seven-page tipsheet by James Grimaldi of *The Washington Post*, Anne Mulkern of *The Denver Post* and Steven Weiss of the Center for Responsive Politics is the perfect place to start for anyone just getting into political reporting or someone who wants to refresh his or her knowledge. It defines basic terms, shows reporters where to go for more information and provides details on how to research such groups as nonprofits and lobbyists. (2005)

MAP IT

As tornado season approaches, it is time to track siren readiness

By Sarah Okeson
(Peoria, Ill.) *Journal Star*

I became interested in how effective tornado siren coverage is in Peoria after I attended a 2004 NICAR mapping boot camp. I looked at similar stories that had been done by David Smith in Lafayette, Ind., and Ian Demsky at *The Tennessean*.

I considered trying to geocode the addresses that Peoria sirens were close to, but learned that, because sirens are often in parks or fields, it is more accurate to plot the latitude and longitude. Since the county does not track sirens that way, I bought an eTrex, a simple handheld GPS receiver from a local sporting goods store. On the advice of Ted Mellnick at *The Charlotte Observer*, I bought an eTrex cable online to get the data into my computer.

I then discovered I needed another piece of software to import the data as a shapefile so I could use it. After a Google search, I found a site devoted to birdwatching in California that had directions for how to download the waypoints and links to free software at www.gpsu.co.uk. It worked. I could now see there was a tornado siren on the map. Now all I had to do was go to the other 79 sirens maintained by Peoria and Peoria County and plot their locations.

Although my editors hoped I would get the story done in a week or two so the story could run early in tornado season, it took me time not only to figure out the software, but to drive to just about every part of the county to plot tornado sirens between daily assignments. I also had problems finding the sirens.

Once I had all the points representing sirens on the map, I had to draw buffers around them to represent the range of the sirens. The standard for measuring the range is how far away the siren can be heard at 60 decibels and at 70 decibels. The manufacturers provide this information, and the range varies depending on the model of the siren and its size.

I added fields to the attribute table for the sirens and put in the radii for the siren coverage and used the buffer wizard to draw the buffers. Once that was done, I compared the coverage area to the census block groups. I joined the population statistics for the block groups to the shapefile for the block groups using what I had learned in mapping boot camp.

Jennifer LaFleur, computer-assisted reporting editor of *The Dallas Morning News* and a mapping boot camp instructor, showed me how to figure out what block groups were not covered by the sirens. I exported the table with the number of people living in those block groups into Excel and added them up. I did a similar query and table for the block groups that were covered by the sirens. This showed me the areas not covered by the sirens were mostly rural with few people. Only about 5,400 people in the county, or about 3 percent of Peoria County residents, were not within range of the sirens.

I also geocoded the county's nursing homes and schools. I got a list of schools from the county superintendent of schools and got nursing home data from www.medicare.gov. Not all of the addresses showed up on the map, so I used my GPS device.

As I was starting to write, Hurricane Katrina was menacing Florida and Louisiana. Suddenly, my story became more relevant as we took a look at how ready Peoria was for a major disaster.

An expanded version of this story appears in the March/April Uplink.

DIRTY DINING

FOI records blitz overcomes challenges in revealing stadium food safety violations

BY BOB SEGALL
WITI-MILWAUKEE

Lambeau Field is more than a football stadium. For thousands of pigskin-loving, beer-drinking, cheesehead-wearing, green-and-gold-blooded Wisconsinites, it is a holy place – it is Packers Paradise.

Marty Adams sees the place a little differently. To him, Lambeau Field is a 70,000-seat restaurant.

Adams is a sanitarian for the Brown County (Wis.) Health Department, and it is his responsibility to inspect the stadium for food safety violations.

"Never been to Lambeau where there wasn't something," Adams told me during our first meeting.

As I looked through several years' worth of Lambeau Field inspection reports, I realized he wasn't kidding.

"Dirty Dining" stories have been around for years and, unless everything you eat comes from your own kitchen, they are hard to ignore. I recall being grossed out as I have watched or read at least a dozen television and newspaper reports, each detailing a myriad of culinary no-no's at local restaurants. The key to each of these stories was a health department inspection report and, in most cities, such reports are easy to get your hands on.

This investigation was no different – except for the restaurant. I figured any place that serves 10,000 slices of pizza, 35,000 bratwursts and 45,000 hotdogs in a single Sunday afternoon might be the site of a few safety violations. The hunch was right.

A review of Lambeau Field's food safety inspection reports revealed dozens of problems – some big, some small. Among the violations:

- Hamburgers only partially cooked.
- Utensils considered dirty or "overgrown with mold."
- No warm water in hand-washing sinks.
- Debris in beer taps.
- Food service employees licking their fingers, touching their nose or touching their mouth, then handling more food without washing their hands.
- Food service workers seen putting on the same plastic gloves they had taken into a bathroom with them, and not washing their hands in the kitchen after leaving the restroom to return to work.
- Some hotdogs, brats, chili, hamburgers, subs, pasta, ribs, sour cream and shrimp maintained at potentially unsafe temperatures.

Despite what he has seen, Adams says he does not hesitate to eat the food served at Lambeau Field. He does not know whether fans would feel the same way.

"Certainly the public, if they see those things, would be a little disgusted," Adams told me. The sanitarian says few people have ever asked to see the Lambeau Field inspection reports, which are available for public viewing at the health department, two miles from the stadium.

Both the Green Bay Packers and its food service provider, Levy Restaurants, agreed to talk about the inspections on camera. They also provided WITI access to one of its food-prep kitchens and all of its stadium concession areas. Both the Packers and Levy defended the stadium's safety record, insisting that all violations are isolated incidents that are dealt with immediately.

"Any time you have 70,000 friends coming by, it certainly is a complicated process," a Packers spokesman told me.

After spending one afternoon at the health department and another at the stadium, I had plenty of documentation, interviews and video for the story. What I did not have was perspective. With my deadline still six weeks away, I launched an all-out FOIA blitz to obtain food safety inspection reports for as many NFL stadiums as possible.

The hardest part: figuring out where to find the records. Depending on the stadium you are interested in, the inspection reports could be maintained by a town, a city, a state or even a university. I created a spreadsheet to keep track of the appropriate health department for each stadium, my contact within the department, the cost (if any) to obtain each set of records and when I would receive them.

Altogether, I dealt with 29 health departments. Several of the departments e-mailed or faxed me the records at no charge. Some directed me to their Web sites, where the inspection reports are online for easy public access. Other departments made the process much more challenging.

The Metro Public Health Department of Nashville/Davidson County wanted $95 for about 160 pages of inspection reports for the Tennessee Titans' home stadium. Other departments charged expensive copying fees and administrative surcharges.

The Philadelphia Health Department denied my original open records request, explaining that under the Pennsylvania Right to Know Law, the department is not required to fulfill requests submitted by anyone who is not a Pennsylvania resident. When my cousin in Philadelphia later submitted the request on my behalf, I was then told the health department does not know the names of each concession area inside Lincoln Financial Field and, therefore, could

not provide me with individual inspection reports.

The Foxborough (Mass.) Health Agent originally said he would not release Gillette Stadium inspection reports to WITI without a subpoena because "they might contain damaging information." The Foxborough Board of Health later released the records after I challenged that position.

Within a few weeks, I had thousands of pages of inspection reports from football stadiums all over the country. I made another database – this time to keep track of all of the violations. Among the most notable:

- Inspectors found rodent droppings in or around food service areas at NFL stadiums in Minnesota, Cleveland and Pittsburgh.
- Inspectors found "slime mold" inside ice machines at Paul Brown Stadium in Cincinnati. The Cincinnati Health Department noted a food service employee had been working at the stadium despite being diagnosed with E. coli poisoning.
- At Gillette Stadium, home of the New England Patriots, an inspector observed "blood driping onto [beer] kegs" (sic) from raw meat sitting above the kegs in a cooler. Inspectors also noted "moldy salsa," "no hot water in hand washing sinks" and "employee dropped a bag of [pasta] shells on the floor and reused." (Now you know why he wanted that subpoena.)

The biggest surprise came at Soldier Field in Chicago.

The Chicago Health Department provided hundreds of pages of inspection records, and the documents showed very few violations. In fact, the stadium looked nearly violation-free. That's when I noticed the date on the inspection reports – May 17, 2005. As any Chicago Bears fan knows, there is not much happening at Soldier Field on a Tuesday afternoon in May. At the time of Soldier Field's annual food safety inspection, there was no football, no fans and no food at the stadium.

So how do you check for food safety when there is no food?

"You really can't," Adams told me. "You're not going to observe the most common types of violations if you don't inspect on game day."

The Chicago Health Department says it gets too hectic during game conditions to perform an inspection. Of course, even if things were not busy on game day, Chicago's food safety inspectors don't get paid to work nights or weekends, so they don't.

The reality in Chicago is that hundreds of thousands of meals are prepared and served at Soldier Field each year and not one of those meals will be inspected by anyone at the Chicago Health Department – at least not until the Bears start playing on Tuesday afternoons.

Bob Segall recently joined the staff of WTHR-Indianapolis. He produced the stadium food investigation while reporting at WITI-Milwaukee, where his investigations were honored with a Peabody and more than 50 other awards in the past five years.

EDITOR'S CORNER

In-depth online project offers unprecedented interactivity

ERIC CONRAD

Block by block, Maine's largest city was changing.

Low interest rates, a great quality of life and an influx of well-heeled Boston retirees triggered half-a-dozen major real-estate projects in Portland last year. The list includes a $110 million Westin hotel where a meat-packing plant once bustled, and a nine-story condominium tower on land that is home to an Italian café.

One of the projects even boasts a $5 million penthouse. Sure, the suite comes with great ocean views and 24-hour doormen. But $5 million? In Portland, Ore., maybe.

Last June, after reporting a handful of A1 stories about a hotel there and a condo tower there, we asked ourselves: What's going on here? What's the city's plan? Or is there one? While we're at it, what challenges do the people who live in our surprisingly diverse, and increasingly expensive, city of 65,000 face?

A project eventually named "Portland at a Crossroads" was born.

We had high expectations from the outset, but we usually do. A typical year for our newspaper includes at least a dozen series or "projects." We have a talented newsroom of 108 journalists, led by editors who have guided efforts like this many times before.

This time we tried to be different in our approach and, especially, online. We wanted to publish stories that would surprise long-time Portland residents. We wanted to take a major step forward by tailoring parts of the project exclusively to our MaineToday Web site and by offering readers more interactivity than they had ever seen from us.

Here is what we did well:

- We assigned three reporters to the project and told them: "Just go out and talk." Ask music-store clerks, barbers, skateboarders and city planners what they think about Portland. What's going right and what's going wrong? Don't suggest; just ask and listen. Do 30 interviews in two weeks. We will meet again and see where we stand.

  This approach paid off. Our news staff knew, for example, that real-estate prices in Greater Portland were soaring. We had done many stories on this. But we did not know that middle-class families felt they were being squeezed out of Portland, a city where many of them had been born and raised – as were their parents and grandparents. These families were moving to rural towns 30 and 45 minutes away by economic necessity, not by choice.

  We knew that Portland is quite diverse – roughly one resident in seven is from an ethnic or racial minority. But we did not know how some people in those communities resent being served by an overwhelmingly white professional class – teachers, accountants, lawyers, doctors. We did not know that children "of color" view this as one of Portland's great weaknesses, and list it as a reason why they move away for college or their first full-time job.
- We "thought big" with our MaineToday Web site from the outset. At our second "Portland project" staff meeting, we did not talk about our stories at all. Instead, we saw an hour-long video of the innovative, interactive winners of the 2004 Batten Awards for Innovations in Journalism. One entry really impressed us – *The Providence Journal*'s "Saving Block Island" project.

  It also bugged us that Providence had done something so advanced and we had not. (We think we're bigger than we are.) We decided to match what the *Journal* had done, or come as close as we could. MaineToday editor Scott Hersey and Web designer Wendy Clark used Flash technology to build a project site that, for us, included unprecedented visual display and interactivity. The series online includes audio interviews with key sources, chat areas, and a slide-show Q&A with yours truly about the newsroom's approach.

Not everything was perfect. Here is what we learned:

- We could have planned even better than we did. Late in the game, we changed the name of the project, because some copy editors and staffers were confused by the original choice, "Whither Portland?"

  That is no big deal for a newspaper, really, because a headline change can be done right up until deadline. But our online presentation – all the way down to the cursive fonts we had chosen

CONTINUED ON PAGE 38 ➢

Eric Conrad has been managing editor of the Portland Press Herald/Maine Sunday Telegram since 2001. He is president of the New England Society of Newspaper Editors. The "Portland at a Crossroads" project can be seen at http://pressherald.mainetoday.com/specialrpts/portlandatacrossroads.

Vegetable farmer Bobby Chambers holds a bag of ice in a tomato field in Cocke County, Tenn., showing how he faked a hailstorm to allow other defendants to collect bogus insurance payouts. Chambers testifed for the government and got two years probation for his role in the scheme.

FARM FELONIES

Crop fraud scams cost taxpayers millions, political connections hinder prosecutions

By John Burnett
National Public Radio

Crop insurance fraud.

The title alone is enough to induce the onset of narcolepsy. What is crop insurance, how do you defraud it, and (my editor asked me), why in the hell should I care? But after a nine-month investigation, what I found was astonishing: a $47 billion program tailor-made for fraud, with scant internal controls and thousands of good old boys ripping it off. Our three-part series, "Fraud Down on the Farm," aired Nov. 14-16 on Morning Edition.

It all started with a tip from a U.S. attorney in Jackson, Miss., who told me about widespread crop insurance fraud.

Most farmers depend on crop insurance to get them through bad years when drought, hail, freeze or flood ruins their crops. But since the 67-year-old program was privatized in the mid-1990s, government investigators have uncovered persistent fraud and abuse. They call them "insurance farmers." The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) reports these types of scams cheated the U.S. Treasury out of $160 million in 2004, and a USDA-funded data mining firm in Texas discovered that at least 2,000 farmers a year file suspicious claims.

The lead report in our series focused on the largest agriculture insurance scam ever uncovered by the USDA. A North Carolina farming couple, Robert and Viki Warren, swindled the government out of more than $9 million using tens of thousands of bogus documents. Investigators proved the Warrens falsified planting dates, farming history, acreage, shipping manifests and front producers. They went so far as to stage a hailstorm to make it look like Mother Nature ruined their tomato crop.

I knew I had great tape when one of their former farm managers agreed to re-create the crime.

"We just stood behind it and throwed the ice over the top. It looked to me like a hailstorm," said Bobby Chambers, a beefy vegetable farmer from Cocke County, Tenn., who tossed handfuls of cocktail ice onto the plants as my recorder rolled.

Political clout

Typically, farmers buy an insurance policy on their expected yield, and only collect a check if they suffer losses. But I discovered that some farmers file false claims with the collusion of crooked loss adjustors and insurance agents. Some sabotage their crops through poor farming practices while others never even put seed in the ground.

Normally, insurance companies are watchful for fraud. But because the U.S. Treasury, in the guise of the Federal Crop Insurance Corporation, underwrites the riskiest agriculture policies, sources told me that some crop insurance companies have little incentive to go after dishonest farmers. It's not their money on the line – it's the taxpayers'.

Finally, I showed that crop insurance companies help keep the honey pot full through political clout. Political action committees such as Rain & Hail PAC and the American Association of Crop Insurers PAC have contributed more than $900,000 over the past six years to the campaigns of congressmen who wielded direct influence over the program. In the case of crop insurance, a highly profitable, easily exploitable, poorly policed program happens neither by accident nor in a vacuum.

"The thing that seemed most egregious was the extent to which the industry ran the program. … It wasn't like they wanted to look the other way (when there was evidence of insurance scams), they didn't want anyone looking. They actively tried to prevent us from going out finding criminals," said John Zirschy, former associate administrator at the Risk Management Agency (RMA), the USDA agency that oversees crop insurance.

It was a long journey just to understand the recondite world of crop insurance. The jargon alone

is daunting — "Uh, Mr. Perkins, after Congress passed ARPA, which ordered the RMA and FSA to cooperate with the FCIC to exert more oversight on crop insurance, do you think the SRA tightened up insurance company profits?"

Slowly, the onion revealed itself.

First stop was the official Web site of the USDA Office of Inspector General, which conducts audits of all agriculture programs, particularly the troubled ones, such as federal crop insurance. I found case after case in which farmers had buffaloed the system, with sexy titles such as "Risk Management Agency Review of Large Insurance Claim For Watermelons in South Texas." The RMA's Web site also contained briefs about disciplinary actions taken against farmer/clients.

Next, I spent some time with LexisNexis and Google to find out what had been written about crop insurance fraud. I was heartened that there were precious few news stories, but I got few leads. More helpful were the press releases from U.S. attorneys' offices that had successfully prosecuted insurance farmers. I called those prosecutors, who were eager to brag about their cases, explain the complicated schemes and give me more leads.

As it happened, a few years ago the RMA contracted a data-mining firm, the Center for Agribusiness Excellence, located just up the road from me in Stephenville, Texas. The director, Dr. Bert Little, had a wealth of interesting data that was in the public domain but had never before been published.

Then I discovered an agricultural private investigator who had testified as an expert witness in most of the government's big crop insurance fraud prosecutions. John Brown of Columbia, Mo., is the nation's only satellite-imagery farm detective. Initially, Brown told me he never talks to reporters, but I kept calling him, bouncing information off him. Finally, he realized I was serious and offered me vital assistance.

Knowing I was asking unflattering questions, the RMA could have dragged its feet and thrown me curve balls. Instead, the chief of compliance, Michael Hand, and head of public relations, Shirley Pugh, were helpful and forthright throughout. Maybe they figured a little publicity on their overwhelmed and oft-forgotten agency might help them get some needed funding increases. Whatever the reason, they did their best to get figures and check facts when I needed them.

And, once word got around the tiny world of crop insurance that an NPR reporter was poking around, a well-placed source within RMA contacted me and helped me find several on-the-record, blunt-talking sources who felt the system needed reform. I searched out a couple of current and former USDA officials to reality-test my conclusions and number crunching: Ken Ackerman, former RMA administrator and now a lobbyist and author, and Keith Collins, USDA's chief economist.

After I learned additional information, I had to re-interview some sources two and three times to finally get past the spin and get plain-spoken answers. I am grateful to the unflagging support of NPR managing editor Bill Marimow, national editor Ellen Weiss, regional editor Bebe Crouse and, finally, series editor Dan Charles for giving me the time to work on this story periodically over nine months.

Fraud investigation

I knew from the beginning the key to drawing listeners into the arcane world of crop insurance was finding a slam-dunk case. That was the Rotten Tomato Caper. The assistant U.S. attorney who made the case, Richard Edwards, of Asheville, N.C., had become a self-taught expert in crop insurance fraud over the course of his three-year investigation. I had to wait seven months for the Warrens to be sentenced before he would talk to me on the record, but when I finally sat down in his office it was well worth it.

"The American taxpayer is getting defrauded out of millions and millions of dollars. The Warrens are in no way unique," he said.

Throughout the project, I was in a road race. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) was hot on the same trail. Sen. Susan Collins, chair of the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, had requested an investigation of fraud and abuse in the nation's crop insurance system. Every couple of months, I would check in with her staff investigator, who would ask me what I had learned, as I warily asked him what he knew.

The committee was considering holding hearings on the issue in fall 2005. But then, Hurricane Katrina stole the spotlight and Sen. Collins was sidetracked. The GAO did, however, release a report, "Crop Insurance: Actions Needed to Reduce Program's Vulnerability to Fraud, Waste, and Abuse." The report came out a week before our series aired, giving us a nice tailwind.

John Burnett has been a correspondent for National Public Radio based in Austin, Texas, since 1986. His investigative reporting won a 2004 Edward R. Murrow Award and a 2003 National Headliner Award.

John Brown of Columbia, Mo., is the nation's only satellite-imagery farm detective. He has testified as an expert witness in most of the government's big crop insurance fraud prosecutions.

Resources

Agriculture is a terrific area for investigative reporting because the dollar amounts are huge; waste, fraud and abuse are endemic; and there are not many journalists snooping through the crop fields. Remember that *The Kansas City Star* won the 1992 Pulitzer for National Reporting for its seven-part expose on waste and flawed policy-making at the USDA. The following resources came out of Burnett's crop insurance fraud investigation and other stories he's done in the area of agriculture fraud.

To find out about investigations and/or prosecutions in your part of the country, go to the USDA's Office of Inspector General Web site and snoop around the audits, news releases and semi-annual reports:
www.usda.gov/oig/audits.htm

The Risk Management Agency has become more aggressive in going after fraud and now publicizes recent fines and administrative actions against farmers on the front page of its Web site:
www.rma.usda.gov

A helpful source for agricultural and other types of insurance fraud is Dennis Jay, head of the Coalition Against Insurance Fraud:
www.insurancefraud.org

Listen to NPR's three stories and see the Web pages that accompany them:
www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5009836
www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5012400
www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5013871

Other stories Burnett has done on agriculture fraud:
www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1960385
www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4210325

SUSPECT CONTRACT

Discretionary power held by district attorney highlights possible detainee rights violations

BY ALBERTO PONCE DE LEÓN
EL DIARIO DE EL PASO

I had been working in El Paso as a reporter for nine months, trying to adjust to U.S. culture and its idiosyncrasies when I came across something that further jarred me: the routine detainment of suspects by the district attorney that appeared to violate the U.S. Constitution.

After a 60-day investigation that included open records requests, interviewing officials and studying state and federal law, I found a practice that had already been in place for more than a decade and that no local media appeared to take seriously.

My report in *El Diario De El Paso* would result in an investigation by the American Civil Liberties Union and changes in how detainees are handled by the district attorney's office.

It all began when I was interviewing Theresa Caballero, a local attorney voicing her opposition to the discretionary power held by the district attorney on determining domestic violence cases. The District Attorney's Information Management System (DIMS) gave the office the authority to determine probable cause of detainees arrested by police as well as set their corresponding bond *prior* to their appearance before a magistrate judge – a right guaranteed by the Constitution. Records showed more than 4,000 people are arrested annually in El Paso under the DIMS program, and then freed on bail without ever appearing before a judge.

According to Caballero, Sam Snoddy, another lawyer with a 30-year career, spent at least two of them studying DIMS and the elements that – in the name of "efficient procedural arrests" – made it illegal.

After making a contact list, I studied certain parts of the Texas Penal Code pertaining to the application of DIMS. Lawyers, judges and former judges interested in DIMS agreed that the process presented irregularities; but, as I found out later, the real fault in DIMS was in the service contract between the district attorney, the county and the city.

Public policy debate

Using the Texas Open Records Act, I requested the county's most recent DIMS contract, as well as information on the number of people that were processed under it from 2004 to 2005. The records showed that DIMS' annual cost to taxpayers was more than half a million dollars, with the city footing more than 67 percent of the bill.

Specifically, up until Aug. 31, 2004, the contract stated the city was to pay the district attorney close to $370,000 for services rendered in the process of arrests – an amount payable in monthly installments or by semester. The municipal government made those payments available through the city's Police Department. And, it was precisely this payment structure that led me to believe the greatest conflict created by DIMS was that the police were issuing checks to the district attorney. I asked myself: How can a detainee have the slightest impression his rights are safe if the police officer arresting him is, in fact, paying the district attorney for his services?

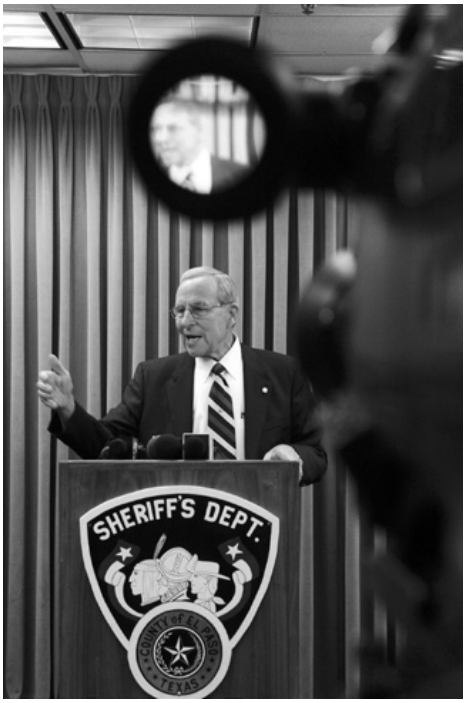
Hicmar Falcon | El Diario de El Paso

El Paso District Attorney Jaime Esparza created the DIMS project in 1995, which some lawyers now claim is illegal.

I found that at least 14,000 people were processed under DIMS every year. Close to 4,200 were bailed out of jail. The bond was set with a pre-established tabulator and suspects were never taken in front of a magistrate. Whether many people were perhaps unjustly put behind bars will remain a question for more debate.

I tried to contact District Attorney Jaime Esparza to talk about DIMS, but despite many messages and even a visit to his home, he never responded.

Hicmar Falcon | El Diario de El Paso



El Paso County Sheriff Leo Samaniego condemned the DIMS program after stories were published.

During the investigation, I received a 13-page report on DIMS written by Larry Cunningham, a professor at Georgetown University and director of the Criminal Justice Clinic at Texas Tech University. "The DIMS contracts are illegal, anti-ethical, and opposed to public policy," Cunningham wrote. "The DIMS contracts should be cancelled right away."

The results of Cunningham's study were later used as evidence in federal civil rights lawsuits against the city and county.

Many days later, I heard the inevitable: Esparza made changes to the new DIMS contract. Compared to the past two, this one established that services "should not stimulate a client-lawyer relationship" between the parties.

But I was not ready to give up just yet.

The only other DIMS program in place in Texas was being applied in Harris County. I got in touch with the system administrator from the sheriff's office. The administrator assured me the DIMS system was used there to make the system of arrests more efficient. He also explained that the detainees were presented before a magistrate to determine if there was probable cause and, if necessary, for the judge to set the bond.

Process reinvented

After we published my story about every aspect of DIMS, County Sheriff Leo Samaniego criticized it. But the district attorney insisted it was the sheriff's office that accepted detainees and set their bonds.

The sheriff's response? "The district attorney is lying," he said.

A couple of months after the story ran, the sheriff called for a press conference to declare he had "never"

Hicmar Falcon | El Diario de El Paso

At least 10 federal lawsuits have been filed for more than $12 million against the city of El Paso for claims of abuse of power and illegal police action. Residents have protested against the DIMS program.

participated in any part of the process and that if the district attorney wanted to imply it, then he was not going to accept detainees in jail. He then asked the district attorney's office to put a halt to the DIMS procedures.

The district attorney tried to reinvent the process by asking for the police department's support. He said that because they were peace officers like the sheriff's department, then they had the ability to determine bonds.

Obviously upset, Samaniego summoned the press to reiterate his position. Now he ordered all suspects to be taken in front of a magistrate.

Currently, the city representatives are looking into possibly terminating DIMS because it does not make economic sense.

Alberto Ponce de Leon is an investigative reporter for El Diario de El Paso. His work has been published in Mexican magazines such as Poceso and Milenio Semanal.

DISCOUNTED VICTIMS

Underreporting of city's sex crimes leads to investigation of police 'crime memos'

BY JEREMY KOHLER
ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

I circled the number in red marker. Eighty-one rapes in a calendar year? In a city as violent as St. Louis?

It didn't seem right. The FBI's uniform-crime report said St. Louis had suffered more than one-quarter of Missouri's violent crimes in 2003, but only 6 percent of the state's rapes. Bucolic New Bedford, Mass., recorded more rapes than St. Louis. So did Sioux Falls, S.D., and a lot of other small cities. How could that be?

St. Louis' tally had been dwindling for a decade. Were St. Louis men better behaved than their brothers in Cleveland or Kansas City? Cheery thought, but unlikely. Had police locked up all the predators? Or was there another explanation? Moreover, with all the crime and policing experts in town (the University of Missouri-St. Louis employs some of the nation's top criminologists), why was I the only one seeing red flags?

I started digging in the fall of 2004. Sources told me officers had a way of keeping crimes – particularly sex crimes – off the books. They would detail some victims' complaints in informal, usually handwritten, "crime memos." No reports were written in these cases, and no crime was counted. The memos would be filed in a drawer and quickly forgotten.

At great risk to themselves, sources slipped me about 70 memos. They detailed serious crimes – rapes, assaults, robberies – that had gone uncounted. In many cases, there was nothing to suggest the victims were being untruthful. By uniform-crime standards, this is supposed to be enough for the crime to be counted. If a report is proven false, it can be labeled "unfounded" and subtracted from the stats – but only if it is proven false.

In an interview last November, Police Chief Joe Mokwa said his officers were not using memos in lieu of reports. The "ethics of the process" dictated that the police correctly report and count incidents, he said. Officers had "no flexibility" to speculate on a victim's truthfulness.

Not in the system

Our public safety editor, Patrick Gauen, detached me from daily reporting in the fall of 2004 to track victims and tell their stories. They were the powerless, the invisible. They were people who were unlikely to check in with detectives. They were the lady who cleans your office at night. The depressed loner living in a subsidized apartment. The single mom from the projects. Drug addicts. Prostitutes. The homeless. Most had no idea they had been discounted.

A single mom, Latisha Williams, could not grasp that the officer who responded to her 911 call had discounted her complaint. So, I took her to police headquarters and stood by while she asked for her police report. The clerk told Williams she was "not in the system." Williams nodded quietly. (My heart broke.)

I faxed the police requesting every memo they had written over the previous 18 months. The department lawyer complained that I was abusing the Sunshine Law. A police commissioner said I was hindering public safety.

The department didn't hand them over. Not to me, anyway. After Thanksgiving, Mokwa appointed a blue-ribbon panel to "independently" audit the department's crime reporting in light of my questions. Former U.S. Attorney Edward L. Dowd Jr., who had assisted in the government's Waco probe, would chair it.

Mokwa said he wanted the department's workings to be transparent. But the panelists met in secret. We threatened to sue if their next meeting was not properly advertised. The panel agreed to meet in public, and we backed off. But the panel never met again.

I published a bruising package over two days in January 2005 using the memos I obtained through sources. I hammered the department for dragging its feet on my records requests. The stories disclosed that Mokwa had quietly ordered an end to memos after my inquiries began.

The police struck back two days later at a meeting of the St. Louis Police Board. The panel, which had never officially met, somehow produced a report. It concluded police should not have written memos. But it said the memos had not cut deeply into crime statistics. Mokwa explained that the department's sex-crime detectives had used memos for at least two decades. But Dowd said memos he reviewed seemed like "weak cases."

I wasn't done. We threatened another lawsuit, and the police finally turned over about 700 memos – including about 200 that concerned sex crimes – on the last week of January 2005.

I started taking rape memos home and became engrossed. Some were garbage – victims who admitted fabricating rapes and abductions. Others seemed like truthful complaints. Why weren't they counted as crimes? I asked the department to turn over the two decades of rape memos. In February, the department lawyer informed me that the police had

periodically destroyed them. Only memos written since 2003 were still in its possession.

There it was: They had destroyed two decades worth of what should have been rape reports, possibly covering the tracks of serial criminals. This went beyond police malpractice in Philadelphia and Atlanta. At least in those cities, shelved rape cases could be exhumed.

There were other problems with St. Louis rape reporting. Detectives were giving women forms to sign that released police from investigating and counting the complaints as crimes, even when officers seemed to have little reason to believe the women were lying. Officers often made judgments on the spot about women reporting rapes, improperly rejecting many complaints that crime experts told me should have been investigated. Police sometimes collected but did not analyze physical evidence that could have identified rapists by their DNA.

Revised numbers

I spent the late spring and summer on the streets tracking more victims. I was amazed at how the poor people in this town live – switching addresses every few days or weeks. I used AutoTrack and LexisNexis and other databases, but those were marginally useful for finding transients.

Victim advocates were outraged that I was contacting rape victims. But I found most victims were grateful that someone was finally paying attention to their cases. In June, I learned police were working long hours to revisit every case they thought I might write about.

"They're going to pull this file and reinvestigate it all of a sudden?" the mother of one victim told me. "How stupid do you think I am?"

I requested an interview with the police in July. Within hours, the police revised their 2004 rape numbers upward by 58 percent. Mokwa said 25 memos from that year had been converted to rapes, and at least 39 lesser crimes were reclassified as rapes. But the department brass insisted that I did not understand uniform crime reporting.

I published a four-day series with 13 stories in August. The story I'm most proud of examined the "independent" audit. I obtained panelists' e-mails and notes through a records request and found they had been giving Mokwa public-relations advice. Its final report was penned by the chief's speechwriter.

Community reaction was strong at first but, by the fourth day, Hurricane Katrina had nearly washed the series off of A1. Responses dwindled as the situation worsened in New Orleans.

Mayor Francis Slay has appointed a committee of victims' advocates to review St. Louis police procedures.

Jeremy Kohler covers public safety for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. He also teaches reporting principles and beat reporting at Washington University in St. Louis.

Member news

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5

ing News were awarded a Katie Award from the Press Club of Dallas for investigative reporting in a major market newspaper. Benton and Hacker received the award for their reporting on cheating in Texas schools. ■ **James Heaney** of *The Buffalo News* has received the Hal Hovey Award for his article "The Half-Billion-Dollar Bust." The award is presented by *Governing* magazine and Stateline.org for outstanding journalistic coverage of state and local government. ■ **Matthai Kuruvila**, **Natalya Shulyakovskaya**, **Jaci Smith** and **Mc Nelly Torres** were among the 16 fellows selected to attend a four-day program in November entitled "Disclosing Company Secrets: Finding Hidden Stories in Financial Documents" at the University of California-Berkeley's Western Knight Center for Specialized Journalism. ■ **Fredrik Laurin**, **Joachim Dyfvermark** and **Sven Bergman** of Sweden's TV4 won a special citation award of $2,000 from the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists. Their documentary "The Broken Promise," exposed U.S. government involvement in the transfer of two Egyptian citizens from Sweden back to their homeland. ■ **Charles Lewis**, president of the Fund for Independence in Journalism and founder of The Center for Public Integrity, will be a fellow this spring at Harvard University's Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy. He will focus his research on news media, power and the people's right to know. ■ **Ryan McNeill** is now database editor at *the Oklahoman*. ■ **Dave Moore** has left the *Denton* (Texas) *Record Chronicle* and is with the *Dallas Business Journal* as government, law and sports business reporter. ■ **Anthony Palazzo** is an editor on Bloomberg News' technology team in Los Angeles. He was managing editor of the *Los Angeles Business Journal*. ■ **John Perry** has left his post at *The Oklahoman* to join the database staff at The Center for Public Integrity. ■ **Chris Roberts** is an instructor at the University of South Carolina where he is working on his doctoral degree. He was a reporter at *The State*. ■ **Brian Ross, David Wilson Scott** and **Rhonda Schwartz** of ABC News 20/20 were awarded the Outstanding Investigative Reporting prize for 2005 by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists for "Peace at What Price: Investigating Misconduct in the Congo." ■ **Jonathan D. Salant**, of Bloomberg News, is president of the National Press Club. ■ **James Eli Shiffer**, formerly an assistant metro editor at *The* (Raleigh) *News & Observer*, is the metro life team leader at the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*. ■ **Mitchell Tobin**, a reporter at the *Arizona Daily Star*, was awarded a 2006 Alicia Patterson Fellowship. He will research and write about "Endangered Species of the Southwest." ■ **Mc Nelly Torres** is the consumer watchdog reporter at the *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*. She was a government reporter covering Miami-Dade County. ■ **Ken Ward Jr.,** a reporter at *The Charleston* (W.V.) *Gazette*, was awarded a 2006 Alicia Patterson Fellowship. He will research and write about "The Curse of Coal."

Editor's corner

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 31

– was profoundly affected. It was complicated and tiresome to make changes online with less than a week before launch.

- Although there are ethical issues to consider, you may want reporters to do the audio-taping themselves for online purposes. Reporters are good at interviewing anyway. They will know which questions got surprising answers, answers that best fit their stories.

We ran four letters to the editor. A local leadership group and some at City Hall protested our Day Three mainbar, "A Leadership Void."

The online reaction has been downright vibrant, with some young readers posting comments about how hard it is to make a living in Portland, and tourists saying they simply love our quaint city – so what's the problem?

No one accused of us timidity. Matthew, an online poster from Brunswick, Maine, wrote: "I want to applaud the *Press Herald* for its series on Portland. When many newspapers these days are shirking their responsibility to spark discussion in the communities they serve, this series seems to have done just that."

We'll take that, and we'll try to go even farther next time.

IRE news briefs

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5

was awarded for his revelations that the Nixon administration secretly backed Pakistan in its war with India.

Those whose secrets were brought to public attention by Anderson often struck back. Nixon and his cronies led the pack. But it was not easy to discredit Anderson. He was a family man and a Mormon who neither drank nor smoked.

It wasn't easy to intimidate him, either. In "Peace, War and Politics," Anderson's 1999 memoir, he admitted that he loved a good fight.

"Contrary to popular theology," he wrote, "there is nothing that produces as much exhilaration and zest for living as an ugly, protracted, bitter-end vendetta that rages for years and comes close to ruining both sides."

He experienced all of those things in his career. But he was the one left standing.

"Drew Pearson had taught me that if anyone ever trampled on the Constitutional rights of the column," he wrote, "I should hit back swiftly and with such force that the next person would be forewarned not to tangle with me." With a reported 40 million readers in his heyday, Anderson could hit back to devastating effect.

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- Abigail Sterling Vazquez, KRON-San Francisco

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IRE SERVICES

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Contact: Pia Christensen, pia@ire.org, 405-707-7300

UPLINK – Newsletter by IRE and NICAR on computer-assisted reporting. Published six times a year. Often, *Uplink* stories are written after reporters have had particular success using data to investigate stories. The columns include valuable information on advanced database techniques as well as success stories written by newly trained CAR reporters.
Contact: David Herzog, dherzog@ire.org, 573-884-7711

REPORTER.ORG – A collection of Web-based resources for journalists, journalism educators and others. Discounted Web hosting and services such as mailing list management and site development are provided to other nonprofit journalism organizations.
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