

# Pulitzer Prize reporters tell how they uncovered text scandal

by Jack Harned, Detroit SPJ

Pulitzer prize-winning reporters M.L. Elrick and Jim Schaefer told a Detroit SPJ audience the back-story of their award-winning “sex, lies and texting” stories at the chapter’s annual banquet in Troy April 15.

The two Detroit Free Press staffers were named SPJ Detroit’s “Journalists of the Year” for their work that led to the resignation and conviction of Detroit’s mayor and his chief of staff.

“Covering the city hall beat, we noticed the mayor and his people were using texting a long time before most of us,” Elrick and Schaefer said. “We thought that was an oddity, and wanted to see if all their messaging would reveal stories about how the city was run ...about how they made the decisions that affect all of us.”

Because the texting was done on city-owned devices, they filed Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests to get the messages. They were denied, but got them from sources unrevealed.

“We got a stack of some 14,000 messages, about a foot high,” they said. “We spent weeks reading, analyzing and organizing them ...using high-tech techniques like highlighters, paper clips and post-it notes.”

The messages revealed insights into the acts and motives of the mayor and his associates, including some that can’t be printed in a family newspaper. But it was hard work to separate the relevant from the mundane, and compile the facts that proved the scandals.

“We focused on the crime of perjury,” they said. The messages proved the mayor and his chief of staff lied in court in 2007, in a whistle-blower suit settled at a cost to the city of more than \$14 million.

Throughout the coverage, the Free Press was thoughtful, responsible and sensitive as the story unfolded over many months, Elrick and Schaefer emphasized.

“We tried to give the mayor a day’s notice, to make a response, before running the first story. We found him in Washington, but he didn’t reply. So we gave him one more day.” The story ran on January 23, 2008.

“Before we could go with it, we had to verify ...to be certain the texts were genuine, not a bogus creation made to set us up.” They did this by cross-referencing messages with other documents, including city records obtained via FOIA in a pre-



**ML Elrick**



**Jim Schaefer**

*“Beyond the sex, lies and texts, this concerns us more as journalists and civic watch dogs. Access to the city’s work and jobs should be open equally to all.”*

vious credit card scandal. For example, when the mayor texted that he was in Miami, they verified it from his official schedule and credit card statements.

The Free Press’ editors and Gannett owners “were champs” in supporting their investigations, Schaefer and Elrick emphasized.

“They never hesitated; they even forced the story. It was very expensive, including the legal backing.”

Beyond the perjury case that ended with the resignation and jailing of the mayor and his chief of staff, the text messages revealed other stories.

One was their romantic trip to Colorado, listed on the mayor’s official schedule as “gone fishing.” Another was evidence of irregularities in city bidding and contracting and favoritism for the mayor’s relatives and friends in city hiring.

“Beyond the sex, lies and texts, this concerns us more as journalists and civic watch dogs,” they declared. “Access to

# Free Press duo 'Journalists of the Year'

## Hansen, Crain earn lifetime achievement awards

Detroit Free Press reporters M.L. Elrick and Jim Schaefer won the Journalists of the Year award of Detroit Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists, presented at its annual banquet April 15 in Troy.

The two investigative reporters were honored for uncovering the text messages and reporting the criminal investigation that led to the resignation and conviction of Detroit's mayor and his chief of staff.

The SPJ Chapter also awarded Excellence in Media honors to 122 metro area journalists for their work during 2008, presented Lifetime

Achievement Awards to two veteran Detroit newsmen, and give scholarships to seven students aspiring to careers in journalism.

Young Journalist of the Year honors went to Brian Kaufman, photographer and video journalist for the Detroit Free Press online edition.

The other finalist for the Journalist of the Year award was Bryn Mickle, police reporter of the Flint Journal. Finalists for Young Journalist of the Year were Dustin Dwyer, business and auto industry reporter for Michigan Radio, and Tim Higgins, business reporter covering Chrysler for the Detroit Free Press.

### Lifetime Achievement Awards

Lifetime Achievement Awards were presented to Keith Crain, publisher of Automotive News and editor-in-chief of Crain's Detroit Business, and Rod Hansen, a WJR Radio news reporter for 38 years.

Crain is chairman and editorial director of Crain Communications Inc., publisher of more than 30 busi-



**Lifetime Achievement Award winner Rod Hansen, left, with Detroit SPJ President Colleen Clement and David Ashenfelter of the Detroit Free Press, right.**

EILEEN HARNED PHOTOGRAPHY

ness and consumer magazines in the U.S. and Europe and an active leader in numerous civic and charitable organizations in the Detroit area. Hansen won 50 national, state and local broadcast journalism awards for covering major stories and produced award-winning documentaries on Michigan's criminal justice system, abuses of open housing laws, and unscrupulous practices by car dealers during his career at WJR.

### Longtime Members Honored

As the national SPJ organization is celebrating its centennial this year, the Detroit chapter honored three of its long-time members at the banquet.

John K. Sterling, Jr., retired communications officer of the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority, and Ervin Dewey Little, who still edits the Construction Association of Michigan's magazine, have been members of the chapter for 60 years. John Teahen, Jr., senior editor and columnist at Automotive News, has been a member for 50 years.

### Seven Scholarships Awarded

Scholarships were presented by the Detroit SPJ chapter to seven students aspiring to careers in journalism. The chapter's \$2,500 Lawrence Laurain Scholarship was presented to Yvette Lanier, a senior at Michigan State University. The award is named for the late newspaper editor and SPJ chapter president. Other scholarship awards were given to Amanda C. Harmon, Eastern Michigan University; Jessica Vosgerchian, Andy Kroll and Stephanie Steinberg, University of Michigan; Ilissa Gilmore, Wayne State University, and Danny Hopkins, Eastern Michigan University.

### Excellence In Media Awards

The Excellence in Media awards are presented annually for outstanding news reporting and analysis in Detroit metro area publications, broadcast and internet media. Winners are selected in various categories including news and sports reporting, column and editorial writing, photography and graphics.

This year's contest received 325 entries from Detroit area news media. Winners were selected by the Chicago, Minnesota and North Central Florida professional chapters of the Society of Professional Journalists.

"Our SPJ chapter is proud to recognize and honor the best work of our professional colleagues at this event," said Colleen Clement, chapter president.

"The quality of the work recognized by these awards proves that our region is well-served by the quality news-gathering and interpretation coming from its many news organizations."

# Here's your 2009 ballot for Detroit SPJ

Members of the Detroit Chapter SPJ have until Aug. 15 to vote for this year's election slate. Five names have been proposed by the election committee to serve on the board of directors for two years. All are incumbents. Nominees are:

## \_\_\_\_ Jack Harned

Harned is senior partner at AutoCom Associates, retired General Motors public relations executive, and former reporter for a daily in Wisconsin. During his 35-year career at GM, he held responsibilities for strategic communications at GM's world headquarters in Detroit, for European public relations based in London and Brussels, and for environmental news media relations in Detroit. At GM's former AC Electronics Division, he served on the communications team for NASA's Apollo program and other aerospace programs. Prior to his General Motors career, he was a reporter for the Wisconsin State Journal in Madison and press secretary to U.S. Senator William Proxmire in Washington, D.C. He has served on the Detroit SPJ board since 2002.



## \_\_\_\_ Janet Mendler

Mendler is a staff representative for the Michigan Press Association Foundation, administering the Foundation's scholarship, internship and fund-raising programs. She spent 20 years working for the University of Michigan News Service, where she coordinated media relations with the state's print and broadcast outlets. Before that she was a writer and editor at the Marquette Mining Journal, the Dearborn Press and the Ann Arbor News. The Pinckney resident has served on the Metro Detroit SPJ chapter since 2003; she's also an at-large board member of the Michigan Journalism Hall of Fame serves on the Northern Michigan University Alumni Association board. She earned an undergraduate degree from Northern and a graduate degree from the University of Michigan in journalism and public administration.



## \_\_\_\_ Tom Stanton

Stanton is a journalism professor at University of Detroit Mercy and is a founder of The Voice newspapers in New Baltimore. His guest columns have appeared in many newspapers, including *The New York Times*. He has earned degrees from Michigan State University and Oakland University, and belongs to the Society for American Baseball Research, Friends of the National Baseball Hall



of Fame, and the Mayo Smith Society. He is the author of four baseball books: *Ty and The Babe*, *Hank Aaron and the Home Run That Changed America*, *The Road to Cooperstown* and the Tiger Stadium memoir *The Final Season*, which was named best baseball book of the year as winner of both the Casey and Dave Moore awards. He also edited the *Detroit Tigers Reader* and was named 2008 Michigan Author of the Year by the Michigan Library Association. He is currently secretary for Detroit SPJ.

## \_\_\_\_ Jerome Vaughn

Vaughn joined WDET in 1992 to help chronicle Detroit's comeback and let people know that the city is improving. His interest in news reporting began when he was four years old, when his mom bought him a yellow Panasonic ball and chain radio. He listened to news on it all the time and took inspiration from Walter Cronkite, Charles Collingwood and Eric Sevareid. He joined the Detroit SPJ board in 2007. In his spare time Jerome enjoys gardening, spending time with his wife and seven children....and coaching his kids' soccer teams. Jerome also runs the news department's internship program and serves as a mentor for NPR's Next Generation Radio Project.



"It's so important to get the next generation of public radio news producers involved in the process right now. We can't afford to let them choose their career path, without at least considering public radio. So, I'm doing my part to get young people around the country interested in what we do at WDET."

## \_\_\_\_ Ann Zaniewski

Ann Zaniewski is a reporter for The Oakland Press, a 65,000-circulation daily in Pontiac. She has worked for the paper for five years and covers courts. A member of SPJ since 2002, Ann has been active in the Detroit Pro chapter since 2006. She recently attended the Leadership Conference at SPJ National Headquarters in Indianapolis. Ann works to recruit new members as the chapter's membership chairwoman. She is an Oakland University graduate and lives in Troy.



**Mark ballot, return to:**  
 SPJ Detroit  
 PO 279  
 Armada, MI 48005

**Or e-mail your vote to:**  
[detroitspj@comcast.net](mailto:detroitspj@comcast.net)

**Deadline: Aug. 10, 2009**

## What a weekend!

I recently attended the Ted Scripps Leadership Institute, an annual conference in Indianapolis that helps SPJ members learn about their leadership style, improve their interpersonal skills and get ideas to grow and strengthen local chapters. About 50 professionals and students from across the county participated.

The Institute was jam-packed with activities. We each took a test that thoroughly assessed our behavioral and leadership patterns with a goal of helping us better understand ourselves and the best ways to work with others. Everyone swapped ideas about membership, programming and chapter operations. I couldn't take notes fast enough!

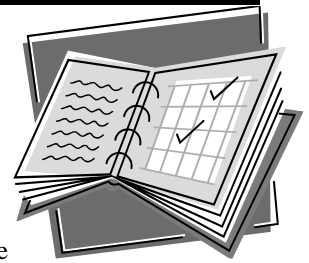
SPJ President Dave Aeikens spoke about SPJ's continuing commitment to journalists as our industry is going through major, and often painful, transitions. An example of this is the recent unveiling of a six-month dues waiver for members who have been recently laid off.

I left the Ted Scripps Leadership Institute feeling inspired, refreshed and excited about journalism and SPJ. The Institute, which is funded primarily through a grant from the Scripps Howard Foundation, is an excellent example of the many worthwhile activities SPJ offers its members.

Check our Web site, [www.spj.org/detroit](http://www.spj.org/detroit), to learn about ways you can get involved.

*Ann Zaniewski,  
Detroit SPJ Membership Chair*

## Mark your calendar ....



### Aug. 27-30

Join journalists from across the country for the 2009 SPJ Convention and National Journalism Conference in Indianapolis. Highlights include 60 professional development sessions and half-day training workshops. Details and registration at [www.spj.org](http://www.spj.org).



### Local panel debates Federal Shield Law

"Would You Go to Jail?" was the topic at a Detroit SPJ panel earlier this year. About 85 local journalists gathered to hear (from left) Kevin Dietz of WDIV-TV, Chief U.S. District Court Judge Gerald Rosen, First Amendment attorney Herschel Fink and Federal Judge Avern Cohn discuss a proposed Federal Shield Law. The topic was timely, since *Detroit Free Press* and Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist David Ashenfelter had refused to identify a source in a lawsuit brought by former federal prosecutor Richard Convertino. Ashenfelter was facing the threat of jail time.

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**Can't wait for your next newsletter?**  
Check the Detroit SPJ website at [spj.org/detroit](http://spj.org/detroit)