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Profile in Public Integrity: Jeff Gottlieb

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Profiles in Public Integrity: Jeff Gottlieb



Jeff Gottlieb is a senior writer at the Los Angeles Times. He shared the Pulitzer Prize for public service in 2011 for uncovering corruption in Bell. He also received the George Polk and the Selden Ring awards, among others. He previously won a Polk award while working at the San Jose

Mercury News for uncovering Stanford's questionable spending of federal funds. He received a bachelor's in sociology from Pitzer College in Claremont and a master's in journalism from Columbia University.

COLUMBIA LAW SCHOOL
JEROME GREENE HALL
435 WEST 116TH STREET
NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10027
(212) 854-6186
WWW.LAW.COLUMBIA.EDU/CAPI

Public corruption has been a salient theme in your work as an investigative journalist in California. How and why did you decide to pursue issues of public integrity?

Watching public officials is one of the most important jobs of a journalist. People often forget that government officials work for us.

Your reporting on corruption in Bell, California helped expose one of the largest local government scandals in California history. What led you to start investigating the city?

In June 2010, Ruben Vives was covering southeastern Los Angeles County, a region we call the “Alley of Corruption.” He learned that the city of Maywood was so screwed up the city council was taking the unprecedented act of laying off nearly all its employees.

Maywood cut deals with the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department to patrol the town, and with Bell, its southern neighbor, to take over city services. This is when I got called to work on the story.

During our reporting, Ruben and I heard rumors of corruption investigations. I asked the head of the district attorney's Public Integrity Division, David Demerjian, which investigates public officials, if his unit was looking at Maywood.

He said other agencies were investigating, but he wouldn't tell us which ones. We hadn't heard any rumors of corruption about Bell, so I'm not sure why I asked him the next question: “What about Bell?”

Demerjian said his office had received a complaint that council members were making nearly \$100,000 a year for their part-time jobs. According to state law, he said, the council should be making \$4,800 a year. Our first story about Bell was about the council salaries.

Those salaries reminded me of a story I had written in 1993 about the East Palo Alto Sanitary District when I worked for the San Jose *Mercury News*. East Palo Alto, one of the poorest cities in the Bay Area, was a much different town than Palo Alto.

My story showed that the district spent more money on parties than it did repairing sewer lines, and its part-time directors traveled around the country at district expense, staying at fancy hotels and eating expensive meals. The district had also spent \$1.8 million to build a new headquarters, the nicest building in the city, driving up its customer charges to the highest in the Bay Area.

After my story appeared, one of its directors, a Harvard graduate who had spent time at Stanford law school, was charged with theft.

The salaries in Bell seemed to echo what I had found in East Palo Alto. I figured if Bell council members were being paid nearly \$100,000 a year, they must be ripping off the city in other ways.

The next day Ruben and I drove to Bell to ask for documents under the California Public Records Act. We were off and running.

When investigating public corruption, what are the greatest impediments to your work? What are the greatest rewards?

The greatest impediments are: (1) government officials who won't give you documents you're entitled to receive, forcing you to sue; and (2) convincing people to talk to you. The greatest reward is to see things change because of stories I've written.

Many commenters have raised concerns about declining coverage of state- and local-level government in the US media. Why is this trend so worrisome? What can be done about it?

Bell was a great example. If journalists aren't watching government officials, who is? It's also easy for officials to ignore local citizens who don't have the resources or knowledge to fight them.

Media companies must be persuaded that it is in their interests to cover state and local governments. Maybe if there were more interesting articles, more people would read their papers. This is also a place where college and university journalism programs can pick an uncovered area and give students real world practice.

How can practitioners in the public integrity field build more productive relationships with investigative journalists to work together to root out corruption?

The best thing you can do is built a relationship with a reporter so that he or she trusts you. If you have an idea about corruption, call or send an email to a reporter. But don't just base this on a hunch. Reporters are busy people who must constantly decide how to spend their time. Try to find evidence, such as documents that raise questions.

How can CAPI help enhance the ability of journalists like you to investigate corruption?

By holding conferences that get more journalists interested in looking at corruption, by helping them understand the tools available, and by providing experts who can add context to stories.