



**News release**

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Contact: Al Cross, director, 859-257-3744 cell 502-682-2848 [al.cross@uky.edu](mailto:al.cross@uky.edu)

**NORTH CAROLINA COUPLE WITH TWO-YEAR-OLD NEWSPAPER WIN GISH  
AWARD FOR COURAGE, INTEGRITY, TENACITY IN RURAL JOURNALISM**



Jonathan and Susan Austin of the Yancey County News in Burnsville, N.C., are the winners of the 2012 Tom and Pat Gish Award for courage, integrity and tenacity in rural journalism.

The Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues, based in the School of Journalism and Telecommunications at the University of Kentucky, presents the award in honor of the couple who published *The Mountain Eagle* in Whitesburg, Ky., for more than 50 years. Tom Gish, who died in 2008, and his wife Pat were the first recipients of the award. *(Photo by Bill Sanders, Asheville Citizen-Times)*

“The Austins showed courage in starting a second newspaper in a one-newspaper town, in January 2011, then demonstrated courage, tenacity and integrity by their reporting on local corruption,” said Al Cross, director of the Institute.

The weekly paper reported in its first edition about a state investigation of vote-fraud allegations, then analyzed records obtained from investigators to report that the county had an unusually high number of absentee ballots, many of which were witnessed by employees of the county sheriff’s department and cast by criminal defendants, some of whose charges were soon dropped.

The paper revealed that the county's chief deputy, the arresting officer in several cases in which the suspects immediately voted and were given leniency, was also pawning county-owned guns for personal gain. He has resigned and pleaded guilty to failing to discharge his duties. The vote-fraud investigation continues.

The Austins were nominated by Roy L. Moore, dean of the College of Communication at Middle Tennessee State University in Murfreesboro and author of the textbook *Media Law and Ethics*. He helped start the Institute for Rural Journalism when he was at Kentucky and is one of its academic partners.

After an unannounced visit to the paper, Moore wrote, "Susan and Jonathan are essentially a two-person operation, which is quite remarkable, given the comprehensive, hard-hitting, public-service journalism they practice in their weekly publication. I was highly impressed with their strong commitment to, and practice of, the highest standards of professional journalism, ethics and public interest. They do so knowing full well that some public officials may chastise and even attempt to punish them."

Moore, a native of Hazard, Ky., concluded by calling the Austins "role models for other rural journalists . . . They represent and symbolize the best in our noble profession, and the Yancey County News is the quintessential great rural newspaper."

The award committee that unanimously endorsed Moore's nomination included Ben Gish, son of Tom and Pat Gish and editor of *The Mountain Eagle*. He said, "Even though it occurred a few decades apart, I get the same feeling from looking at the examples of their work as I do when I look at copies of the *Eagle* when my parents were just getting started in the late 1950s."

Upon getting the news, Jonathan Austin said, "We are humbled and honored to receive the Gish Award. Good journalists can spend their careers doing important work, yet they may never receive recognition other than an occasional tip of the hat from their neighbors. To be recognized by the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues for our work reporting on the events in Yancey County is especially nice because the institute strives to strengthen the small, rural media in Appalachia."

Another judge, Dr. Nancy Green, wrote, "The spirit of small community, making positive change journalism with limited resources and fearlessness in the Jonathan and Susan Austin entry is the essence of the Gishes' legacy that we honor with this award." Green is executive director of external relations for Ivy Tech Community College in Richmond, Ind.

The Austins' efforts have also been honored by the Ancil Payne Award for Ethics in Journalism and the E.W. Scripps Award for Distinguished Service to the First Amendment. A Scripps judge wrote that the paper practiced hard-nosed journalism "in a rural county where government is entrenched, across generations in at least one office, sheriff; and with officials used to operating with a disregard for public scrutiny and accountability . . . ."

The judge, First Amendment Center Executive Director Gene Policinski, wrote that the paper was "the first news organization in many years, if ever, to challenge those in power, and at risk to its circulation, survival and even concerns about the personal safety of its small staff."

Jonathan Austin told the Asheville Citizen-Times this year that he had never been directly threatened but had seen examples of indirect intimidation – but also support from people in Yancey County, which has a population of about 17,000.

"There has been a war waged on us in this community by the people whose foibles or criminality we have exposed," Austin told Dan Cooper of The Awl, an online journal. For more background on the Austins, see this item on The Rural Blog, published by the Institute: <http://irjci.blogspot.com/2012/06/editor-of-year-old-prize-winning-weekly.html>.

Besides Tom and Pat Gish, other winners of the award have been the Ezell family, publishers of The Canadian (Tex.) Record, in 2007; former publisher Stanley Dearman and Publisher Jim Prince of The Neshoba Democrat of Philadelphia, Miss., in 2008; and Samantha Swindler, editor-publisher of the weekly Headlight Herald in Tillamook, Oregon, for her work as editor of the daily Times-Tribune in Corbin, Ky., and managing editor of the Jacksonville (Tex.) Daily Progress, in 2010; and Stanley Nelson and the Concordia Sentinel of Ferriday, La., in 2011. Nominations for the 2013 award are welcome at any time before Sept. 1, 2013.

The Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues was created to help rural journalists define the public agenda in their communities, through strong reporting and commentary. It has academic partners at 28 universities in 18 states. It offers help to rural journalists on its Web site, [www.RuralJournalism.org](http://www.RuralJournalism.org), on The Rural Blog at <http://irjci.blogspot.com>, and through seminars, conferences and publications.