

12.17.2011

AL SMITH

3297 Malone Dr.

Lexington, Ky. 40513 ,

Al Cross, Professor and Director,
Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues,
And Gish Award Selection Committee
University of Kentucky
Lexington, Kentucky
Re: Tom and Pat Gish Award

Gentlemen:

I am pleased to nominate for the 2011 Gish Award the weekly Concordia Sentinel in Ferriday, La. and the paper's editor, Stanley Nelson.

As a reporter for the Sentinel, Nelson started digging after hearing of a racial murder that happened 43 years earlier. Four years and more than 150 stories later, a grand jury was convened. His account of what happened is told in the Fall 2011 issue of Nieman Reports of the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard and in a different version in the November/December 2011 issue of Columbia Journalism Review. His story for the Review appears in a special issue of CJR on Past, Present and Future of Journalism in a section of eight articles by eight reporters, headed "The Art of Great Reporting."

Nelson's stories in the Nieman Reports and CJR, a story about his work and his paper in the Los Angeles Times by James Rainey, and awards to Nelson from two universities all reflect the kind of courage in community journalism by Tom and Pat Gish of The Mountain Eagle in Whitesburg, Ky., that is memorialized by the Gish Award.

The murder in December, 1964 of Frank Morris, a 51-year-old African-American businessman, occurred in Ferriday when Morris's shoe repair shop was torched by arsonists, believed to be Ku Klux Klansmen. Morris was sleeping in a back room that night, perhaps unknown to the perpetrators, or perhaps known. Badly burned, he died several days later. His murder, and that of two other black men in the area, all racially motivated, came to Nelson's attention in 2007 when the FBI announced it would take

another look at more than 100 unsolved civil rights era murders, including that of Morris.

Nelson is a member of the Civil Rights Cold Case Project, a collaborative effort supported by universities and media groups across the country. Morris Dees's famed Southern Poverty Law Center at Montgomery, Ala., helped Nelson, but the case for giving him and his paper the Gish Award is (a) how his work on the Morris case bore results; (b) how he was inspired by the owners of the paper, a family named Hanna, one of whom, Sam Hanna, as editor, taught Nelson that when something goes wrong in a community, a journalist's job, even on a small weekly, is to ask why, and then keep digging for answers (cited by Nelson in CJR, Nov./Dec., 2011), and (c) how the paper's owners and their editor were undeterred by threats of bodily harm and loss of business as they pursued the story (see below).

In January, 2011, Stanley Nelson named a living suspect in the 1964 Klan murder of Frank Morris which has led to a Grand Jury investigation. This is after plowing through thousands of documents, interviewing scores of people, and writing more than 150 stories about murders that are more than four decades old.

Last May, he was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in local reporting. He works in a three-person newsroom. He is one of the three and, like many rural editors, has sold ads, delivered his papers — whatever it takes. This year he has received reporting awards from the University of Oregon and Louisiana State University. I strongly urge that the IRJCI give him another.

As state editor of the Times-Picayune some 14 years before the Morris murder, I handled news from Ferriday, across the river from "Natchez under the bluffs," a region known on both sides of the Mississippi River for a tradition of violence, prostitution, gambling, and corrupt cops and judges. Nearly 50 years later, I still shudder at the memory of what it was like to be a threatened black person there, or a reporter who took risks for a story.

I offer this nomination with a profound respect for all in journalism, law enforcement, political office and civic activism who have changed the culture and improved the administration of justice in Ferriday and Concordia Parish.

Sincerely,
AL SMITH

Citations for Courage:

From Nelson in the Nieman Reports: *The owners of the Concordia Sentinel never hesitated in following the story. We knew some would be angered to read about the parish's ugly racial past. Some canceled subscriptions. We were threatened. Our office was burglarized .One irate reader called to find out my ultimate goal. "To solve a murder," I said.*

"You can't do that," she snapped. You're just a reporter!"

From Jim Rainey in the L.A. Times: *"I told Stanley the other day he is the hub in this and everybody else is just a spoke," said David Oppeman, the assistant district attorney who is one of the prosecutors tending to the continuing grand jury proceedings. "He did the work that needed to be done."*

What Nelson told Hank Kilbanoff (Pulitzer Prize winner for *The Race Beat*, co-authored with Gene Roberts) in CJR: *"Every article I wrote presented something new or clarified something. Doing it that way also put me in touch with my readers' attitudes, both good and bad. The newspaper sold well every time I wrote those stories, and the website got busier. But I also encountered hostility. I'd have people tell me, 'You're stirring up those old hatreds,' or "Why're you doing this?' and 'I think it's terrible you're doing this.' I'm sure my owners, the Hannas, the widow and the children of the late Sam Hanna Sr., heard the same thing, but they stood by me the whole way. They trusted me enough to let me go."*

From the Shreveport Times: *The Payne Awards [from the University of Oregon for ethics in journalism], a news release says, recognize journalists "who demonstrate an extraordinary commitment to ethical conduct, even when faced with economic, personal, or political pressure. In conferring the honor (on Nelson) the judges recognized "the huge social, economic, and political pressure on a small-town paper in the South to keep a racially motivated killing in the past.*

"There was great personal risk, even death threats," the judges continued. "There was no doubt of a direct economic impact (on the Concordia Sentinel," both in lost subscriptions and personal expense."

In conclusion, the judges said Nelson's work was "the definition of journalistic courage."

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