

# THE BEST DARN JOURNALISM INTERNSHIP IN CALIFORNIA?

## Summer 2017

First of all you need to know that yes, there's a lot to read here, so if you're not serious about journalism and hearing about what is arguably the best hands-on, blood and guts newspaper summer internship in California, then don't waste your time reading any further.

So, the basics:

### **The Sacramento Valley Mirror:**

Their tagline is 'small, obstinate and fiercely independent'...you get the idea. Last year it was distinguished with 1st Place awards in both Investigative Enterprise Reporting and Freedom of Information from the California Newspaper Publishers Association. Serious, investigative journalists desired. No anti-social media applicants, please.

Location: 40 miles west of Chico, 90 miles northwest of Sacramento  
Summer 2017: hours and weeks negotiable, preferably full-time  
Positions: 2 summer interns; openings for spring and winter interns  
Salary: Interns receive a payment of \$125 per week or \$500 per month from the newspaper and are eligible to receive a Rebele stipend of up to \$5,000, based on a full-time, 12-week internship.

### **What can you tell me about Tim Crews?**

- \*A few years ago, he went to jail for five days for refusing a judge's order to divulge his confidential sources.
  - \*He's a phenomenon...Look up working journalist in the dictionary, and there you'll see his face.
  - \*His paper has the only regular "atheist column" in the country, written by a man who also assembles the religion page.
  - \*He kicks butt.
- (go to the end of this email to read an in-depth commentary of the infamous Mr. Crews)

### **How do I apply?**

Contact Tim at (530) 934-9511 or vmtim@pulsarco.com (copying kwheeler@stanford.edu).

## **Application Deadline April 1st**

**What else can you tell me about the internship?** (this is the long part, so print this out for some inspirational bedtime reading). Here are recommendations from former Stanford interns:

### **Elizabeth Titus**

Interning at the Sacramento Valley Mirror in 2009 helped me break into a career in journalism, which has taken me to Washington, D.C., where I now cover national politics. I am grateful I got to work for Tim in Willows, and I hope today's students will avail themselves of the same opportunity: to learn and grow at one of the smallest, toughest, most unique papers in California.

### **Rahul Kanakia**

It was an amazing opportunity, and I managed to learn more about real, working journalism in one summer than in three years at the Stanford Daily. On my second day, when I was sent out to the county jail to interview a man who was being held for attempted murder, I knew that this position was going to give me opportunities to cover the kind of stories I had never even thought of previously.

Over the next three months, I was dispatched to accident and crime scenes as they came up on the scanner. I covered city council meetings and rallies. I got the opportunity to improve my lamentably poor photography skills. I also did an extended series on groundwater rights, which had become a major issue because of the drought. I got to cover the acrimonious debate between environmentalists, small landowners, and large irrigation districts, as they squabbled and took each other to court over the right to exploit the Lower Tuscan Aquifer.

I became a much better journalist because of this opportunity.

### **Gerry Shih**

I'm proud to be the latest trainee to graduate from the boot camp that is the *Sacramento Valley Mirror*. (In April) I packed up all my personal belongings, drove to a town of population 2,000 hidden in the rice fields, dumped my things in my trailer in the almond orchard, and immediately began to fight my battles against corrupt and incompetent government on the back of one scruffy giant of a man. It wasn't luxury, but it was grand journalism. (Some people) know Tim as a crotchety Libertarian, a journalist of the old school with steel that is rarely seen today. Well, he was. He took the reporting skills I had been honing since I was 14 and put my heart on the common person and trained a steely eye on the government. He developed my nose to sniff out a story angle and coached a feel for the issues and elusive subtleties of politics. He's one of the greatest teachers I have ever had.

I wrote a few feature profiles and covered events, but my work mainly intersected with law. I spent hours in the jail to visit a man who defended himself. He lost his case but I followed the story. I capped off my work with a three-part series on the defunct public defender system, after interviewing a quarter of the jail population. When I was in the jail working on the public defenders project, two inmates hesitated and asked me how I could promise that I wouldn't divulge sensitive case information. I replied that I could only give them my word that, as a representative from Tim Crews newspaper, I won't squeal on them. Tim went to jail for his sources. Yeah I heard about that, one said while the other nodded deeply. Okay, what do you want to know?

In the *Mirror*, (Stanford) ha(s) possibly the best training newspaper in the state...the *Valley Mirror* experience...is outstanding.

### **Niraj Sheth (later the 2007 winner of the Daniel Pearl Journalism Memorial Internship)**

It was, hands down, the most valuable summer of my life. If you know Tim Crews, the editor and publisher of this small but fiercely independent newspaper, then you also know that a summer working for him and this paper was an experience that challenged and shaped me as a journalist. And if you know what lurks in the shadows of Willows and Glenn County, then you also know that there's enough there to satisfy even the hungriest journalistic appetites. Sure, I had read newspapers since grade school, and sure, I had written occasionally for the Stanford Daily. But when I arrived in Willows at the end of June, I had little idea what it really meant to be a reporter. The next two months, I was thrown directly into the mix of things - uncovering small-town corruption, bureaucratic red tape, and covering a kind of community I had never lived in before. Im an East Coast boy used to the hustle and bustle of metropolitan areas. After all, I grew up minutes from the Big Apple and now go to school just outside the shadow of the City by the Bay, places slightly different from Glenn County - with its 27,000 residents- and Willows - with a population of just over 6000.

In just my first weeks, I wrote a story on the local politics behind a promised but never-built soccer field in a heavily Hispanic community. A few weeks after that, I penned an article exposing assets hidden by a county supervisor that constituted a conflict of interest with his public duties. And the last piece I had in the *Mirror* was an examination of the county courts archive of search warrants and the disarray they were in.

But there is one story, and one experience, that I doubt I will ever forget. Every year, before the high school football season begins, the *Mirror* runs an article previewing the local teams and their prospects. This year, Tim assigned me to do it. I contacted the Willows High School football coach and arranged for a time that I could shoot some pictures of his team in practice. When I arrived at the field on that afternoon, there was an ambulance on the grass. Something terrible had happened- I knew it. Despite my shock, I tried my best to do my journalistic duties, shooting pictures and trying to find out what exactly happened. I spent the rest of the day on the story, eventually ending up at the local hospital. That's when I heard it - the coach's son had died after collapsing during practice. Tim, who was at the hospital, looked at me gravely and told me I had the story. But, I protested, how could I do the story? I wasn't qualified. How was I going to handle one of the most sensitive stories the paper ever had? Tim didn't budge. The story was mine, he insisted. I was ready, he told me. A few stressful days later, and after a story I am now proud to call mine, I knew he was right. I had become a reporter.

## **Anthony Ha**

If not for Tim Crews, I would probably not be a journalist right now. In my final years at Stanford, feeling that I had unnecessarily limited myself, I drifted away from journalism. For a while, I considered being a lawyer, or an activist, or a teacher. But as graduation approached (and, to be frank, my job options seemed limited), I started looking at newspapers again. And I thought, 'what the heck, I'll apply for that crazy internship I keep getting e-mails about.' It was one of the best decisions I've ever made. Although there were certainly times when he drove me crazy, I've come to realize that Tim is pretty close to being the ideal boss for a young journalist. He's immensely knowledgeable about law, politics, pretty much anything about how his little corner of the world works. But he won't tell you everything at once, and he won't hold your hand. So the Rebele interns at the Valley Mirror are really set loose to explore and learn on their own, and when necessary, we can draw on Tim's knowledge. And above all else, when someone tried to push us around, Tim picked up the phone and pushed right back.

During my time at the Valley Mirror, I did a little bit of everything - I covered City Council meetings, I toured the massive encampment built to house firefighters who were battling a forest blaze, and I had to call the chief of police to get his thoughts about the death of a young boy in a bicycling accident. I also copyedited, took (mediocre) photos, and delivered papers.

The piece I'm proudest of is an examination of Glenn County's ambulance system. Basically, there are only two ambulances in the whole county, and the government hasn't bothered to put any laws into place requiring them to respond in a certain time period. When Tim set me on the story, he just said, 'find out about the ambulance response times.' I turned something in a week later, and about halfway through he shook his head and said, "you haven't got it." Two weeks after that, with guidance from Tim, I turned in a piece that we were both happy with. If nothing else, it really opened my eyes to how things work in small towns.

And by the end of the summer, I realized that I still love journalism, that I'm better at it than anything else, and that I would be crazy to give it up. I'm not as aggressive as Tim, but I'm working on it.

## **Sara Ines Calderon**

My internship at The Sacramento Valley Mirror was a pivotal part of my professional development as a journalist. I didn't realize it at the time, but the skills I learned working new beats, searching for public information, interviewing a vast variety of people, and being thrown into the real world of journalism gave me a key set of skills that most journalists today do not have. I've been fortunate to work in newspapers — The Austin American-Statesman & the San Antonio Express-News — but since I've begun to work in blogs and online media, and I now realize more than ever the importance of the skills I learned at the Mirror to making me a better journalist, one better than those whose entire careers have been spent online. I highly recommend this program to anyone who wants to grow as a journalist and develop skills that will put them at the top of their profession.

## **Elizabeth Aguilar**

I worked with Mr. Crews the summer of 2005 in Willows, Calif., and the experiences my internship gave me cannot be found elsewhere. Mr. Crews is the editor and publisher of an intense and aggressive biweekly newspaper serving at least three counties in northern California. Aside from those duties, he is a photographer who is never afraid to get too close to action or the emotion and an investigative reporter that never lets up. His paper pursues stories that others do not dare touch, and he highlights controversial issues in the community that are often ignored but always present. What means the most to me, however, as I recommend this internship, is that he is a wonderful person to work for.

While I interned at *The Sacramento Valley Mirror*, the small but intensely active staff was kind towards me and they all treated me on the same level as any other peer. Mr. Crews, especially, was generous and helpful as I settled in. He allowed me to follow him on large stories, always pointing out what should be learned. As an employer, he gave me the freedom to choose my stories and even set my own deadlines, as he is considerate of his workers pace and energy. Nevertheless, he was always ready to suggest stories and even provide leads and sources. In addition, he and Donna Settle opened their home to me from the start and their company outside of the workplace is something special to enjoy as well.

I am confident when I say that there is no internship like the one Mr. Crews offers. It changed my approach at journalism for the better, it took my writing and reporting skills to another level very quickly, and the staff offered support and friendship that will last a lifetime.

## **Courtney Yin**

"Ask people to recall two or three of the most important learning experiences of their lives, and they will never tell you of courses taken or degrees obtained, but of brushes with death, of crises encountered, or new and unexpected challenges

and confrontations. They will tell you, in other words, of times when continuity ran out on them, when they had no past experience to fall back on, no rules or handbook. They survived, however, and came back stronger and more adaptable in mind and heart." --Robert Cooper and Ayman Sawad, *Executive EQ*

For me, my time spent as a photographer at *The Sacramento Valley Mirror* was one of those important learning experiences. Of course, I gained a lot of skills: I learned how to develop and print black and white film in a darkroom. I became more adept at digitally processing photos. Slowly but surely, I became more aware of light sources and improved my framing accordingly. My non-existent journalism skills emerged as I learned how to write cutlines and even my own article. There is no doubt in my mind that by the end of the summer, my photography and writing greatly improved. But working for *The Valley Mirror* is not just an average internship at a regular, bi-weekly, small town newspaper. I will forever remember it as the job that made me think long and hard about how I want to spend the rest of my life.

Glenn County is one of the poorest in the state, and it became obvious to me that the people were in dire need of a strong voice. Tim Crews and *The Valley Mirror* is that voice. In a day and age where the media spins every story until it becomes unclear where truth and exaggeration begin, it is almost crystal clear what role *The Valley Mirror* must play. It must speak up for the little guy the one who is powerless against large corporations and the government. And in a county where the little guy needs as much help as possible to survive, Tim Crews is an intimidating combination of knowledge, justice, and morality. I never expected to feel like my work at *The Valley Mirror* was making a difference in people's lives, but it became immediately obvious that we were.

As a photographer, I was asked to take a series of fundraiser photos for the new digital mammography machine for the local hospital. On the surface, the story seemed straightforward: the old one was to be replaced by a newer, digital machine. But there was more to the story was digital really better? Did the old mammography machine truly need to be replaced? As Tim Crews later discovered, the maintenance records for the old machine showed that it was in working condition, and digital mammography machines are only as good as the doctors who can analyze the results. If not for *The Valley Mirror*, who else would publish the news?

An internship at *The Valley Mirror* means an opportunity to work with an awe-inspiring editor. He digs a little deeper to get the entire story, and has made strong friends and enemies as a result. His intentions are just and noble and good, and he has sacrificed a lot for the small town of Willows. Tim Crews is the kind of person that reminds us all that we have a very powerful voice and can either use it for good or waste it on meaningless garble. I won't lie an internship at *The Valley Mirror* isn't easy but what is worthwhile never is.

## And now...4 Articles about Tim Crews

You want to kill Crews? Well, you're welcome to try.

**By Gerry Shih  
of The Valley Mirror, 2008**

First of all, Tim Crews paid me about \$1.67 per hour over the past nine weeks according to my calculations, so keep in mind that I don't owe him jack.

Compared to many of you readers, I am nothing. Not yet half past 20 years, I haven't ventured into a career or a family of my own. I don't have a college degree. I get paid \$1.67 per hour. I have yet to meet a worldly range of people and personalities. I have no way of gaining the tried wisdom that only grows familiar to those of advanced age.

But my opinion is not worthless. I've read a few books and have seen a few places. I think I have a sense of compassion and civic duty. Considering my interest in journalism, I also have a faint idea about the disparity between the current and ideal states of the newspaper industry and its functions and responsibilities.

I have probably never seen anything as polarizing in a community as this newspaper.

I once shot pictures of children at the fair and the mother said she wouldn't have let me if she had known for

whom I worked in the first place. The beefy man next to her said he would punch in Tim Crews' face if he ever saw him.

I stood there, and I paused for a second to assess this shining beacon of intelligence and sophistication.

Well, longtime residents confirm that for those with average eyesight and mental faculties, it's quite easy to spot a bearded fat guy with a camera and suspenders because he walks around everywhere and sticks his nose in everything. So, good luck to you, pugnacious sir.

I then walked thirty yards and shot a group of teenagers who said they read every issue of the paper because it's their only source of real information about what's going on around the community. Not the elementary-school-lunch-menu-type real information.

"We have a duty to report what happens," Tim always says. No fear, no favor.

If I crashed my car on Wood Street on my way out with a sky high BAC level and traces of meth, cocaine, and the good ganja, I guarantee my picture would be on the front page too.

He's a bulldog when the government breaks laws, but someone told me he vividly remembered Tim shedding tears during in an interview with a Latina single mother who told her bitter story of struggle.

What is integrity?

When I was in the jail working on the public defenders project, two inmates hesitated and asked me how I could promise that I wouldn't divulge sensitive case information.

I replied that I could only give them my word that, as a representative from Tim Crews' newspaper, I won't squeal on them. Tim went to jail for his sources.

"Yeah I heard about that," one said while the other nodded deeply. "Okay, what do you want to know?"

One member of the grand jury unaffiliated with the newspaper told me that Tim has filed countless lawsuits but has never been sued, and much less lose a suit. If what Tim is doing is unethical or illegal, I challenge you to put him in his place and sue him and his ink-stained rag to oblivion.

Ask yourself: Is the current Glenn County Office of Education Superintendent going to think twice before "liberating" some public funds?

I'm not the best person to tell you this. And Tim certainly doesn't want or need a bumbling college student who can't find his way to Stonyford — "a kid" — hyping him.

Ask last summer's interns, one of whom is already an award-winning professional journalist, and the other is off to the Wall Street Journal's esteemed London bureau courtesy of a recommendation from Tim.

Walk in front of the Mirror office and take a look at the awards. Call legal groups and newspaper publishers associations around and ask about the Mirror.

Hang out at the office and watch all the people come in and pour their personal hardships and injustices on Tim, the countryside cross between a psychiatrist and the Godfather.

Go see him give talks to Chico State professors or Stanford's Knight Fellows — some of the best journalists selected from around the world, and watch them soak in Tim with wide eyes. They would probably admit they couldn't tie his shoelaces.

He wears raggedly Birkenstocks, by the way.

Glenn County is tremendously lucky to have a newspaper like this here. For all its quaint charm, this county lacks the national civil rights groups, or a watchdog with a bite, a conscience of the people.

Punch Tim all you want, in your naive anger. Hate him and spite him in your ignorance because he dug up your dirt. He'll still be the bigger man, and he'll still be supported by the hundreds of people he has personally helped.

I'm leaving today, and this is my last contribution to the paper.

But lucky for you guys, whether you realize it or not, Tim Crews will still be around for a long, long time.

Editor's note: Stanford Rebele summer staffers are paid some \$12 per hour including the paltry local match. Sometimes they get lunch. Mostly not.

## San Francisco Chronicle

### Small-town journalist makes big-time impact on Central Valley community

Peter Fimrite, Chronicle Staff Writer

Monday, March 19, 2007

**(03-19) 04:00 PDT Willows, Glenn County** -- Tim Crews looks like a jolly fellow, with his thick white beard, suspenders and jiggling belly, but many Glenn County officials probably see his rosy visage in their nightmares.

The 63-year-old owner, editor, reporter and editorial voice of the Sacramento Valley Mirror has a habit of sticking his nose where it isn't wanted. He has written exposes that have infuriated politicians, law enforcement officials, jailers, educators and developers.

He has, in short, yanked the cloak of secrecy off Glenn County bureaucracy.

"We're s -- disturbers. It's what a small county needs," said the bespectacled editor as he sat at his cluttered desk in his office, fielding calls and listening to a police scanner. "It is really important for a place like this to have somebody hold up a mirror."

The kind of scrappy journalism Crews does may become harder to find if current media trends continue. With classified advertising usurped by the Internet, newspapers across the country are facing mounting losses and, in many cases, cuts in staff and resources.

First Amendment scholars fear that investigative journalism may die as newsprint fades away. Crews won't have any of it. He is a country editor whose little paper is influencing public opinion on a shoestring budget. A maverick, old-school muckraker, Crews is notorious in this rural farming community of 6,220 people and the governmental center of Glenn County.

In 2000, he was jailed for five days after refusing to name his sources for a story about a former California Highway Patrol officer charged with stealing a gun, a case that received national attention. Depending on who is talking, his financially strapped newspaper is either a beacon of journalistic integrity or an unsavory scandal sheet run by a scoundrel.

"I would prefer a little bit of the good news for a change rather than the dirty laundry all the time," said Forrest Sprague, a local developer and former county supervisor, echoing a common lament. "We all know that controversy sells newspapers. The sad part is that local newspapers can fall into that trap of yellow journalism."

Despite the criticism, the twice-weekly Mirror is surprisingly influential for a paper with a circulation of 2,944.

Almost everybody in the community reads it, more than pick up the Willows Journal and Orland Press Register, which have a combined circulation of 2,122 and are distributed twice a week by the Tri Counties Newspapers chain.

The Mirror is, readers insist, the most comprehensive source of information for the citizens of Glenn County, a historic agricultural county formed in 1891.

Some 30 percent of the 27,000 people in Glenn County are Latino, and many people live in virtual poverty. The median income for a household in the county is \$32,107, according to the 2000 census.

Crews has written about farms and businesses failing, more children dropping out of school and the rising illiteracy rate. He has documented the slow deterioration of the downtowns in Willows and other Glenn County communities and lamented the movement of people to other places, such as Chico, in neighboring Butte County. He has castigated officials for taking years to build a promised soccer field for Latinos and pushed for the construction of an Indian casino as a way to revitalize the community.

"The function of newspapers is that by reporting the truth we will make you better," he said. "When I came here, there were twice as many hardware stores, there were music stores, a department store. Half of it is gone. I care a lot about this community, and want to make it better."

For his efforts, he has been snubbed and threatened, and seen advertising pulled and his beloved dog die in 2004, apparently with poisoned meat that he believes was left by an angry sex offender he named in the paper. An arson fire was set recently in an office adjacent to his newspaper.

There have been several attempts to silence Crews, but he has moles virtually everywhere, and the plots themselves invariably end up in print. The most infamous involved a series of hard-hitting stories last year about Joni Samples, then the superintendent of the County Office of Education.

The stories detailed Samples' alleged use of county resources for vacations, personal speaking engagements and financial deals with friends. Crews accused her of campaigning at work for her chosen successor, using the office computer for private business and trying to cover it up.

Samples and her colleagues got so fed up that they held a brainstorming session on how to shut Crews up, according to statements in the Mirror from people who were there.

"How do we quiet the lion?" screamed the front-page headline shortly after the closed-door session. It was a direct quote from an assistant superintendent as she kibitzed with Samples and other officials.

"The public records act has been broken, individual constitutional rights violated, thousands of dollars of taxpayer money spent on controlling a political scandal," Crews wrote. "And now they want to 'quiet the lion,' or, put more plainly, silence this newspaper."

The California Department of Justice is looking into some of the allegations in the Mirror.

"We've been investigating allegations of wrongdoing involving the Glenn County Office of Education for several months now," said Nathan Barankin, spokesman for the California attorney general. "I know there has been a lot of reporting there on the subject."

Samples has denied any wrongdoing and defended her 40-year record as an educator. She said she could not comment about the allegations because of pending court proceedings, but her supporters have characterized the articles as a smear campaign fueled by wild exaggerations.

"I loved education. I still do," said Samples, whose chosen successor was defeated by the man Crews supported after she announced she would step down in January.

Born in Aberdeen, Wash., Crews grew up in Olympia. He spent three years in the Marine Corps and, after his discharge in 1963, enrolled in Central Washington State University.

He was a bit too rebellious to get a degree and instead worked for a logging company and a steel mill, and also did commercial fishing. He got his first newspaper job in the mid-1970s with the Santa Barbara News & Review.

He worked for publications in Texas and Colorado before moving back to Washington in the early 1980s, where he wrote for two newspapers. After a stint as a documents expert at Boeing, he went to the Middle East as a freelance writer.

Crews returned to California in 1988, and a year later he was hired as general manager and editor of the Tri Counties Newspapers, covering Willows and Orland. Soon after that, he heard that certain officials had been issued concealed-weapons permits, so he published a list of several questionable permits issued by the county.

That infuriated the sheriff and other law enforcement officials, who, with political supporters, met with the publisher and demanded that Crews be fired. When the publisher sided with the sheriff, "I said screw these people," Crews said.

He got a divorce, his fourth, and with \$35 in his pocket started the Mirror out of a motel in the hamlet of Artois. The first issue came out on Christmas Eve 1991. The paper recently moved to Willows. He has won numerous journalism, photography and press-freedom awards, including the Bill Farr Freedom of Information Award from the California First Amendment Coalition and the California Society of Newspaper Editors.

Still, critics claim Crews mixes his opinions so liberally with the facts that it is impossible to decipher the truth.

"Frankly, I can't rely on stories he's written as being factual," said Denny Bungarz, a former county supervisor, who gave several examples of how he believes Crews jumped to conclusions about county actions before he knew all the facts.

Even some of Crews' supporters acknowledge that his prose often reflects his point of view.

"He's an excellent writer, almost a novelist, if you get my drift," said Roy McFarland, a retired judge. "He can take an incident and make it pretty big."

But Jim Bettencourt, a landscape contractor and former Glenn County supervisorial candidate, said Crews' aggressive reporting has kept the public involved in government.

"Tim is the conscience of our community," said Bettencourt, who, like many locals, regularly stops by Crews' dusty office. "He addresses issues that others choose not to. He has empowered the downtrodden and instilled fear in the majority of the old guard in this community."

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Sacramento Valley Mirror online

To see what Tim Crews is writing about, read the Sacramento Valley Mirror online at [www.valleymirror.us](http://www.valleymirror.us).

E-mail Peter Fimrite at [pfimrite@sfnchronicle.com](mailto:pfimrite@sfnchronicle.com).

*This article appeared on page **A - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle*



## The Sunshine Boys

**In a rural county, a resourceful lawyer and a maverick newspaper publisher have turned the California Public Records Act into a powerful weapon.**

August 2010

by **Tom McNichol**

It's not hard to distinguish the attorney from the client. The lawyer, 53-year-old sole practitioner Paul Boylan, who practices out of Davis, is wearing a neatly pressed black suit, a crisp purple tie, and shiny black shoes that nicely set off his carefully trimmed salt-and-pepper goatee. It's the kind of look that instills confidence, a look that quietly says *esquire*.

The client, 67-year-old Tim Crews, is considerably less well put together. A ruddy-faced bear of a man, Crews is the editor and publisher of a tiny, semiweekly newspaper in Glenn County, which is a poor, rural area toward the top of the Sacramento River Valley. With his scraggy white beard, red suspenders, and a rumpled red T-shirt, Crews could easily be mistaken for a department store Santa Claus—albeit one with a serious case of cabin fever.

And yet, as odd a couple as these two are, Boylan and Crews do share a common passion: They love to shake down recalcitrant bureaucrats for undisclosed government documents. In fact, Boylan has represented Crews in more than two dozen cases over the past five years when the publisher has either sought government records under the California Public Records Act or pursued violations of the state's open meetings law. Their objective, they say, is a simple one: to shed light on the dimly lit machinery of government.

Call them The Sunshine Boys.

"Tim gets himself in situations where—what can I say—a lot of interesting and novel issues are generated," Boylan observes. Crews, in turn, expresses an appreciation for Boylan's expertise. "I don't know a better advocate for transparency in government than Paul," he says.

Crews, who grew up in Washington state, runs his *Sacramento Valley Mirror* from a modest building in downtown Willows, which is the county's seat. The office space goes unheated in the winter, and has what Crews refers to as "whorehouse wallpaper," left over from the days when it was a jewelry store. But the rent is cheap: just \$420 a month.

Crews has had quite a wild ride here. Once, he went to jail for five days for protecting the identity of a confidential source. On another occasion he battled a fire that apparently had been set in the office next door to his. And in 2004, his beloved dog, a German shepherd-Rottweiler mix named Kafka, was mysteriously poisoned to death. To this day, Crews strongly suspects foul play.

"Tim is one of the most vilified people around," Boylan readily acknowledges. "One of the biggest complaints is that he forces public entities to pay money in the form of attorneys fees. They think it's the most horrible injustice in the world, when in reality the focus should be on the fact that these public entities withheld documents they should have turned over."

"He's an interesting guy, there's no question about it," says Denny Bungarz, a former Glenn County supervisor. "When I



Dale Higgins

Paul Boylan and Tim Crews (L-R).

was on the board of supervisors, I'd get calls from people about articles that were in his paper about what was going on in the county, and the articles were not terribly accurate."

"Many people I talk to refer to the paper in a very negative undertone and won't buy it" because they think it's too opinionated, adds Steve Holsinger, city manager of Willows, an hour and a half north of Sacramento. "Yet the first thing they do when they come into the office is pick up a copy to read. In this community, *Time* magazine has a limited number of subscribers, but everyone seems to know what's in his paper."

In one series of hard-hitting articles, Crews relied on education agency records to show that a local school official used county resources for vacations, travel to personal speaking engagements, financial deals with friends, and to campaign for the election of the official's chosen successor. Another set of stories detailed the \$25,000 remodel of court chambers that had been slated for closure in the town of Orland. In that case Crews and Boylan have been fighting Glenn County for more than a year to obtain undisclosed documents.

"In the private sector, if you spend your employer's money improperly, they're going to fire your ass," Crews says. "It ought to be the same thing with public money. One of the reasons why Glenn County is so poor is that they piss away so much money."

At a time when most newspapers are just struggling to stay alive, Crews is part of a vanishing breed—a journalistic spotted owl, if you will. Last November, the California Press Association cited his unusual dedication to uncovering local government secrets in naming him Newspaper Executive of the Year. And Boylan, too, is a rare bird.

"It takes a huge expenditure of time and money to go after public records," says Boylan, "and then you have to go up against a judge who's reluctant to give you your fees. Under those circumstances, it's a huge risk, and there aren't a lot of lawyers willing to take it." In fact, to make ends meet Boylan has had to work hard to broaden his practice. For example, drawing on his Southern California contacts (he lived in the Los Angeles area for awhile), he continues to compose nondisclosure agreements for sports and entertainment figures who hope to deter their hired help from betraying confidences. He also represents county school and fire districts, and does some lobbying in Sacramento.

"You're not going to get rich doing public records cases," he says. "But it's really interesting work." Somehow, though, the word *interesting* doesn't quite capture what he's trying to express, and after a pause he adds: "It's fun getting public records that someone's trying to hold back. It's fun when they underestimate you. It's fun creating attitude adjustments. *It's just fun.*"

Of course, this fun wouldn't be possible without the California Public Records Act (CPRA) (Cal. Gov. Code §§ 6250–6276.8), which Gov. Ronald Reagan signed into law in 1968. The statute is based on the federal Freedom of Information Act (5 U.S.C. § 552), which was championed by John Emerson Moss, a Democratic congressman from Sacramento. In 1955 Rep. Moss headed a series of congressional hearings that documented excessive government secrecy, and he pressed for a law that would prevent records from being routinely withheld from public scrutiny. But with Dwight Eisenhower in the White House the Republicans weren't so receptive to the idea, and that didn't begin to change until after John F. Kennedy was elected president in 1960.

In the fullness of time, an Illinois Congressman named Donald Rumsfeld (yes, that Rumsfeld) would prove to be one of the strongest Republican supporters of the bill. He signed on as a co-sponsor of Moss's bill, and by the mid-1960s was denouncing what he called the "suppression of public information" by the Johnson administration. In 1966, the Freedom of Information Act passed the House by 307–0.

Seeing the handwriting on the wall, President Johnson grudgingly signed the bill into law that year. But LBJ's personal disdain for the legislation was widely known. In fact, he refused to hold a formal signing ceremony. Johnson's press secretary, Bill Moyers, would later say that the president "hated the very idea of the Freedom of Information Act; hated the thought of journalists rummaging in government closets and opening government files; hated them challenging the official view of reality."

Two years later, the California Legislature passed the CPRA, aimed at giving citizens similar access to state and local government records. Hailed at the time as one of the country's strongest public records laws, the CPRA covered all state and local government agencies, including any boards or commissions created by an agency, as well as school districts. When the act is involved, the agency in question bears the burden of justifying nondisclosure and, as the act states, "any

reasonably segregable portion ... shall be available for inspection ... after deletion of the portions which are exempt." Moreover, the courts have interpreted the CPRA to include not only written documents created or received by a public agency, but also emails, faxes, and voice mail messages.

Still, there were loopholes. For example, the act did not cover access to court records, nor did it cover the Legislature. The act also exempted privileged discussions between attorneys and client agencies, as well as appointment calendars, phone records, and other documents whose release might impair the deliberative process of government officials. Over the years, the "deliberative process" exemption has been especially nettlesome to attorneys fighting to gain greater access to public records. A 1991 California Supreme Court decision that prevented Gov. George Deukmejian's appointment schedule from being made public significantly broadened the deliberative process exemption; it is now often cited by state and local agencies as a reason to withhold documents (*Times Mirror Co. v. Superior Court*, 53 Cal. 3d 1325, 1336 (1991)).

Terry Francke is the co-founder and general counsel of Californians Aware, a nonprofit group based in Carmichael that advocates for open government. "Deliberative process," he observes, "is being used as a backstop for anything that's considered sensitive about a government decision, even though the purpose of the CPRA is to let citizens figure out what the government was thinking when it made certain decisions."

Though the CPRA allows for the awarding of attorneys fees, it specifies no penalties for agencies that ignore a records request. "Right now it's very easy for agencies to simply ignore a public records request, because they know that it's the rare requester who's going to pursue litigation," says David Greene, executive director and staff counsel for the First Amendment Project, an Oakland-based nonprofit association. "There's a great variation among agencies in the state, about both their awareness of what their duties are and their knowledge of what the law requires. We hear stories from requesters all the time that they get yelled at or treated discourteously because they've made a records request."

And for those requesters who do fight, the deteriorating financial health of both state and local government agencies can also work against them. "Superior courts are ultimately creatures of their county," Boylan explains. "If the county is strapped for cash, they're a lot less likely to hold in favor of a litigant asking for records, because by doing so they've obligated the local government to pay the other side's attorneys fees. So it's getting that much tougher to get records."

**As tight as Crews and Boylan have become**, these two weren't always fighting on the same side. In fact, 15 years ago Crews sued Boylan for defaming him.

The story goes like this: Back in the 1990s Crews filed a public records request with the Glenn County school district, which Boylan represented at the time. Boylan felt the information was privileged, and he recommended that the board deny the request. That touched off an acrimonious exchange that included some disparaging remarks Boylan made during a radio interview, which Crews sued over. The suit was settled out of court. But over time the two began to warm up to each other.

"I came to admire Tim," Boylan says. "I could see that this is a person who has a lot of principle behind what he was doing."

Crews launched the *Sacramento Valley Mirror* in 1991 from a motel room, with just \$35 in his pocket, after leaving the nearby Tri-County Newspapers. Today, his paper competes with the semiweekly *Willows Journal* and *Orland Press Register*, which are owned by Irvine-based Freedom Communications, publisher of the *Orange County Register* and more than a hundred daily and weekly newspapers nationwide.

The *Mirror's* 2,910 Glenn County readers live in a predominantly agricultural community situated halfway between Sacramento and Redding. Its main crops are rice, almonds, plums, walnuts, and prunes. Willows is its largest town, with a population of just over 6,000 residents. But for most people driving north on Interstate 5, Glenn County is little more than a blur on the way to Oregon.

The last Democratic presidential candidate to win a majority here was Lyndon Johnson back in 1964. And about 18 percent of the county's 27,000 residents now live below the poverty line. "In my little county, only 20 percent of the homes are online," says Crews. "We tore down the newspaper's website and our circulation went up. No one reads the paper online." The youngest person on the *Mirror's* three-person payroll is 48. (Two additional staffers are unpaid.) And for a while, the paper's contributing editor was homeless.

To keep costs down, Crews does a lot of the work himself. In addition to editing and publishing the paper, he reports and writes news stories, and often he shoots the accompanying photographs. He keeps a police scanner squawking on his bedside table at night, a habit that one of his ex-wives (he has four of them) didn't appreciate. "She said I paid more attention to the police scanner than I did to her," he laments.

Every issue of the *Mirror* carries detailed police logs. These not only recount crimes, but also reflect the tenor of small-town life:

*10:22 p.m. Officer Johnson responded to a report of a loud banging coming from the area of East and Chapman. He contacted [the resident], who reported that her son had been using a drum set. [She] agreed to keep it down for the night.*

But of course, it's the stories about the hidden workings of local government that draw the most heat and light. In one 2007 episode, Boylan sought an order compelling the Glenn County Sheriff's Department to produce a list of internal computer records so that Crews could determine whether employees were visiting pornographic or other inappropriate websites at the taxpayers' expense. The case settled out of court, with the county agreeing to implement protocols that preserve a list of URL addresses visited by sheriff's personnel.

Last year, Boylan requested copies of a year's worth of email sent or received by the Willows school superintendent after Crews was tipped off that a school official was using his staff and computer equipment for a campaign to recall the county Superintendent of Schools. Instead of providing the messages in their original electronic format, the school district printed out and rescanned each email, creating a PDF image. The resulting files could not be searched electronically, nor did they contain crucial metadata—information such as the names of senders or recipients. In March a trial court ruled against Crews, finding in a tentative decision that there was no duty to release the emails in the original, searchable format (*Crews v. Willows Unified Sch. Dist.*, No. 09-CV-00697 (Glenn County Super. Ct. tentative decision issued March 26, 2010)). But Crews remains undeterred, and at this writing Boylan anticipates filing an appeal.

"The way you avoid getting into a fight over public records is by never asking for them," says Crews. "What I've found over the past 25 years is that if I don't go to the source documents, I don't find out what's really going on. If you want to know how a government agency is working, you have to be able to look at source documents like phone logs and emails."

Another public records case that has drawn both attention and controversy concerns documents detailing the remodeling of a superior court judge's chambers in the town of Orland. In late 2008, Crews found out that extensive remodeling was underway even though the court was scheduled to move its operations to nearby Willows within a year. For several months, Crews tried in vain to obtain documents that itemized costs for the renovations and any competitive bidding on the project.

In June 2009, Fifth District appeals court Justice Betty Dawson granted the *Mirror's* demand for court spending records. She noted that even though the California Public Records Act did not explicitly apply to the requested documents, the "spirit" of the act was what counted (*Crews v. Superior Court*, No. 09-CV00684 (Glenn County Super. Ct. writ of mandate issued June 18, 2009)).

That ruling seems to have had a sizeable ripple effect. As Boylan notes: "After our case, I received phone calls from the staff of state Assembly committees that wanted to require the Judicial Council to create new rules making it clearer that the public has the right to scrutinize [court] spending records." And sure enough, early this year a new rule did go into effect. Rule 10.500 of the California Rules of Court grants broader access to judicial administrative records maintained by state trial and appellate courts. The new rule says, in essence, that judicial administrative records are open to the public unless specifically exempt.

"I can't tell you Tim and I were solely responsible for that change," Boylan says, "but we certainly were an instrument."

Along with Crews and Boylan's exploits, perhaps the biggest public records case to be decided in recent years is the state Supreme Court's 2007 ruling in favor of granting the *Contra Costa Times* access to the salary information for government employees, including police officers (*Int'l Fed'n of Profl & Technical Eng'rs v. Superior Court*, 42 Cal. 4th 319 (2007)). At issue was whether the names and salaries of public employees earning \$100,000 or more a year are exempt from disclosure under the CPRA. The original suit was filed against the city of Oakland.

The state Supreme Court ruled that government employees should have no expectation of privacy about their gross salaries even if the disclosure of the information "may cause discomfort or embarrassment." Police salaries also were deemed to be part of the public record, except in instances where anonymity is essential to an officer's safety. The opinion was sharply critical of a 2003 appellate court decision affirming that an employee's right to privacy had precedence over a newspaper's right to salary information from five cities in San Mateo County (*Teamsters Local 856 v. Priceless LLC*, 112 Cal. App. 4th 1500 (2003)).

The *Contra Costa Times* victory spawned dozens of media stories about profligate government agencies doling out fat salaries to their employees. In February, for example, California Watch—a project of the Center for Investigative Journalism—reported that even amid a crippling financial crisis, employees throughout California's government routinely were allowed to stockpile large amounts of vacation time, enabling hundreds to end their careers with payouts in excess of \$100,000. One worker cashed out enough vacation and compensatory time to walk away with more than \$800,000—not bad for government work.

But, of course, the newspaper business isn't what it used to be—nor perhaps is the *Contra Costa Times*. In fact, the same year it won its big Supreme Court victory, the paper was bought by the MediaNews Group, a Denver-based newspaper company far better known for its aggressive cost-cutting than its investigative journalism. (In 2009 alone, the paper laid off 18 newsroom employees.)

So who will do this investigative work in the future? Watchdog groups, which are funded by membership dues, contributions, book sales, training session fees, and the occasional grant, will at least partially fill the void. One such organization, Californians Aware, is already ramping up its litigation efforts against recalcitrant local governments. Lone crusaders are also fighting to keep local governments transparent. For example, Rich McKee, a chemistry professor at Pasadena City College, has filed nearly two-dozen lawsuits since 1993 alleging infringements of the CPRA and the Ralph M. Brown Act open meetings law (Cal. Gov. Code §§ S4950–54963).

When he's not teaching chemistry, McKee monitors news reports and blog entries from around the state for signs of possible violations of open meeting laws. He sends out about one letter per week to errant local councils, boards, and agencies demanding corrective action, and threatens to sue if they don't comply with the letter of the law. But not every case is a winner. Last year, in fact, McKee had to pay \$80,000 in legal fees after a lawsuit against the Orange Unified School District fell flat. McKee had filed the suit after the Southern California school district deleted a board member's comments from a recording of a meeting before sending it to a public access channel for broadcast. (The CPRA allows defendants to recover fees and costs if the court finds that the plaintiff's claim is "clearly frivolous.")

McKee remains unbowed. "There certainly are a lot more things that people could take on to keep public agencies open and above-board," he says. The Tim Crewses and Paul Boylans of the world, after all, can only do so much.

**One afternoon earlier this year**, Paul Boylan was standing in Crews's office admiring the publisher's latest handiwork. The front page of the paper had a story about staff and program cuts made in the tiny Stony Creek Joint Unified School District that serves Grindstone Rancheria, a hard-scrabble native American village. Crews was able to produce this and other stories on the inner workings of the struggling school district after a pointed letter from Boylan freed up documents detailing both the district's budget and a dismissed teacher's contract. Score another small victory for the Sunshine Boys.

"In my little flat-earth corner of the world, I'm trying to get people to participate in democracy by showing them what's really going on," says Crews. "Not what the government wants them to know, but what's *really* going on."

His lawyer couldn't agree more. "I think every attorney is looking for something special," Boylan says. "I found my reason to practice in public records and First Amendment work. There's a chance to change things. There's a chance to do good."

He continues: "There's not an attorney out there who hasn't been asked by a client to do something that deep down he knows he shouldn't be doing. When it comes to fighting for the release of public records, though, that never happens." *Tom McNichol is a San Francisco-based freelance writer.*

## Peers salute Mirror Publisher and CalAware's VP Tim Crews as FOI Champion

By Terry Francke, General Counsel, Californians Aware

<http://calaware.org/awareness-area-government/peers-salute-calawares-vp-as-foi-championvp-as-foi-champion>

**Los Angeles** — Tim Crews was presented with the Freedom of Information Award for 2013 of the California Newspaper Publishers Association at its annual convention in Universal City. Before a packed luncheon audience at the Sheraton Universal, Karlene Goller, vice president for legal affairs of the Los Angeles Times, had this to say in introducing Mr. Crews to his fellow professionals.

“This year’s recipient may be the most experienced freedom of information litigant. You could call him Mr. Sunshine.

“Just looking at the past five years, he has filed more than two dozen cases seeking government records under the California Public Records Act or pursuing violations of the Brown Act.

“He won most of the cases, setting public access standards in all of them. You’d think bureaucratic obstructors would know: Don’t mess with Tim Crews and the *Sacramento Valley Mirror*.

“Nearing 70, he served five days in the Tehama County jail for contempt because he refused to name sources of published information subpoenaed in connection with a criminal prosecution. “I had given my word,” he said.

“He was so immersed in the contempt battle that he hadn’t paid attention to the fact that, if he went to jail, because it was essentially a one-man operation, the paper’s sterling record of continuous publication could be broken and his government foes would have won a significant victory.

“As Crews likes to say, ‘Journalism in small towns and tiny counties is different from the big city. I see the people we write about at the gas station, in our one independent grocery, in Walmart, on the street. And that’s every day. All day.’

“Tim Crews has had his office burgled, his building set afire, his car’s brakes and wheels weakened to the point of failure and his dog poisoned and killed.

“Crews’ current CPRA case seeks records held by the local school district. He was looking for evidence that the district might have spent public money to influence the outcome of a local election.

“He asked for records.

“The district stalled.



**Willows** —*Sacramento Valley Mirror* Publisher Tim Crews poses in the newspaper’s morgue - repository of more than 20 years of back issues - holding the treasured California Newspaper Publishers’ Freedom of Information plaque, a single award given annually, the top honor. *Valley Mirror* photo by Sharon Barker

“He sued.

“During the time it took the judge to hear the case, the district dribbled out some records. Finally the judge reviewed thousands more district documents in chambers. He spent 45 minutes reviewing them, then he decided, without explanation, not to release any – not one document.

“Jim Newton, editor at large of the *Los Angeles Times*, who we just heard from, wrote a column about Tim: He said, “ ‘Up to that point, the case was fairly unremarkable, one of thousands of disputed but ultimately resolved Public Record Act requests that wind their way through public agencies and courts every year.

“ ‘But then the judge in Crews’ case, Peter Twede, did something extraordinary: He concluded that Crews’ request had been frivolous and he ordered Crews to pay not only his own legal bills but those of the school district.

“ ‘For the privilege of obtaining the documents that were his legal right to have, Crews was ordered to pay more than \$100,000, an amount later reduced to \$56,000.’

“Crews said this would wipe him and his paper out. Newton added that, if upheld by the appellate courts, the judgment would ‘radically alter the contours of the CPRA in California.’

“Appellate arguments are scheduled for next month. CNPA and California newspapers, including *The Times*, are supporting him in the appeal as *amici curiae*.

As a footnote, I want you to know who that judge was ruling against. Remember Tim’s comment about being a journalist, running a paper in a small town and tiny counties? “Pete Twede is the judge Tim sued a few years ago to get receipts for renovations and expansion of his chambers, in a courthouse slated to be demolished. Tim won.

“In recognition of his courageous and committed advocacy for open government in the state despite personal risk and discomfort, the recipient of CNPA’s 2013 Freedom of Information Award is Tim Crews, Mr. Sunshine.”

Crews is a founding director of Californians Aware and was recently elected its vice president. Among the non-media figures supporting him in his current fight against crippling attorney’s fees for “frivolous” litigation are Senator Leland Yee and former Assemblyman Bill Bagley, father of the California Public Records Act.

A number of large newspapers, including the *Los Angeles Times* have joined as friends of the court on behalf of the *Sacramento Valley Mirror*.