

Spot News

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Advocates for open government Plan Nashville conference in May

by Frank Gibson, Conference Chairman

In May, advocates for open government from across the country will convene in Nashville to assess the fallout from the fervor for secrecy brought on by “homeland security” efforts and its implications for state and local Freedom of Information laws. Attendees at the conference—“Freedom and Fear. . . at War/Access Under Attack”—will examine the unprecedented assault on government in the sunshine laws and the public’s right to know.

The two-day event, May 16-17, will assemble the National Freedom of Information Coalition, SPJ’s Project Sunshine network, First Amendment experts and leaders of state open government coalitions from California to Florida under one roof to discuss losses and threats and will attempt to develop strategies to mitigate both.

Tennessee is in the process of forming its own open government coalition of citizen, media and bar groups, and this conference will have major benefits for launching that effort. Attendees can learn how to create and sustain a successful group from leaders in states that have them already. It will help us develop strategies for the same threats that have hit other states’ laws.

The program will deal with other FOI problems we face: privatization and commercialization of public records, the posting of court and other information on government Web sites but limiting access to those willing and able to pay fees. States, including Tennessee, are beginning to post court records online but are restricting access because of privacy concerns.

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Ethel Payne’s niece to speak at Feb. 17 meeting

Sylvia Peters, niece of Ethel Payne who was recently featured on a U.S. postage stamp, will talk about her aunt’s newspaper career at the Feb. 17 meeting of ETSPJ. The program begins at 6 p.m. in rooms 226-227 of the University Center.

Peters, a founding partner of the Edison Project, knew her aunt well and attended the unveiling of the stamp honoring Payne and other women journalists at the SPJ national convention in Fort Worth.

Payne, one of the best-known black women reporters in the time of the civil rights movement, was called the “first lady of the black press.” As a reporter for the Chicago Defender, she covered the Montgomery bus boycott, the integration of the University of Alabama, and the Selma march.

Peters lives in Knoxville and commutes to Atlanta where she is the project director for the Atlanta Community Learning Collaborative, a second-generation school reform effort that seeks to improve achievement among African American students living in public housing.

The U.S. Postal Service honored Payne, Ida Tarbell, Marguerite Higgins, and Nellie Bly with its Women in Journalism series of postage stamps.

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Board urges open access to Blount County records

The ETSPJ board of directors voted in November to urge a Blount County executive to reconsider her department's Web access policy. Beverly Woodruff had revised access requirements to require a password from her office for viewing budget and other information on the county Web site.

As a result of Larry Aldridge's letter and pressure from others interested in open access to records, Woodruff said she would turn the project over to the Information Technology Committee and the Blount County commissioners. She has gone on record, however, as opposing access without passwords. Commissioners have expressed their desire to return the Web site to its former level of access.

Following is the text of Aldridge's November 25 letter.

Dear Ms. Woodruff:

The board of the East Tennessee Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists has passed a resolution urging you to reconsider your decision to limit public access to budget and other public information on the Blount County government Web site.

The resolution, passed unanimously on Nov. 17, 2002, reads as follows:

"Whereas a well-informed public can make the best decisions in participating in its government, and

"Whereas two of the major aims of the Society of Professional Journalists are freedom of information and open government, and

"Whereas the Blount County Commission passed a directive that the Blount County budget be posted on the county's Web site, and

"Whereas the budget and other public information is available to the public only by password at the order of the County Executive, thus limiting access to it,

"Therefore be it resolved that the board of directors of the East Tennessee Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists urges the Blount County Executive to make all information on the county's Web site accessible to all citizens without requiring a password in order that they may be better informed and thus able to make better decisions in a participatory democracy."

Ms. Woodruff, while we appreciate your concern for safeguarding a county credit card number from unauthorized use,

information regarding purchases made against the card is a matter of public record. Several other governments in Tennessee post budget information on the Web, and we are not aware of any problems that have arisen.

The county's Web site, like all county departments, is there to serve its citizenry. In that spirit, it should be restored to a place where the citizens can gather information about their government. A number of citizens cannot travel to the courthouse to get the information they seek. Whether they are homebound or working full-time jobs, citizens are entitled to all information about their government. Requiring a password and user I.D. is an obstacle to information that belongs to the citizens.

I and/or other members of the SPJ board would be happy to discuss this issue with you further at your convenience. We hope that you will look carefully at our concerns and make a decision that will help bring open government to all citizens of Blount County.

Aldridge sets record straight

On behalf of ETSPJ, Larry Aldridge responded to a claim published in Metro Pulse's "Ear to the Ground" about Pamela Reed and SPJ membership.

The story reported that Reed's boss at the Knoxville Journal, Phil Hamby, had hired her, in part, because she had joined SPJ. She did this under the pen name, Ashley Rhea.

Aldridge's letter to the editor pointed out that neither Reed nor Rhea is on the membership roster of ETSPJ or national headquarters.

Reed was romantically linked with former U.T. president, J. Wade Gilley.

Food, fun, Party's Done

ETSPJ's annual Christmas party featured great company, tremendous food, and, . . . well, . . . some good gifts. Popular items in this year's crazy gift exchange were a New York Times crossword puzzle book, T-shirts from China, and a cookie jar, which can best be described as cute.

Approximately 25 members and guests attended the party at the Cherokee Bluff Clubhouse, Dec. 5. Members also brought gifts to donate to the Toys for Tots campaign.

See party photos on page 3.

President Larry Aldridge

First Vice President Lisa Hood Skinner

Second Vice President Alan Carmichael

Secretary Jean Ash

Treasurer Dorothy Bowles

Officers and Board ETSPJ

Communications Coordinator

Sally Guthrie (588-1474)

Board Members

Adina Chumley

Jim Fields

Nicole Henrich

Bonnie Riechert

Michele Silva

Gimme that

Party Goers Display crazy gifts



Almost everyone loves Sponge Bob, but Adina Chumley didn't get to keep him.



Shhh, don't tell anyone. Ann Klebenow wants to keep the book of New York Times crosswords. Nicole Henrich looks on.



Jason Reagan displays his gift, a children's toilet seat. For some unknown reason, Pete Prince grins mischievously.

Nicole Henrich had the cookie jar for a short time before someone else claimed it.



All photographs by Steve Skinner, D.V.M.

Choices, choices Georgiana Vines tries to decide which packages hold treasures. Not all do, you see.



Golden Press Card

A call for entries in the 2003 Golden Press Card award competition has been mailed to last year's entrants.

To save printing and postage costs, I have not mailed entry forms to members. If you are interested in participating, and we really want you to, you can obtain information and a form from our Web site at <http://www.kornnet.org/etspj/GPC2003.htm>. You can also follow the link from the home page. If you are unable to access the site or copy any of the materials, I will be happy to send them to you. My e-mail address is sallyguthrie@mindspring.com, or you can phone me at 588-1474.

Sally Guthrie, Communications Coordinator

Board supports conference

The ETSPJ board of directors at its Jan. 5 meeting voted to donate \$500 toward the Nashville FOI conference and appointed Dorothy Bowles as the chapter's representative on a citizen access steering committee.

Frank Gibson, political editor of The Nashville Tennessean, FOI activist and former national SPJ president, attended the board meeting to discuss the upcoming conference and to talk about a proposal to form a non-profit group "to create a working alliance of media, citizen, civic and professional groups to work to preserve and improve access to public information and government proceedings in Tennessee."

Mark Your Calendar

Feb. 17, 6 p.m., Rooms 226-227 University Center, February meeting with Sylvia Peters

March 7, 5 p.m., Golden Press Card Entry Deadline

May 16, Golden Press Card Award Program with Court-TV's Fred Graham

May 16-17, Nashville, Freedom and Fear. . . at War/Access Under Attack

June 14, Front Page Follies

Feb. 17, 6 p.m., University Center Sylvia Peters