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The Society of Professional Journalists Honors First Amendment Champions with James Madison Freedom of Information Awards

With its 38th annual James Madison Freedom of Information Awards, the Northern California Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists recognizes people and organizations whose work advances transparency, freedom of information and the public's right to know. SPJ NorCal's Freedom of Information Committee presents these awards in the spirit of James Madison, the creative force behind the First Amendment.

SPJ has awarded attorney Paul Nicholas Boylan its Career Achievement Award. According to a SPJ press release announcement, Boylan's track record of getting his clients access to hard-fought, revelatory government records spans every corner of the Golden State and permeates much of northern California's most impactful journalism. Boylan has represented both journalists and private citizens in public records disputes for nearly 34 years, often working with small local media outlets that lack legal resources. Half a dozen of Boylan's clients have been recognized by SPJ over the years, thanks in large part to Boylan's determined, creative representation in the face of recalcitrant government agencies.

As SPJ reports, Boylan has a long list of notable government transparency wins under his belt. He has secured an appellate court decision stating that police officers have no expectation of privacy in footage from cameras mounted on dashboards. He successfully defended several investigative journalists facing defamation suits that retaliated against unflattering reporting. Boylan secured an injunction on behalf of a citizen group that sought public records from a scandal-plagued mayor's office. He has won the release of hundreds of thousands of emails documenting corruption in a rural public school district. He secured a legal victory that led to the state legislature strengthening the California Public Records Act by ensuring that government agencies aren't able to shift litigation fees onto requesters. Boylan also kept government financial records from being hidden from view during open meetings. And he has helped numerous journalists at publications of all sizes avoid litigation altogether by successfully negotiating for the release of newsworthy public documents.

Boylan, an adjunct professor, has been invited to speak about the importance of government transparency at universities around the world. Boylan's work with his longtime client Tim Crews, former publisher of the Sacramento Valley Mirror, was highlighted in a 2010 cover story in California Lawyer magazine, "[The Sunshine Boys.](#)"

Boylan's legal prowess and readiness to help have left an impression on transparency advocates around Northern California.

“Paul Boylan is THE reason we have any form of transparency in our small town government. Without him, our citizenry would still be in the dark,” said Caroline Titus, former longtime editor and publisher of the Ferndale Enterprise. “His work resonates years after his successful challenges to those that would rather we just didn’t know.”

“Working in a newsroom of five for a small, rural weekly, lawyers like Paul Boylan, who are not only brilliant and accomplished but willing to take cases on contingency, are often all that stands between the public’s right to know and a recalcitrant agency,” said Thadeus Greenon, news editor of the North Coast Journal. “Paul is in a class of one, always willing to pick up the phone and lend his time and expertise, often without hope of being compensated. His contributions to our readers’ access to information they rightfully own have been beyond measure.”

“Paul Boylan is such an integral and longstanding part of the FOI and free-press community in California it’s hard to imagine where we’d be without his creativity, enthusiasm and willingness to take the fight to City Hall (or whomever the scofflaw du jour is),” said David Snyder, executive director of the First Amendment Coalition. “Paul is all-in, always. He’s unafraid. He’s an indispensable ally; I wouldn’t want to be his opposing counsel. Paul and his cheerfully fearless approach have made a huge difference for good and I look forward to continuing to work with him for many years to come. Congratulations, Paul.”

In addition to the North Coast Journal and the Ferndale Enterprise, Boylan represents other Humboldt County news media outlets, including the Lost Coast Outpost, and Boylan is representing the Rio Dell Times to defend the Times against a defamation action against the Times filed by local attorney Chris Hamer.