

The Tim O'Brien Award

for Best Investigative Reporting Using the New Jersey Open Public Records Act

NEWARK - The New Jersey Foundation for Open Government and the New Jersey Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists are proud to announce the winner of the annual Tim O'Brien Award for Best Investigative Reporting Using the New Jersey Open Public Records Act.

Colleen O'Dea, Laura Bruno, Joe Ungaro & Matt Manochio of *The Daily Record* of Morris County won the 2008 award for "Super Perks: Morris taxpayers foot the bills for school superintendents big benefits," a package of articles that led to changes in state regulations requiring greater public disclosure of administrative spending and placing tighter controls on travel stipends and severance benefits for school administrators.

The judges said this of the winning entry: "The Daily Record spent nine months doggedly collecting mounds of records from dozens of school districts to show the outrageous perks enjoyed by school administrators. Information from the documents was then boiled down into an easy-to-read chart and put on the Web for anyone to search for an individual district. The paper also provided a good explanation for the public on how it got the documents, including anecdotes of unnecessary redactions by some agencies. Ultimately, the work led to change and greater public awareness of how tax dollars are spent. Great work!"

The award, which was judged by out-of-state journalists with expertise in open government issues, is designed to honor the best reporting in any media that uses the state's Open Public Records Act to uncover important information and expose issues of public significance that might not have come to public attention otherwise.

It is named after Tim O'Brien, whose investigative reporting, first at the *Star-Ledger* and later at the *New Jersey Law Journal*, exemplified the qualities of courage, thoroughness, integrity, persistence and quiet idealism that the award seeks to honor.

The award was jointly created by the New Jersey Foundation for Open Government (www.njfog.org), a non-profit, non-partisan group of civic organizations and individual that advocate for government transparency and free access to government information for both the press and the general public, and the New Jersey Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists (www.njspj.org), an organization of journalists from all media that works to improve the practice of journalism and to protect freedom of the press and those who exercise it.

The judges for this year's Tim O'Brien Award were David Cuillier and Joe Adams, the chair and vice chair of the national Freedom of Information Committee of the Society of Professional Journalists. Both have wide expertise in the use of public documents in investigative reporting.

Cuillier is chairman of the national Freedom of Information committee for the Society of Professional Journalists and maintains a blog on FOIA issues as part of those duties. He also serves as SPJ sunshine chair for Arizona, a member of the First Amendment Coalition of Arizona and a FOIA trainer for SPJ, traveling to newsrooms around the country to train journalists. He joined the Department of Journalism at the University of Arizona in 2006 as an assistant professor. He researches public attitudes toward freedom of information and has won teaching and research awards from the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. He is currently the teaching chair for the AEJMC media law division. Before moving to academia, he had 12 years of newspaper experience, doing city hall and public affairs reporting in Washington and Idaho and also working as an assistant city editor in Kennewick, Wash. and as city editor at *The Herald* in Everett, Wash.

Adams is an editorial writer at *The Florida Times-Union* and author of *The Florida Public Records Handbook* published by the First Amendment Foundation in Tallahassee and used as a textbook by eight universities in Florida. More than 1,000 journalists have attended his workshops on how to use public records. He is the recipient of the national 2007 Eugene S. Pulliam First Amendment Award sponsored by the Sigma Delta Chi Foundation and has earned two national Sunshine Awards from the Society of Professional Journalists. As an editorial writer, Adams has received awards from the Florida Press Club, Florida Society of Newspaper Editors and the Society of Professional Journalists. His year of public records research of the Jacksonville City Council uncovered widespread open meetings abuses. The resulting work by Adams and the newsroom inspired a grand jury probe and prompted the council in 2007 to create the state's first known local ordinance

to ensure better compliance with Florida's Sunshine Law. He is originator of the www.iDigAnswers.com Web site about Florida FOI news and public records use.