



2019 NJ SPJ Signature Awards (for work done in 2018)

The contest was judged this year by the Colorado Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists. The judges provided comments on the first-place honorees.

Stuart and Beverley Awbrey Award

Since its creation in the 1990s, this award has sought to honor both hard-hitting investigative journalism that is public-spirited as well as more “uplifting” efforts such as creating care packages for soldiers overseas or helping a handicapped child get an education. The Awbrey pays tribute to Beverley Awbrey and her late husband, Stu, who ran The Cranford Chronicle from 1978 to 1988. The Awbreys believed their 100-year-old weekly was more than a livelihood; they saw it as an opportunity to contribute to the civic life of Cranford.

- **First place:** Jaimie Winters of the Montclair Local for "Lackawanna Plaza redevelopment." The judges were impressed with the Lackawanna Plaza redevelopment series of stories because they spoke to the community's need to be involved in such matters that affect their lives. Comprehensive stories about the development plans from start to finish.
- **Second place:** Thomas Franklin of TAPinto Newark for “Despite Newark’s Sanctuary City Status, Undocumented City Resident Turned Over to ICE.”
- **Third place:** Al Sullivan of The Hudson Reporter for stories outlining various conflicts related to immigration issues in Hudson County.

Tim O’Brien award for best use of public records:

The award honors journalists specifically for investigative work based on public records requests. This award pays tribute to 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 we seek to honor.

- **First place:** Audrey Quinn of New York Public Radio for “For New Jersey Jails, Suicides and Overdoses, but Little Oversight.” The judges said Quinn’s series on jail deaths in New Jersey is a testament to the power of public records in informing the public about what is happening in governmental institutions, including jails. A comprehensive, well-done series.
- **Second place:** Carla Astudillo, Craig McCarthy, S.P. Sullivan, Stephen Stirling, Yan Wu, Erin Petenko, Disha Raychaudhuri, Blake Nelson, of NJ Advance Media (NJ.com & The Star-Ledger for “The Force Report.”
- **Third place:** Erin Roll of *The Montclair Local* for “Absenteeism in Montclair schools.”

Best grass roots journalism

- **First place:** Rebecca Panico and Mark Bonamo of TAPinto Newark for multiple stories: “Governor Murphy: ‘I drink Newark’s water.’”; Newark City Council Members are mad they didn’t get front row seats at Sotomayor event”; “5 major issues Newark Public Schools inherited from state-controlled Leadership”; “McGovern’s summer renovation closing party celebrates change”; and “Hip-Hop manager turned developer becomes part of the West Ward’s revitalization”.
The judges said this was a very tough category to judge because of the strong entries. These submissions stood out because of the breadth of grassroots issues they covered, both good and bad. Also, very well written.
- **Second place:** Joe Strupp of TAPinto South Orange-Maplewood for “Video of School Board Member in Altercation with Police at Traffic Stop in South Orange.”
- **Third place:** Diccon Hyatt of The Hamilton Post for “Racist Facebook Posts, School Board Election.”

Investigative reporting

Weekly and hyperlocal winners:

- **First place:** Rebecca Panico of TAPinto Newark for multiple stories on diverse subjects: “Newark Contracts with PR firm \$225K to help with lead messaging”; “Those boarded-up homes in the West Ward? Newark has a Plan for Them.”; “Mystery Developer gets OK to turn Historic Griffith Building into Apartments”; “Five Major Issues Newark Public Schools Inherited from State-Controlled Leadership”; “Pharma company being sued by Newark gets 40 million in State Tax Credits”.
The judges cited comprehensive, wide-ranging stories by journalists committed to investigative journalism.

- **Second place:** Caren Matzner, Marilyn Baer, Hannington Dia, Rory Pasquariello of The Hudson Reporter for “The Truth about 'Fake News,” an investigative report digging into the origins of fake news stories about the first Sikh mayor of Hoboken.
- **Third place:** Jaimie Winters of *The Montclair Local* for multiple articles about Lackawanna Plaza redevelopment.

Daily or broadcast outlet winners:

- **First place:** Craig McCarthy, Carla Astudillo, S.P. Sullivan, Stephen Stirling, Erin Petenko, Disha Raychaudhuri, Blake Nelson and Yan Wu, of NJ Advance Media (NJ.com & The Star-Ledger) for “The Force Report.” The judges said NJ Advance Media’s exhaustive look at police use of force across the country sheds light on an issue vital to this country. The stories show disturbing trends and put the issue in perspective that readers could understand. The graphs added to showing the issue.
- **Second place:** Michael Symons and Sergio Bichao of New Jersey 101.5 for their four-part series on New Jersey’s public pension systems.
- **Third place:** Sophie Nieto-Muñoz and Alex Napoliello of NJ Advance Media (NJ.com & The Star-Ledger) for “Groomed, then Gone.”

Ron Miskoff award for journalism educator of the year

This award is named after Ron Miskoff, a long-time journalism educator and former president of our chapter. Ron is now retired but continues to support NJ SPJ and remains active in our sister organization, the New Jersey Foundation for Open Government

- Nicholas Hirshon, professor at William Paterson University and a member of the SPJ New Jersey board

Hirshon is an active educator. He played a key role organizing this year’s NJ SPJ inaugural New Jersey Journalism Hall of Fame event held at William Paterson University, and also founded and advises the William Paterson SPJ chapter. At WPU, he organizes and hosts a monthly series of discussions for student with professional journalists. He is the author of *We Want Fish Sticks: The Bizarre and Infamous Rebranding of the New York Islanders*, a book published by the University of Nebraska Press in December 2018, and he serves as the digital-media reviews editor for the academic journal, *American Journalism*.

Gabe Pressman Award for best news video:

This award honors the late Gabe Pressman, a veteran reporter for WNBC whose six-decade career began with a stint at the Newark Evening News.

- **First place:** Louis Hochman of townsquaremedia.com for “NJ Teen kills family on New Year's Eve — They're remembered with love.” The judges

found the first piece about the vigil for the family who was killed by the son was especially impactful because Hochman allowed the event and the participants to tell the story of their heartbreak and more about the people who died. Sometimes it's more important to let the subjects of the story simply tell the story.

- **Second place:** Walt Kane, Anthony Cocco and Karin Attonito of News 12 New Jersey for “Kane in Your Corner.” A wide-ranging consumer advocacy column.
- **Third place:** Jay Lassiter and Louis Hochman of townsquaremedia.com for “Domestic Violence – Why NJ Lawmaker Finally Told Her Story.”

Herbert Morrison Award for best audio story

This award is named after the radio broadcaster Herbert Morrison, whose dramatic on-the-scene coverage of the Hindenburg explosion in May 1937 in Lakehurst N.J. is still remembered today.

- **First place:** Nancy Solomon of WNYC for “Stories on Suburban Gender Politics.” The judges said Solomon’s reporting provided interesting, relevant and insightful information on politics in New Jersey.
- **Second place:** Dino Flammia of New Jersey 101.5 for “New Jersey’s Mental Health.”
- **Third place:** Michael Symons, also of New Jersey 101.5 for “News Jersey Pension Series.”

David Carr Reporter of the Year

This award recognizes the best collection of work in a given year and honors the memory of David Carr, the former New York Times media reporter and SPJ member who lived for many years in Montclair.

- **Matt Katz, WNYC public radio**

Katz is a high-performing reporter who covers immigration for WNYC and sometimes fills in as a host for the radio station. This year, his work included a vividly reported piece chronicling the story of a Congolese refugee in Elizabeth, N.J., who was admitted to the United States just prior to the 2016 presidential election but remains separated from his wife, who is stuck in a refugee camp in Malawi. In addition to telling a very human story, the piece also documents how refugee policy is changing under the Trump administration. Other highlights from Katz’s 2018 reporting portfolio includes stories that focused on county jails in New Jersey and their role in detaining immigrants. Another notable: he broke the story about a secret tape recording that caught the Sheriff Michael Saudino of Bergen County – a very powerful political figure at the time – using racial slurs against a variety of people. The tape – a copy

of which Matt obtained – resulted in the Saudino resigning his post as Sheriff.

Courage Under Fire:

This award honors a journalist (or journalists) who, in the face of strong oppositional forces, exhibited the most strength in defending the principles of a free press, open records, open meetings and transparent examination of public servants doing their jobs. This is the only award where the honorees are selected by the New Jersey chapter.

- **Isaac Avilucea and John Berry of *The Trentonian***

Trentonian reporter Isaac Avilucea published several exclusive stories that the mayor and his administration were trying to keep under wraps. One administration official reported a burglary to police and suggested—in a supposed ‘joke’—that the reporter could be a suspect. The paper stood by Avilucea, first with the staff un-earthing contradictory statements from police sources, then by filing an Open Public Records Act (OPRA) lawsuit to obtain body-cam footage. In the end, the “burglary” was revealed not to have ever occurred. Even after the incident, Trenton’s mayor continued to insist that Avilucea be removed from the City Hall beat, which editor John Berry also resisted. The *Courage Under Fire* award is intended to send a message—to those in NJ and in Washington, DC—that SPJ will not allow public officials to dictate which journalists they will allow to cover them.