



PUBLIC SERVICE AWARD

for journalistic
contributions to civic life

Breaking Bell

SERIES ON EPIC CORRUPTION AND GREED EARNS *TIMES*
REPORTERS JEFF GOTTLIEB AND RUBEN VIVES THE L.A. PRESS
CLUB'S FIRST PUBLIC SERVICE AWARD

BY JON REGARDIE

BY NOW, everyone is familiar with the story of what happened in Bell, of the epic corruption and greed that ultimately brought down the government of one of the poorest cities in Los Angeles County. What has become easy to forget is that the *Los Angeles Times* reporters who led the charge on the story, Jeff Gottlieb and Ruben Vives, didn't start off looking at Bell.

It all came about, Vives said last August during a Los Angeles Press Club event titled "How We Got That Story," because he was assigned to cover Southeast Los Angeles. When the small city of Maywood hit the financial skids and began contracting out services to neighboring cities, including Bell, a town with 40,000 residents, Gottlieb came aboard. He called the District Attorney's office to ask if it had any ongoing Maywood investigations.

"They said no, but we're inquiring about Bell," Vives recalled. "Jeff asked, 'What's going on there?' They said, 'Well, we're inquiring about their salaries. They're pretty high.'"

Thus began a series of articles that would soon draw national attention. By the time the dust settled, Bell's city manager, assistant city manager, police chief and most of its city council were forced from office, and criminal charges had been filed against eight individuals. The tenacious reporting led to a Pulitzer Prize for the more than two dozen *Times* reporters and editors who would have a hand in the story. In recognition of the work Gottlieb and Vives did, the ground they broke, the truths they uncovered and the change that followed—in March, the citizens of Bell elected a new city council—the Press Club is awarding the two reporters its inaugural Public Service prize.

LOOKING FOR RIZZO

Vives and Gottlieb took vastly different paths to the once-in-a-lifetime story.

Vives was a young reporter with limited experience covering news. Although he had been with the *Times* for about 10 years when Bell came along, he had only been writing for three years.

Gottlieb, by contrast, was an experienced journalist who had done stints as an editor and reporter at the *San Jose Mercury News*, the *Herald Examiner*, *Sports Illustrated* and the *Riverside Press-Enterprise*. He had been with the *Times* for 13 years before Bell. Most recently he had been covering the South Bay.

When Bell hit, the two were ready. During the August panel, they recalled the events that led up to the first story. The action began when they arrived at Bell City Hall to ask for the city manager, the soon-to-be-infamous Robert Rizzo.

"He wouldn't come to the counter," recalled Gottlieb. "Ding ding ding."

The city clerk instructed them to fill out a public records request for council minutes, contracts and other reports. After about 10 days of stonewalling, the Bell brigade broke. They agreed to hand over the documents, but wanted a face-to-face meeting. Vives and Gottlieb were surprised when they arrived at the city's Little Bear Park, entered a room normally used for events such as Boy Scouts meetings, and found themselves in front of Rizzo, his assistant, the assistant city manager, the police chief, two council members, a member of the Maywood city council and two attorneys.

The reporters posed some questions and then Gottlieb pounced.

"I asked Bob Rizzo, 'So how much money do you make?'" he remembered. "He literally sort of coughs out, '\$700,000.' And I wasn't sure I heard him correctly. I say, 'Pardon me?' I thought maybe he said \$7,000, or a month or a week. And he said, '\$700,000.' And Ruben, who is sitting on my left, goes, 'Jesus Christ!'"

"I was a little worried," Vives admitted about the



Los Angeles Times reporter Ruben Vives, right, celebrates with fellow reporter Jeff Gottlieb after they won the 2011 Pulitzer Prize for Public Service Monday, April 18, 2011. Gottlieb and Vives won the award for their exposure of corruption in the small California city of Bell where officials tapped the treasury to pay themselves exorbitant salaries, resulting in arrests and reforms. (AP Photo/Los Angeles Times, Katie Falkenberg)

outburst. “I thought I’d given the story away.”

Not quite. The duo spent four hours interviewing the city staffers, took the weekend to pore over the contracts and documents, and filed their story early the following week. The first article, published July 15, revealed that Rizzo was making \$787,000 (more than twice what officials with similar positions in far larger cities earn), the assistant city manager was earning \$376,000 and the police chief was pulling in \$457,000 (more than double what he had been making as head of Glendale’s police force). Additionally, most of the city council was receiving nearly \$100,000—for part-time work.

Later reports revealed that Rizzo’s total compensation was actually about \$1.5 million, and he worked to boost his pension to nearly \$1 million annually.

It wasn’t long before the dominos began to fall. Residents of the largely working class town expressed their outrage at public meetings. Within two weeks of Gottlieb and Vives’ story, the council cut its salaries by 90%. In September, Rizzo and others were hauled away in handcuffs. Preliminary hearings for the “Bell 8” began in February.

The stories led to efforts across California to create transparency regarding the pay and pension ben-

efits of public employees. The Los Angeles City Controller’s office posted the salaries of tens of thousands of workers online. Millions of dollars in tax refunds were given to the residents of Bell.

While the accolades and prizes have surely been appreciated, Gottlieb and Vives said they were struck by the response of the citizens of Bell. Gottlieb recalled attending a City Council meeting after the first story.

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“People were patting us on the back, congratulating us and asking us for our autographs,” he said in something close to amazement.

Added Vives, “I think as a journalist one of the biggest things you want to accomplish in your career is to bring positive change, to be responsible for those changes. To me that’s the rewarding part. And also to know I’ve allowed these residents in Bell to have their voices heard, which hadn’t happened for them in a very long time.” 🍷