



JOSEPH M. QUINN AWARD

for journalistic excellence
and distinction

The Baddest Boy of Broadcast News

JOHN
SCHWADA OF
KTTV GETS
THE JOSEPH M.
QUINN AWARD
FOR LIFETIME
ACHIEVEMENT

BY JILL STEWART

JOHN SCHWADA has a dramatically different effect on different people. Seen through the eyes of a government official, he's a fact-gathering pain. Seen through the eyes of his editors, he's a brilliant machine who fears nothing and gets the story.

Now, he can also be seen as the recipient of the Los Angeles Press Club's Joseph M. Quinn Award for Lifetime Achievement.

A 1970 Berkeley graduate, Schwada was sent by the *San Diego Union* to cover the remote Imperial Valley, where, along with "a drunken Irishman and a guy who was literally 85," he reported on the land-use struggles among powerful forces in the area's vast farmlands.

He returned to Berkeley, where he got his Masters degree in history in 1975, and became a freelancer. It wasn't long before he nailed a major story, discovering that the CIA had a listening post in the Bay Area.

"I ended up with a brief introduction to William Colby, the head of the CIA," he recalls, "only to find out that a Berkeley professor of mine was part

of the whole CIA thing and halfway tried to lure me in—actually gave me an application to work for the CIA."

He audaciously entered his *Bay Guardian* freelance piece in the San Francisco Press Club competition, and won for best investigative story of the year.

The Bay Area couldn't hold onto this native of Columbia, Missouri, for long. He and his wife, Tima, relocated to Los Angeles and he worked for a year in a job he loved at the *Riverside Press-Enterprise*. When he heard about an opening at the *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, he jumped.

Schwada was stunned to find the *Her-Ex* was "a terrible sweatshop, especially after the *Press-Enterprise*, which had one Pulitzer under its belt and an early computer system."

It was the 1980s, but the *Herald-Examiner* was stuck in the 1950s: "I got introduced to the typewriter again," he laughs, "and Linda Breakstone sat behind me smoking like a chimney. I sat next to Jim Cramer, who went on to 'Mad Money.'"

Schwada wrote extensively about the schism over busing children to far-off schools, which proponents thought would achieve integration and improve education. He won awards covering the riot in Beverly Hills when 500 Iranians burned cars and set fire to the estate of the sister of the Shah of Iran.

Schwada's boss, and hero, was City Editor Larry Burrough, a hard-bitten newsman who backed his reporters against powerful Los Angeles forces that didn't appreciate a probing media.

One day, at a tense press conference held by District Attorney Ira Reiner, a KTLA reporter tossed a softball that allowed Reiner to change the subject. Schwada angrily gave Reiner the finger, then got into a scuffle in the hall with the KTLA reporter.

Later that day, he warned Burrough there might be trouble. "I might have seemed tough, but I was basically a scaredy cat," admits Schwada.

When Reiner and KTLA both lodged complaints, "Larry Burrough said right back, 'I don't



Convention coverage.



care what he did! He was doing his job!”

Schwada ultimately got the choice City Hall beat, spending more than seven years covering Mayor Tom Bradley and the Los Angeles City Council cast of characters.

One of his memorable exclusives revealed that Bradley was scandalously close to Far East National Bank, serving on its board while mayor—and while the city placed large deposits in Far East. Schwada’s stories badly hurt Bradley, who squeaked through his next election.

On Nov. 1, 1989, the *Herald-Examiner* closed its doors, a victim of fiscal woes. Schwada was snapped up by the *Los Angeles Times*.

The *Examiner* had been a “crazy, weird place with drunken editors and wild personalities. It was fun, a great joy mixed with pain—like a loose tooth you bite down on that feels good in a way.”

At the buttoned-up *Times*, he found “so many sacred cows that I couldn’t get the news into the paper.”

Schwada actually directed some tips to other media because his editors were uneasy going after the city’s political elites. But he did manage some scoops.

He discovered that mayoral candidate and City Councilman Mike Woo, co-sponsor of a law to control hillside development, had put in for building permits to expand his own hillside home just before introducing the new restrictions.

He made the jump to TV in early 1996, joining



Above, John Schwada in his office with some of his mementos.

Left, former L.A. Mayor Richard Riordan takes over the camera.

KTTV Fox 11 News. “I’m a kid from the Midwest, not at all flashy, so I was pretty goddamned nervous in front of that camera,” he says.

Yet Schwada showed his investigative range, en-

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— John Schwada

couraged by people like News Director Jose Rios and Larry Croner, the managing editor. “They realized my approach is that government institutions are garbage dumps where you can go and find glittering pieces of stuff—great stories.”

Among his scoops, Schwada discovered wrong-

QUINN AWARD JOHN SCHWADA

doing on a Los Angeles city pension commission, forcing the commission's president to resign. He earned Los Angeles-area Emmy Awards in 2002 and 2003, and Golden Mikes in 2003 and 2010. In 2008, the Society of Professional Journalists' Los Angeles chapter named him its distinguished journalist.

One of his great thrills was working with the now-retired Pete Noyes, a legendary news producer. In 2009, the pair won the prestigious Sidney Hillman Foundation Award and achieved something rare: the arrest of a



Above, Schwada reporting live; left, on friendlier terms with Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa.



major con man preying on victims of the housing crisis.

Last year, Schwada scored again when he revealed that Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa was taking pricey free tickets to entertainment and sporting events.

It began as a tip. Then Schwada discovered that the *Times* had been delving into same tip for months but hadn't published anything. A few days later, KTTV aired Schwada's story, setting off a controversy that prompted a California-wide crackdown on politicians who accept gifts from those hoping to influence them.

"A mischievous pain in the ass sums up what I've done with my life," says Schwada. He thinks his drive is probably inspired by his beginnings in Missouri, among "the country club elite and bloviating churchgoers."

Whatever inspires John Schwada, Los Angeles is a better place for it. He might describe himself as that loose tooth that you bite down on because it bothers you. But it feels kind of good. 🍷



*Congratulations John
on your award for
Journalistic Excellence
and Distinction!*

