



PUBLIC SERVICE AWARD

for journalistic
contributions to civic life

Bringing Down the House

*'SoCal
Connected'
Team Earns
Public Service
Award for
Exposing
Staggering
Expenditures at
a City Agency*

BY JON REGARDIE

WHEN KAREN FOSHAY, a producer with the KCET show "SoCal Connected," started poking around the operations of the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles (HACLA), she had no idea that she was about to dump a mountain of work on herself and a half-dozen co-workers. She couldn't fathom the gross spending on luxury products and meals the team would expose. There was no way she could predict how her investigation would benefit some of the city's poorest residents.

Yet that is exactly what happened when the 20-year TV news veteran began looking into a large if rarely examined city agency.

"I reached out to a few sources and found out that there were some unhappy workers there," she recalled of her initial explorations. "I filled out my first public records request in October 2010, and we had to fight vigorously to get any response."

That opened the doors to what would become a 12-minute expose, "The Junketeer," in March 2011, followed nine months later by another punishing 15-minute report, "Government Gone Wild." The facts KCET revealed were shocking: Rudy Montiel, president and CEO of the agency in charge of providing housing for thousands of poor individuals and families, earned \$450,000 a year and received perks including 10 weeks of vacation and a car. He traveled extensively, attending 28 conferences and junkets in one calendar year; by contrast, the show reported, Boston's housing director attended three conferences.

More astounding was the HACLA spending that taxpayers were covering. In poring over six years of documents, the "SoCal Connected" team found that outrageous expenditures were an everyday occurrence. They uncovered a receipt for a \$2,200 lunch for four executives. They found that HACLA brass

spent \$4,500 on Land's End sweaters. The agency's head of media and government relations had two purported Saturday night business meetings in one month at Ruth's Chris Steakhouse. One employee spent \$500 on an agency charge card on two stuffed pink elephants.

Then came the HACLA officials' attempts to defend the practices. Montiel in March told the cameras that the expenses were justified because he had turned around an underperforming agency. In December

another executive, Ken Simmons, claimed he was following Montiel's orders and that the agency was "flush with cash" at the time.

The damage was done. Montiel was fired, as were two agency commissioners. City Controller Wendy Greuel began an extensive audit of HACLA and U.S. Sen. Chuck Grassley launched a federal investigation. New spending standards were put in place, allowing the valuable resources to go where they were intended—to housing Los Angeles' poor.

"The Junketeer" and "Government Gone Wild" were rare examples of long-form television investigative journalism on local matters. The reports have earned KCET the Public Service Award from the Los Angeles Press Club. The prize is shared by Foshay, "SoCal Connected" executive producer Bret Marcus, correspondent Laurel Erickson, producer Rocio Zamora, associate producers Miguel Contreras and Lata Pandya and editor Alberto Arce.

TEAM EFFORT

Viewers of the two episodes saw correspondent Laurel Erickson operate like a pitbull with a microphone, refusing to let the HACLA executives get off easy when they tried to evade her questions. What the audience didn't see was the group effort that went into creating the reports.





“It’s a very small staff and it operated like an old-fashioned newsroom,” said Erickson, a veteran Los Angeles reporter known for her never-back-down approach. “There were people doing long hours. There was team spirit.”

The sentiment is echoed by Marcus, who also serves as KCET’s chief content officer. He noted that the staff would routinely work late into the night.

“Sometimes in the middle of the newsroom when everyone else went home these boxes of paper would emerge from dark corners,” he recalled. “My office was three doors down from Karen’s. I could tell if she was having a good or bad night based on the cackling coming from her office when she would find some outrageous expense that was totally unupportable.”

Tracking the expenses and revealing that HACLA spent millions to fight whistleblowers and wrongful termination lawsuits (KCET reported that Montiel fired three HACLA directors of internal control; two sued) was only part of the challenge. The team needed to turn all the numbers and piles of receipts into visually appealing television.

Foshay is quick to credit graphic designer Robert Vega, whose work included placing the headshots of four executives on a spinning dinner table to communicate the meal overspending. Her praise extends to Marcus (“He gave us the resources to do this”) and Arce, the editor, who kept the pace crisp.

The team also took advantage of new media resources, creating an online database complete with scanned receipts.

“You could go in, type in someone’s name and see all their purchases,” said Foshay. “We wanted this to be interactive. We wanted people to see where their taxpayer dollars were being spent.”

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Generally, said Marcus, “SoCal Connected” stories take a week or two to prepare, and the average 15- to 20-minute report might require a month of work.

The March episode, by contrast, required six months of investigation and reporting (team members worked on other stories at the same time). It was a similar timeframe for the December follow-up.

Marcus, Foshay and Erickson have long track records in television journalism, and all have received numerous industry accolades and honors. Still, for people who have seemingly seen it all, the HACLA expose offered new surprises.

“It seemed unbelievable, especially when you consider this was a time when Americans were losing their jobs and houses,” said Erickson. “The most surprising thing to me was the disconnect between how this appeared, what it was, and the state of the taxpayers and residents in this economic crash.”

Marcus pointed to the human angle, or rather, the seeming lack of humanity exhibited by the perpetrators.

“I don’t think anyone ever said to us, ‘I’m sorry, I should not have done this.’ It’s really sad,” he said. “It was sort of remarkable to me that nobody apologized.”

Although the second show aired more than six months ago, the “SoCal Connected” team has changed the way the Los Angeles media views HACLA. No longer is the agency ignored.

Similarly, there is no denying that the staff made a difference in the lives of some of the city’s most disenfranchised residents. It’s a point that hits home.

“It was a window on the world that we should see more often,” said Erickson.

Added Foshay, “I think that’s why we get into this business, to hopefully make some sort of impact and to lay out the facts and see what happens. There had been so many complaints over the years by workers and tenants. Over the years they felt their voices were not heard and that they were retaliated against. That’s always a great payoff to a story.”

She pauses and adds, “That’s great.” 🙌

Jon Regardie is a member of the Board of Directors of the Los Angeles Press Club.

Executive Producer Bret Marcus, Correspondent Laurel Erickson, and Producer Karen Foshay are interviewed by moderator Anna Scott for the Press Club’s “How I Got the Story” series.