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Richmond Times-Dispatch and the Mount Vernon Gazette win the Virginia Press Association's Highest Awards

RICHMOND, Va. – The Richmond Times-Dispatch and The Mount Vernon Gazette were named Saturday as the recipients of the Virginia Press Association's awards for journalistic integrity and community service, the organization's highest award.

The Richmond Times-Dispatch won in the daily category for its series about the death of a mentally ill prisoner in a Portsmouth Jail.

The judges wrote about the series, "This series of articles and editorials reads like a storyboard in a well-written television crime screenplay – it is a page turner. The reporting of Sara Kleiner and K. Burnell Evans is impeccable: Careful, detailed, methodical, exhaustive, and compelling. As a collection, it is a case study in investigative journalism. Through their diligent reporting, conducted over a nine-month period, they brought to light the horrendous, despicable, and in this case, fatal mistreatment, abuse and torture of a young mentally ill prisoner in a Portsmouth jail. They did so by unrelenting pressure on the responsible officials to hold them accountable, made possible in part by their brilliant utilization of the F.O.I.A process.

I would like to particularly note the effective cooperation of the reporters and editors in this project. Every major development revealed by the reporters' investigation in this ongoing story was immediately followed up by an editorial that condensed the findings for the readers and put them into context. The coverage of the Richmond Times-Dispatch grew with the story – from local, to regional, to statewide, to national, and didn't miss a beat. It is a reflection of excellent dynamic communication in the newsroom.

As noted by the prominent individuals lending their written support to this entry, these reporters and editors were catalysts for change. Their work led to reforms throughout the system, including the resignation of the top two officials at the prison where Jamycheal Mitchell

died, and revision of the medical and psychological care procedures for mentally ill inmates in the Virginia prison system.

Syndicated columnist Leonard Pitts, Jr. wrote in his column today about the importance of newspapers to society. He said, in part, that, "I'm talking about knowledge that equips a citizen to hold his or her government to account. I'm talking about the facts that matter... The newspaper, we used to say, is the watchdog of power."

The work of the reporters and editors at the Richmond Times-Dispatch in the Jameel Mitchell case is proof that the statement is still true."

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In the non-daily category, the award for journalistic integrity and community service went to the Mount Vernon Gazette/ Local Media Connection LLC Connection Newspapers, for its coverage of police reform in Fairfax County.

The judges noted, "The Mount Vernon Gazette covered the complex issue of police reform from February through December 2016, sparked by the shooting of an unarmed man by a Fairfax County police officer.

The officer in question was charged with murder, but he walked away a free man with credit for time served by agreeing to a controversial plea deal.

The Gazette focused community attention on the case, particularly on the efforts of citizens and representatives of law enforcement agencies working together on reforming police practice. This led to the creation and implementation of a Civilian Review Panel to provide oversight of police policy, procedures and activities.

The Gazette supported its reporting on this year-long process with editorials that summarized recent developments for its readers, always keeping the greater goal in their sight and in mind: the creation of the Civilian Review Panel.

The approach of the Gazette in this matter provides a good illustration of the positive role a community newspaper can play when it takes an activist approach to issues of importance to its readers."

The judging was conducted by journalists in New Jersey.

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