



21th Charles L. Weltner Freedom of Information Celebration

honoring

Rep. Mary Margaret Oliver's Commitment to Open Government

Oct. 26, 2023 | Emory Conference Center | Atlanta

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Welcome and Recognition of Special Guests

Ken Foskett, President, Georgia First Amendment Foundation

Dinner

Open Government Outlook

Ken Foskett

Presentation of Founder's Award to Peter Canfield

Richard T. Griffiths, President Emeritus, Georgia First Amendment Foundation

Presentation of Open Government Hero Award to the Georgia Library Media Association

John Mack Freeman, Secretary, Georgia First Amendment Foundation

Remarks

Nan Brown, Advocacy Co-Coordinator, Georgia Library Media Association

Introduction of Keynote Speaker

DuBose Porter, Chairman, Dublin Courier Herald Publishing Co. and Member, GFAF Board of Directors

Video Tribute

Keynote Speech

Rep. Mary Margaret Oliver, Georgia House of Representatives

Presentation of 2023 Weltner Freedom of Information Award

Charles Longstreet Weltner Yow

Closing

Thank you to our Weltner Banquet Chair John Mack Freeman and to **Anna Chapman, Silvia Eaddy, Lenora Kopkin, Mike Luckovich, Dale Russell and Fox5 Atlanta-TV** for their contributions to the success of our banquet. **GFAF board members** contribute to the foundation's success and advancement of our mission year round; meet them at gfaf.org/about/leadership.

About the Weltner Freedom of Information Award

Our award is named for **Charles L. Weltner**, a former chief justice of the Supreme Court of Georgia who championed freedom of information and ethics in state government. Our Weltner Banquet provides financial support for the foundation's transparency-focused and essential mission: fighting for free speech, freedom of the press and access to public meetings, proceedings and records in Georgia. Learn more at gfaf.org/events/weltner-awards.



Georgia Chief Justice Charles L. Weltner said it best.



**“Because public men and women are amenable
‘at all times’ to the people, they must conduct
the public’s business out in the open.”
— Davis v. City of Macon (1992)**

The Griffiths Family Fund is proud to support the Georgia First Amendment Foundation as it works to improve government transparency, maintain the free flow of ideas, and encourage independent accountability journalism.

Ken Foskett, president of the Georgia First Amendment Foundation, is an award-winning investigative reporter and editor, and a professor at Arizona State University's Cronkite School of Journalism. He retired from *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* in 2021 after a 32-year career. He is the emeritus chair of the Atlanta Press Club's board of directors.

Richard T. Griffiths serves as a distinguished industry fellow at the University of Georgia and the University of North Carolina. For 20 years, he oversaw editorial quality control at CNN. Before that, he worked at CBS News and in local news in Texas, Missouri and North Carolina. As a GFAF board member, he teaches about the importance of open government, community trust-building and local journalism.

Peter Canfield, recipient of our Founder's Award, was already known as a fierce defender of the First Amendment when, in 1994, he stepped up to help launch GFAF by recruiting board members, crafting bylaws and more. Over 29 years as a GFAF director, Canfield's commitment to a free press and the public's right to know has fueled the foundation's success, and his work in the courtroom has established public-access precedent in Georgia and beyond.

John Mack Freeman, GFAF board secretary, is the Head of Public Services Librarian at Georgia Tech. He is the 2024 President of the Georgia Library Association. Freeman's research includes library services to underserved populations; privacy in public spaces; and libraries and public policy. He is chair of this year's Weltner Banquet.

Nan Brown, advocacy co-coordinator of the Georgia Library Media Association, has been a school librarian/media specialist in secondary schools in the Atlanta area for almost 20 years. Brown was named her school district's 2021 Library Media Specialist of the Year and received the 2022 Georgia Library Media Association Intellectual Freedom Award. She grew up in Coffee County; both of her parents were educators.

DuBose Porter is chairman of the Dublin Courier Herald Publishing Co., publisher of newspapers and magazines across Middle and South Georgia. He served in the state House of Representatives 29 years, leading milestone initiatives including creation of the Hope Scholarship and the state's public defender system; expansion of technical colleges; and preservation of environmentally sensitive land. Porter chaired the Georgia Democratic Party from 2013 to 2019. He is a GFAF director and past president of the Georgia Press Association.

State Rep. Mary Margaret Oliver, a DeKalb native and Decatur attorney, is known for focusing on legislation protecting children and consumers. Her bipartisan approach is respected by fellow lawmakers, and she has the distinction of chairing both the House and Senate Judiciary Committees. Oliver, an open government advocate, regularly shares her under-the-Gold-Dome perspective in the media, providing an inside view of how the Legislature works.

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 and joins in honoring the
 Georgia Library Media Association and
 Rep. Mary Margaret Oliver.



Foundation honors state Rep. Mary Margaret Oliver with 2023 Weltner Award

We're celebrating Oliver's nearly four decades of legislative service and work to protect open government and free speech in Georgia.

Admired for her civility and bipartisanship, state Rep. Mary Margaret Oliver is this year's recipient of the Georgia First Amendment Foundation's 21st Charles L. Weltner Freedom of Information Award.

Oliver, a practicing attorney in Decatur, began her legislative career in Georgia in 1987 and has served in both the Georgia House of Representatives and the Georgia Senate. Over her decades of public service, she has championed transparency in the Georgia Legislature and supported the mission of the Georgia First Amendment Foundation to keep the halls — and files — of government open to the public. Oliver spoke to the foundation about some of these issues.

Have public attitudes toward government transparency changed over your career?

The public's attitudes to transparency have changed because of the way technology has changed. And one of the most dramatic changes is the fact that people can watch from their home everything we do in the Legislature. But when you're watching from home, you have less access to the documents. I feel that difference as a legislator, and that would be even harder for a person at home, because the documents tend to get posted after hearings.

Has technology changed your interaction with constituents, too?

The communication of folks, constituents and others who are following Georgia politics, their access to me is totally different. And it's almost 95 percent on social media. For instance, they don't give me their address when they email me. I'm not always able to know if they are a constituent. And that's always really important to me. So, my responsiveness and my obligation to people changes when you get auto-directed emails. I got, I think, close to 3,000 messages when I introduced the ban on assault weapons back in 2016. And many were not pleasant, and many of them came from very, very organized efforts. The ability for the public to have access, the ability for the people to energize around access, I feel is different. That's a challenge at times, but it also ensures that I no longer hear only from the president of the Rotary Club and the president of the bank.

What is the proper balance between personal privacy and the public's right to know?

We're evolving a balance. The power of social media to be mean and attacking and threatening and dangerous, in many cases, has highlighted this issue. When does [public information] serve the public? And when is it a deterrent to public service? How do we ensure good people run for office and show up for juries?

How have attitudes about transparency changed among elected officials?

At a minimum, we have to articulate a willingness to be open to the public. But you know, there are legislative efforts every year to reduce transparency.

What is the state of open government in Georgia right now?

The public is demanding more transparency. We are delivering it slowly and sometimes over a fight. But clearly, the transparency that is available to the public today is dramatically different than when I started my career as a legal services lawyer. I came to the Capitol for the first time when I was in my early 30s. There were secret meetings: Close the door. Don't come in. And so all of that has dramatically changed. Attempts at secret meetings in the Capitol are far fewer, and far more limited — and the press generally knows.

Read Georgia Supreme Court Chief Justice Michael P. Boggs' letter commending Rep. Oliver's decades of service in the General Assembly and "countless contributions to the state" at bit.ly/46qpvRa

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Georgia Library Media Association recognized for combating censorship

We're honoring school librarians' efforts to safeguard constitutional rights.

A push toward book banning in Georgia has created confusion, disruption and division in our communities, and led to flawed state laws that usurp communities' ability to make local decisions about what is best for their schools.

Through it all, the Georgia Library Media Association has spoken up for the constitutional rights of students and educators, pushing back against state laws and district policies that foster censorship in our schools. That's why the Georgia First Amendment Foundation is honoring the Georgia Library Media Association with our 2023 Open Government Hero award.

We asked GLMA representatives, all educators in Georgia public schools, to share their views on censorship trends and possible solutions.

What are some high-profile examples of book banning and censorship in Georgia schools in recent years?

Nan Brown, GLMA advocacy co-chair: The first red flag was Columbia County in 2019. The superintendent removed three novels, saying they were unacceptable and their content was extreme. In 2022, the Forsyth County School System administratively removed eight books from schools. Parents, community members and GLMA members joined a coalition to advocate for clarity and consistency in book approval policies. Ultimately, all but one book was returned to the shelves. In a related action, the U.S. Department of Education investigated whether Forsyth County had created a hostile environment for students based on sex, color, race and national origin. Recent book talks in the district were disrupted after an author told students that someone connected to the story was gay. In August, Cobb County fired a teacher for reading a book she bought at a school book fair. A tribunal selected by the school district recommended that she not be fired, but the school board fired her anyway.

What's the process for selecting books, and why do books get challenged?

NB: It's important for people to understand that school library books are selected through a process that often starts with student requests and leads to professional reviews that consider age relevance and other factors. The book has to be considered as a whole, not a few words or sentences that get read aloud at a school board meeting. A determination of obscenity must align with the *Miller* test established by a U.S. Supreme Court decision.

Why is it important to have comprehensive collections in school libraries?

Todd Cates, media specialist and member of the Professional Association of Georgia Educators' Legislative Action Committee:

We have to offer materials that represent all the children in our schools. And despite pushback from certain groups of people, there are kids who are questioning who they are in elementary school. Does that mean we have to turn our entire catalog over to books that represent them? No. But it's important that all kids see themselves represented, whether they're children of color, native children, gay or lesbian, white, or Christian or not Christian. They're who they are; they should be represented in the literature they see in school. Books give children a sense of belonging. They help them develop empathy.

What's your advice to people who are interested in learning more about these issues?

Meggan Ford, GLMA president-elect: Get familiar with the American Library Association's Library Bill of Rights. Find out how candidates in your area feel about censorship and book banning. Be mindful of legislative bills coming up, and make your voice heard by lawmakers. Show up to your local board of education meeting to understand what's going on. Talk to your local librarians. Ask what they're seeing and how it's affecting their service to your community. Don't assume that book-banning campaigns are not happening in your community — or won't happen. Book challenges across the nation nearly doubled last year. The trend toward censorship is real.

Read the complete Q&A, including links to related news stories, at bit.ly/48LhyYd



Photo by Stanley Dunlap of the Georgia Recorder

The Georgia Recorder is proud to support the important work of the Georgia First Amendment Foundation and salutes the 2023 honorees.

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and congratulates
Rep. Mary Margaret Oliver
and the Georgia Library
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“A democracy requires accountability, and accountability requires transparency.”

Kilpatrick Townsend is proud to join the Georgia First Amendment Foundation in honoring Rep. Mary Margaret Oliver as this year’s Charles L. Weltner Freedom of Information Award winner. We celebrate Representative Oliver’s extensive career in advancing government openness and responsibility. Throughout her nearly four decades as a public servant, she has steadfastly defended the right of citizens to access information and freely express their thoughts. Her commitment to our laws and Constitution is truly commendable.