



23rd Charles L. Weltner Freedom of Information Celebration

*honoring
Charles Davis for his belief in the power of open government
and his work to protect and expand it*

Oct. 28, 2025 | Emory Conference Center | Atlanta



*The Atlanta
Journal-Constitution*

Substance and Soul

We are here to inform, inspire and empower a new generation of curious minds through distinctive reporting, cinematic storytelling, and thought-provoking commentary — all wrapped in an authentic Southern accent.

Congratulations Charles Davis, recipient of the 2025 Charles L. Weltner Freedom of Information Award. Thank you to your contribution to government transparency and accountability.



Learn more at [AJC.com](https://ajc.com)

Acknowledgments

The Georgia First Amendment Foundation thanks the following sponsors for their support of tonight's banquet and our mission:

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Welcome and Recognition of Special Guests

Nora Benavidez, Free Press, and GFAF Executive Committee Member

Dinner

New Challenges to Free Speech and Government Transparency

Sarah Brewerton-Palmer, Caplan-Cobb, and GFAF President

Presentation of Founder's Award to Richard T. Griffiths, GFAF President Emeritus and Board Member

Sarah Brewerton-Palmer

Presentation of Open Government Hero Award to Richard Belcher, Retired Investigative Journalist

Richard T. Griffiths

Video Tribute to Weltner Award Honoree Charles Davis, Dean of UGA's Grady College of Journalism & Mass Communication

Video created by Dale Russell, GFAF Board Member

Introduction of Honoree

Jonathan Peters, Associate Dean of UGA's Grady College, and GFAF Board Member

Keeping the Fun in FOI

Charles Davis, Weltner Award Honoree

Presentation of 2025 Weltner Freedom of Information Award

Closing

Sarah Brewerton-Palmer

Thank you to **Kathy Brister, Silvia Eaddy, John Mack Freeman, Jessica Harvey, Erica Henry, Shweta Krishnan, Krys Alex Photography, Mike Luckovich, John McCosh, Joy Ramsingh and Dale Russell** for their contributions to the success of our banquet. GFAF board members contribute to the advancement of our mission year round; meet them at

<https://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 <https://gfaf.org/events/weltner-awards/>.

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Nora Benavidez serves as senior counsel and director of Digital Justice & Civil Rights at Free Press, leading the nonprofit's national legal and advocacy agenda to protect democracy and free speech. Benavidez is founder of Build the Bench, a network for Latina women entering law and public service. She serves on GFAF's board and executive committee.

Sarah Brewerton-Palmer is a partner with Caplan Cobb specializing in complex business litigation, First Amendment issues, media and communications law, and appellate matters. She previously served as law clerk to the Honorable Jill Pryor of the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals and practiced with Jenner & Block in Chicago. Brewerton-Palmer is president of GFAF's board.

Richard T. Griffiths, GFAF president emeritus, has long served as a distinguished industry fellow at UGA's Grady College and at the University of North Carolina. For 20 years, he oversaw editorial quality control at CNN. As a foundation board member, Griffiths teaches about the importance of open government, community trust-building and local journalism.

Richard Belcher was born in Atlanta and remained to build a successful career as an investigative reporter for local TV stations, spending most of his career at WSB-TV. Hard-hitting government accountability news stories, bolstered by public records, were Belcher's hallmark. He retired in 2022 but continues to train journalists on how to get the story.

Jonathan Peters is the associate dean of UGA's Grady College of Journalism & Mass Communication. He is an affiliate scholar of the Center for Information, Technology & Public Life at UNC, and he is on the Panel of Experts on Freedom of Peaceful Assembly/Association for the Organization for Security & Co-operation in Europe. He is a board member and past president of GFAF.

Charles Davis is dean of UGA's Grady College of Journalism & Mass Communication. He worked as a journalist, taught journalism, researched and wrote about government transparency (and continues to do so), and served as executive director of the National Freedom of Information Coalition before returning home to Georgia. Davis became dean of Grady College in 2013.

2025 Charles L. Weltner Freedom of Information Award Banquet

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**Caplan Cobb is proud to celebrate the
Georgia First Amendment Foundation
and joins in honoring Charles Davis, Richard Belcher
and Richard T. Griffiths for their dedication
to open government.**

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UGA journalism leader honored with 2025 Weltner Award

Charles Davis has helped loose a small army of journalists holding public officials to account when government strays from Georgia's Sunshine Laws.

Dean of the University of Georgia's Grady College of Journalism & Mass Communication since 2013, Davis ensures reporters and editors leave UGA schooled in open records and meetings laws and ready to protect them.

Before UGA, Davis spent 14 years as a journalism professor at the University of Missouri. He also served as executive director of the National Freedom of Information Coalition and as executive director of the Freedom of Information Center. His scholarship focuses on government transparency laws and the role of a free press in democratic governments. He is the author or editor of four books, including "The Art of Access: Practical Strategies for Acquiring Public Records" (2010). He was a member of the foundation's board of directors from 2014-2018.

Davis, an Athens native, said, "My FOI roots began in Georgia, with my master's thesis, a history of the Georgia Open Records Act, way back in 1992. That's what began my academic fixation with how and why governments can keep some things from the people, and not others.

That power – the power to declare a document secret – animated my research, and continues to fascinate me.

"People undervalue openness and transparency, buzzwords that are easy to say and much harder to operationalize."

His belief in the power of open government and his work to protect and expand it are why the foundation is honoring Davis with our 2025 Charles L. Weltner Freedom of Information Award.

Open government laws are crucial, Davis says, because they support newsgathering and empower ordinary citizens. For most open records requesters, the process is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. And the response they get, he says, can shape their opinion of government from then on.



“Those who won our independence believed . . . that public discussion is a political duty, and that this should be a fundamental principle of the American government.”

Justice Louis Brandeis
Whitney vs. California (1927)

“The Government’s power to censor the press was abolished so that the press would remain forever free to censure the Government.”

Justice Hugo Black
New York Times vs. United States (1971)



“Because public men and women are amenable ‘at all times’ to the people, they must conduct the public’s business out in the open.”

Georgia Chief Justice Charles L. Weltner
Davis, et al vs. City of Macon (1992)

Since the founding of our republic, wise justices have spoken up for truth, rule of law, free speech, free press, accountability journalism, and open government.

The Griffiths Family Fund is proud to support the Georgia First Amendment Foundation as it works to uphold these fundamental values.

Investigative TV journalist honored as Open Government Hero

Richard Belcher's career as a TV journalist was defined by dogged pursuit of investigative stories bolstered by public records. He got his start in radio then moved on to television, spending most of his career at WSB-TV, retiring in 2022.

He covered Atlanta police when the city gained notoriety as the murder capital of the United States in the 1970s. Belcher sifted through police records to put stories behind the crime stats, and that work showed him how records could open a window into what was happening behind the scenes at all levels of government.



Setting up camp in record clerks' offices and poring through documents netted him a treasure trove of news stories, many of which shone a light on malfeasance. He reported groundbreaking stories, among them the state's failed oversight of nursing homes and irregularities in Atlanta Housing Authority operations.

Over 50 years of reporting, Belcher built a reputation for digging in and breaking big stories despite document dumps, taciturn public officials and the constant need to make document-based stories look good on camera. Belcher's career as a watchdog reporter who held public officials accountable to the people is why the foundation is presenting him with our 2025 Open Government Hero Award.



Department of Journalism
Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication
UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

**Congratulations to Charles Davis,
Richard Belcher and Richard T. Griffiths!**

**We embrace your commitment to
open government and freedom of the press as we
prepare the next generation of journalists.**

grady.uga.edu/academics/journalism

GFAF honors Griffiths' commitment to the public's right to know

The Georgia First Amendment Foundation is delighted to honor foundation board member Richard T. Griffiths with our Founder's Award, a tribute to one of our own.

"This award recognizes Richard's years of extraordinary leadership and long-standing service to the cause of open government and free expression," said GFAF President Sarah Brewerton-Palmer. "Richard has been a driving force behind our mission, lending his passion and vision to advancing government transparency, defending press freedom, and strengthening the public's right to know in Georgia."

Griffiths, a career journalist, started working with GFAF more than 15 years ago when he was overseeing "the Row," CNN's editorial quality-control operation. He joined the board in 2015 and served as president from 2018-2020. Over the years, he has helped secure the foundation's funding, connected with allies to bolster open government advocacy, served as GFAF spokesperson and taught hundreds of Georgians about open government laws and free speech rights.

"To be able to make an impact in local communities where the rubber hits the road of our democracy, that is so rewarding to me," Griffiths said, "and why I try to devote as much time as I can."



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**is proud to support the
Georgia First Amendment Foundation
and congratulates
Weltner Award honoree
Charles Davis**

GFAF's Legislative Watch team monitors legislation, educates on open government impact

During the 2025 General Assembly session, the Georgia First Amendment Foundation monitored roughly two dozen legislative proposals and connected directly with members of the General Assembly about the implications. Some key bills that were on our radar:



Senate Bill 12 focused on how private contractors comply with open government laws when doing business with the government. In last-minute changes to the bill, lawmakers sought to expand their own exemptions from state Sunshine Laws and to increase secrecy in local police officers' actions. GFAF pushed back in the Legislature and in the media. Gov. Brian Kemp publicly questioned transparency implications of SB 12, lawmakers dropped the troubling last-minute amendments, and the bill passed.

Senate Bill 27 aimed to add doxxing to the list of crimes defined as stalking. The bill would have upset the balance between free speech and privacy and still not stopped exposure of personally identifying information. SB 27 did not pass.

Senate Bill 74 and similar language tacked onto **House Bill 483** would have exposed library workers at all levels to criminal liability for distribution of material deemed harmful to minors. Neither bill survived the session.

Senate Bill 9 changed late in the session from a bill to curb AI-generated child pornography to one criminalizing publication or broadcast of loosely defined "deceptive information" within 90 days of an election, thereby chilling protected speech. SB 9 did not pass, and lawmakers now have an opportunity in 2026 to address the real and timely issues of AI-generated misinformation while respecting constitutional rights.

Learn more about the foundation's legislative efforts: <https://bit.ly/GFAFWatch>

Congratulations, Dean Davis

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*On behalf of alumni of UGA Grady College
of Journalism and Mass Communication
and members of the Society of
Professional Journalists and its FOI
Committee, I congratulate Dr. Charles
Davis for his extraordinary contributions
to Freedom of Information.*

*I commend the Georgia First Amendment
Foundation for recognizing Dr. Davis with
the 2025 Weltner Freedom of Information
Award.*

Dr. Carolyn S. Carlson

Former National President,
Society of Professional Journalists
UGA Journalism Alumni Association

Local journalist's deportation is 'chilling for all of us'

Mario Guevara, an Emmy-winning Spanish-language reporter who covered immigration in Georgia, was deported on Oct. 3 after being held by law enforcement for more than 100 days. GFAF joined the Committee to Protect Journalists and a coalition of local and national advocates to call for Guevara's release and for protection of journalists' rights to gather news without government interference.

Foundation board member Nora Benavidez, who is senior counsel at the nonprofit Free Press, was among attorneys who fought for Guevara's release. His deportation "is chilling for all of us," Benavidez said. "Mario Guevara was in the U.S. legally, yet he was targeted because the government disliked his constitutionally protected activities as a journalist. It's devastating to see our government abandon the core press freedom principles the United States was founded on."

Guevara had lived in the United States for 20 years, had work authorization and was on a path to obtaining a green card when he was arrested June 14 while covering a "No Kings" protest in metro Atlanta. Local law enforcement authorities charged Guevara with entering a roadway, obstruction of law enforcement officers and unlawful assembly. He was detained despite wearing a vest clearly marked "PRESS." The charges against him were later dropped, and an immigration judge ordered his release, yet he remained in U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement custody.

Guevara worked as an immigration reporter for Mundo Hispanico and, in 2024, launched his own digital news outlet, MG News. He regularly live-streamed news reports from ICE raids. His coverage drew nearly 800,000 followers.

In a petition in federal court, Guevara's lawyers asserted that the government was explicit in its court filings that they were holding Guevara because he had exercised his First Amendment right to record public officials, specifically law enforcement officers carrying out their official duties in public.

Tonight, Guevara's family will accept the foundation's Frontline Award on behalf of the deported journalist. The award pays tribute to journalists who courageously report from the front lines.



Judges should protect Georgians' open records rights by awarding legal fees to victorious plaintiffs

A good law is only as strong as its enforcement. And that's where Georgia is falling short on public access to government records. Here's how it happens: An attorney working on behalf of a pro bono client successfully proves in court that a government agency violated the Georgia Open Records Act. Yet the judge opts not to require the offending agency to pay legal fees, as allowed by law.

This scenario playing out in Georgia courtrooms is sapping the strength of our state Sunshine Laws and shrinking citizens' options when they need a lawyer to fight for their right to know.

Read more: <https://bit.ly/473oiBQ>

Home of the Free

As our nation celebrates its 250th birthday in 2026, we are reminded of the enduring power of the First Amendment — a cornerstone of our democracy that has upheld the rights of free speech, a free press, and open government for more than two centuries.

This historic milestone invites us to honor those who defend these rights and help ensure they endure for future generations.

Kilpatrick is proud to support the Georgia First Amendment Foundation and join in recognizing this year's distinguished honorees:

- Charles L. Weltner Freedom of Information Award: **Charles Davis**, Dean of the University of Georgia's Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication
- Open Government Hero Award: **Richard Belcher**, investigative journalist whose career has advanced public accountability through the use of open records
- Founder's Award: **Richard T. Griffiths**, longtime board member and advocate for free speech, press freedom, and open government

We applaud the Foundation's ongoing work to safeguard the freedoms at the heart of our democracy.

