



24th Charles L. Weltner Freedom of Information Celebration

*honoring **Bill Rankin** for educating Georgians
on the importance of an open, transparent judicial system*

Oct. 28, 2026 | 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 to Bill Rankin on receiving the 2026 Charles L. Weltner Freedom of Information Award. Your print and podcast stories have educated the public on the importance of transparency in Georgia's courtrooms and criminal justice systems.



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 Treasurer

Dinner

The Work of Access

John Mack Freeman, Georgia Institute of Technology, and GFAF President

Presentation of Frontline Award to Saif Aslam, co-founder of CivicDuty

Nora Benavidez

Presentation of Open Government Hero Award to the UGA First Amendment Clinic, accepted by Clare Norins

Joy Ramsingh, Energy and Policy Institute, and GFAF Vice President

Introduction of Weltner FOI Award Honoree Bill Rankin, Longtime AJC Legal Affairs Journalist

Tom Clyde, Kilpatrick Townsend & Stockton LLP, and GFAF Board Member

Sunshine is the Best Disinfectant

Bill Rankin, Weltner Award Honoree

Presentation of 2026 Weltner Freedom of Information Award

Susan Weltner Yow

Closing

John Mack Freeman

We're grateful to this year's Weltner Banquet Supporters for their generous contributions to the foundation's mission: **Bruce Harvey, John Mack Freeman** and **Kathy Brister**.

Thank you to **Silvia Eaddy, Jessica Harvey, Erica Henry, Krys Alex Photography, Mike Luckovich, John McCosh, Shawn McIntosh** 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/>.



CNN IS PROUD
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GEORGIA FIRST AMENDMENT FOUNDATION



Nora Benavidez serves as senior counsel at Free Press, leading the nonprofit's national legal and advocacy agenda to protect democracy and free speech. Nora sits on the board of directors of Ben & Jerry's. She serves on the Georgia First Amendment Foundation's board and executive committee.

John Mack Freeman is 2026 president of the board of the Georgia First Amendment Foundation. He serves as assistant dean of libraries for interdisciplinary initiatives and director of the Clough Undergraduate Learning Commons at the Georgia Institute of Technology. A past president of the Georgia Library Association, his service record centers on intellectual freedom and access to information.

Joy Ramsingh serves as public records counsel at Energy and Policy Institute, a national nonprofit watchdog, where she provides legal counsel relating to state and federal FOIA litigation. Before joining EPI, she litigated public records and public meetings matters in state and federal courts. She previously worked as appellate counsel at the Pennsylvania Office of Open Records. She is the vice president of the Georgia First Amendment Foundation.

Clare Norins is a clinical associate professor and director of the University of Georgia School of Law's First Amendment Clinic. The clinic represents clients in federal and state court on a range of First Amendment and media law issues. The clinic defends and advances expressive freedoms, including protections for journalists. She is a foundation board member.

Tom Clyde is a law partner with Kilpatrick who regularly represents print, television, internet and communications companies regarding First Amendment rights. He served as counsel to Atlanta Journal-Constitution journalists for decades when Bill Rankin covered courts and legal affairs for the newspaper. A foundation board member, he has successfully litigated cases under the Georgia Open Records Act.

Bill Rankin covered courts and legal affairs for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution from 1993 until his 2025 retirement, covering some of Georgia's most sensational trials. He also conducted in-depth investigations exposing inequities in Georgia's judicial system, especially in the state's application of the death penalty. He hosted and narrated the AJC's true-crime "Breakdown" podcast.

CAPLAN | COBB

is proud to celebrate the
Georgia First Amendment Foundation
and joins in honoring:

Bill Rankin

Charles L. Weltner Freedom of Information Award

UGA School of Law's First Amendment Clinic
Open Government Hero Award



Longtime AJC legal affairs journalist Bill Rankin honored with 2026 Weltner FOI Award

The timeline just didn't make sense to Bill Rankin. He was reporting on the investigation into Richard Jewell, a security guard suspected of single-handedly orchestrating the July 17, 1996, Centennial Olympic Park bombing.

A few days after the bombing, which led to the deaths of two people and tainted the flag-waving cheer of Atlanta's Olympic Games, Rankin stepped out of the office of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution and strolled a few blocks past Centennial Olympic Park. Then, keeping an eye on his watch, he walked the distance between the payphone Jewell supposedly used to call in the attack and the spot where the bomb exploded.

It would have been impossible for a lone bomber, as law enforcement suspected Jewell to be, to cover that ground in the time alleged by law enforcement. That realization, combined with doubts Rankin was hearing from court and legal sources and even his own pastor, who knew Jewell's mother personally, shifted Rankin's reporting. He believed the feds had the wrong man.

Jewell was the wrong man. Eric Robert Rudolph, finally captured by police in 2003, was sentenced to life in prison in 2005 for the Olympic Park bombing and other crimes.

"I'm as proud of that story as anything I ever wrote," Rankin said, recalling the impact of his initial article that began to dismantle the case against Jewell. It remains a standout among thousands of news stories he wrote as legal affairs reporter for the AJC.

Rankin opened a window into Georgia's criminal justice system through compelling storytelling that educated the public on the importance of transparency in Georgia's courtrooms and criminal justice systems. "I wanted to do everything I could to keep the scales of justice on an even keel," Rankin said.

That critical work is why the Georgia First Amendment Foundation is honoring Rankin tonight with our 2026 Charles L. Weltner Freedom of Information Award.

Rankin's reporting always reminded readers – and later podcast listeners – what was at stake: The people have given their government officials the power to prosecute, punish and kill. Georgians have a right to know how that power gets used. It was a tenet passed to Rankin by his father, Jim Rankin, a former AJC assistant managing

editor. His father's message, that the state never wields more power than when it executes someone, became the younger Rankin's journalistic *raison d'être*.

"Bill has a very strong sense of justice, to the point of outrage," said his longtime AJC editor and collaborator Richard Halicks. "Take, for example, his work on the death penalty and how capriciously it was imposed."

A 2007 series showed that in more than 1,000 death penalty convictions over a decade, Georgia's ultimate punishment was being administered arbitrarily and unfairly, particularly in cases with Black defendants and white victims.

While his investigative coverage got results, Rankin's day-to-day chronicles of sensational Georgia court cases won followers. The murder trial of NFL star Ray Lewis after Atlanta's 2000 Super Bowl. A racketeering trial centered on celebrity-frequented Atlanta strip club The Gold Club. The murder trial of a father accused of intentionally leaving his child in a hot car. The trial of white men who, in 2020, murdered a Black man, Ahmaud Arbery, as he jogged through a neighborhood near Brunswick. The racketeering case accusing President Donald Trump

and his allies of attempting to overturn Georgia's 2020 presidential election results.

An Atlanta native and University of Georgia graduate, Rankin started as a reporter in 1980, pounding out stories on a manual typewriter. But he was quick to embrace technological change. In 2011, he used Twitter to scoop other news outlets worldwide by reporting — in fewer than 140 characters — that the U.S. Supreme Court would allow Georgia to move ahead with the controversial execution of Troy Anthony Davis, convicted of killing a Savannah police officer.

He eagerly became lead reporter and narrator for the AJC's award-winning true-crime podcast "Breakdown." With a storyteller's finesse and a courthouse regular's acumen, he colorfully detailed botched prosecutions, shocking witness statements, judicial strictures and the consequences of each case.

Still, Rankin is at his core an old-school, shoe-leather reporter who thrives on competition and searches for angles other journalists miss. "He did not want to get beat," Halicks said. "And he had this wonderful way of getting it first and getting it right."



Department of Journalism

Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication

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CONGRATULATIONS TO

Bill Rankin

WELTNER
FOI AWARD

**UGA First
Amendment Clinic**

OPEN GOVERNMENT
HERO AWARD

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

A STRONGER DEMOCRACY THROUGH A MORE INFORMED WORLD

grady.uga.edu/academics/journalism

PEOPLE | STORIES | A MORE INFORMED TOMORROW

UGA 1st Amendment Clinic staff and students recognized as Open Government Heroes

A citizen is blocked from viewing his city's social media page after he criticizes the mayor. A civically engaged citizen is sued for defamation by a county commissioner. A school board forbids parents from making unfavorable comments about its employees during public meetings. A county sheriff attempts to prosecute a constituent for her political speech.

These are real examples of issues tackled by the UGA First Amendment Clinic. Since its establishment at the University of Georgia School of Law in 2020, the clinic has become essential to the fight for government transparency and free speech in Georgia.

"The UGA First Amendment Clinic came out of the gate as a credible, important place for people to go when their access to government had been denied and their First Amendment rights had been infringed upon," said Richard T. Griffiths, president emeritus of the Georgia First Amendment Foundation. "The clinic is an extraordinary resource that does great work in the public interest."



Clare Norins

The foundation is paying tribute to that essential work tonight by recognizing the UGA First Amendment Clinic's staff and students with our Open Government Hero Award.

Directed by Clinical Associate Professor Clare Norins, the clinic is staffed by a legal fellow, a project attorney, an administrative support specialist, and up to 10 UGA law students per semester. The team's results include:

- Achieving dismissal of a strategic lawsuit against public participation (SLAPP) defamation case against neighborhood activists who spoke out against a local developer (bit.ly/4d3V60b).
- Securing a court ruling that sets the standard for how local governments regulate speech on their social media channels (bit.ly/4zELySY).
- Authoring amicus briefs supporting prevailing parties in seminal Georgia Supreme Court cases, among them *ACLU v. Zeh* (actual malice standard for public officials) and *Camden County v. Sweatt* (citizen right to petition).
- Protecting community members' right to address a county school board free from viewpoint discrimination and obstructive procedures (bit.ly/45MUWGE).
- Arguing for public access to court records and the right to record court proceedings (bit.ly/4wZAZHW).
- Representing a journalist arrested while reporting (bit.ly/4zEZ7lv).

In addition, the clinic conducts pre-publication review for journalists and media outlets and trains journalists on using open government laws, interacting with police, safeguarding their personal and digital safety, protecting sources, practicing their right to record, and avoiding defamation and copyright violations.

Norins and team often partner with the Georgia First Amendment Foundation, other advocacy groups and private-practice First Amendment attorneys. Norins sits on the foundation's board of directors. The clinic is primarily funded by The Stanton Foundation; a grant from The Legal Clinic Fund for Local News supports its work with journalists.

"The cases we win protect real people's rights today. Just as important are the dozens of law students who learn firsthand in the clinic why access to government and freedom of expression are worth fighting for," Norins said. "Our law students are the ones who'll carry this work forward, into courtrooms, newsrooms, public forums, and government offices across the state for decades to come."



“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.

Frontline Award pays tribute to students developing new tool for civic engagement

CivicDuty (www.civicduty.app) is a platform that shows people who their elected officials are, what they're doing in government and how that affects the issues that people care about.

A government transparency tool, CivicDuty consolidates government information, drawing directly from official sources with no commentary or added opinion. This allows users to track legislation moving at the state Capitol, as well as ordinances and issues leaders advance at the local and state levels.



Scan the QR code for WMAZ-TV's story on Saif Aslam and CivicDuty.

A group of college students created the platform, which is still in development. **CivicDuty co-founder Saif Aslam is at tonight's banquet to accept the Georgia First Amendment Foundation's Frontline Award.**

Our Frontline Award recognizes people challenging barriers to open government and fighting for freedom of information for all Georgians. The founders of CivicDuty are leading by example to create easy methods for people in our state to understand who represents them in government at every level and what our elected officials do with the power we give them.

The LexisNexis logo, featuring a red circular icon with white curved lines and the text "LexisNexis®" in a serif font. Below the logo, the text "is proud to support the Georgia First Amendment Foundation and congratulates tonight's honorees" is displayed in a bold, sans-serif font. The background of the entire section is a grayscale image of the Georgia State Capitol dome and part of the building's facade. A solid red horizontal bar is at the bottom of this section.

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Full Disclosure: Chronicle salutes 2026 Weltner honorees

**These heroes wear
caps & gowns.**

Proud partners with
UGA First Amendment Clinic.

Rough Draft
atlanta

**Bill's legacy: open records.
Ours: open rates.**

Unredacted congratulations
to a true legend.

CONGRATULATIONS

Bill Rankin

AND

**The Georgia First
Amendment Foundation**

For your steadfast work on behalf of all Georgians
to keep our government and courts
transparent and accountable.

WITH THANKS,

Shawn McIntosh

**New
resource!**



GEORGIA FIRST
AMENDMENT
FOUNDATION

OPEN RECORDS CASE INDEX



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Get the case law you need to fight for your
right to public records in Georgia.

gfaf.org/ora/



Illuminating Justice



Kilpatrick is proud to join the Georgia First Amendment Foundation in honoring **Bill Rankin** as the 2026 recipient of the **Charles L. Weltner Freedom of Information Award**.

For more than three decades as *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution's* legal affairs reporter, Bill Rankin has brought clarity, insight, and a steadfast commitment to transparency to coverage of Georgia's courts and criminal justice system. Through compelling reporting, he has helped Georgians understand not only the legal issues affecting their communities, but also why public access to government proceedings and records is vital to accountability and democracy.

We also are pleased to recognize the staff and students of the **University of Georgia School of Law's First Amendment Clinic** receiving the **Open Government Hero Award**. Through their crucial, hands-on advocacy on behalf of citizens and the media, the Clinic advances the public's right to attend government meetings and proceedings, obtain public records, and exercise free speech.

Kilpatrick thanks the Georgia First Amendment Foundation for its continuing leadership in protecting freedom of information, free expression, and transparent government throughout Georgia.