



## News Herald snags 4 awards in state competition

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[The News Herald](#)

The Panama City News Herald staff brought home four awards from the annual [Florida Society of Newspaper Editors](#) competition earlier this month.

The awards, which are judged by a panel of out-of-state journalists, recognize outstanding work in a variety of categories. The News Herald competed against Florida newspapers with circulations of less than 40,000.

“Our staff’s day-to-day focus is on putting together a top-notch daily newspaper for our readers and not on winning awards, but it is an honor that a prestigious organization such as FSNE recognizes the quality of our work,” said News Herald Executive Editor Phil Lucas.

A collection of Editorial Page Editor [Scott Kent's](#) editorials took second place in the Editorial competition. Kent submitted a collection of editorials on the [half-cent sales tax vote](#), State Attorney Steve Meadows' [handling of a complaint](#) against Judge Glenn Hess (see editorial below) and [political turmoil on the Bay County Tourist Development Council](#).

David Angier's coverage of the Martin Lee Anderson case won third place in the Investigative Reporting category.

The stories examined former Panama City [Medical Examiner Dr. Charles Siebert Jr.'s opinion](#) that Anderson died from an exertional [sickle cell trait collapse](#). The series started shortly after his opinion came out and looked at the body of evidence both in support and [opposed to his opinion](#). It followed the development of the evidence and [culminated with the acquittal](#) of eight former juvenile boot camp employees charged with Anderson's death.

[Graphics Editor John Russo's work took third in the Editorial Cartoon category](#). The cartoon selected by the judges, titled “[KABOOM!](#),” poked fun at the media's coverage of the troop surge in Iraq.

[Managing Editor Mike Cazalas placed third in the Columns category](#). Cazalas submitted a selection of pieces representative of his weekly column, “[Cazual Conversation](#),” which touches on politics, family life and humor.

The awards were handed out June 6 at FSNE's annual meeting in Orlando.

**Editorial by Scott Kent:**

**Friday, October 26, 2007**

**Meadows' wrong call**

When State Attorney Steve Meadows last year received a kooky complaint about Circuit Judge Glenn Hess soliciting the murder of a local political activist, he should've adopted the famous opinion writer Gertrude Stein had of Oakland — "There's no there there" — and dismissed it.

Instead, he gave it credence by recusing himself and passing it on to a special prosecutor to investigate. However, if he thought he was washing his hands of the matter, Meadows succeeded only in dirtying them.

Prosecutors have an obligation to exercise discretion as to when they initiate and conduct criminal prosecutions. They don't have to pursue everything that crosses their desks. They are expected to weigh the evidence and mitigating circumstances against the law and conclude whether it is in the public's interest to proceed. That should apply as well to criminal complaints.

Meadows flunked that test.

The activist alleged that in a February 2006 conversation in a courthouse hallway, Hess told Carrie Brooks, a lawyer's secretary, that some people in Bay County would like to see the activist dead. Hess has denied the allegation. Brooks said that whatever the judge may have said, she didn't consider it to be made with serious intent and saw no reason to report it.

Nevertheless, the activist found out about the incident and filed a formal complaint (18 months later) that Hess was seeking his murder. When it reached Meadows' office, he recused himself and referred the matter to Gov. Charlie Crist, who appointed Tallahassee State Attorney Willie Meggs to investigate.

Meggs returned a scathing report that not only found no basis for the activist's charge, but criticized Meadows for forwarding it to the governor.

Characterizing the alleged threat as a "non-event," Meggs scolded his Bay County counterpart for taking it seriously, which he said was a "miscarriage of the justice system" that "impugned the integrity of an honorable circuit judge."

Hess, a potential political rival of Meadows', was more than happy to chime in and accuse the state attorney of playing "dirty pool" and conducting a "smear campaign" against him.

Meadows argued that, far from playing politics, he was attempting to avoid any conflict of interest. He said it was inappropriate to investigate a judicial officer that his office must appear before, and that he didn't want to be seen as giving a judge preferential treatment by ignoring the complaint or keeping the referral secret.

Fair enough, in principle. But there's one circumstance that overrides the caution: Not all charges are created equal. Indeed, this charge was so baseless that Meggs practically laughed it off the stage. If somebody accused Hess of being a Nazi war criminal, would that be forwarded to the governor as well?

Being state attorney often means being forced to make difficult, no-win decisions — and being held accountable for them by the voters. In this instance, Meadows avoided the tough choice, which would have been to dismiss the activist's claim and take responsibility for making a judgment call. He wound up sullyng both his and the judge's reputations.