
2025 Golden Press Card Awards

List of winners of the 2025 Golden Press Card

East Tennessee SPJ



May 20, 2026

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2025 Golden Press Card Winners

Here is the list of winners of the Golden Press Card Awards of the East Tennessee Pro Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists.

This year's contest was judged by the San Diego Pro SPJ Chapter.

The winners were announced on May 20, 2026, at Maple Hall in downtown Knoxville.

DIGITAL ONLY

SPORTS REPORTING

First Place:

Hard Knox Roller Derby Keeps Rolling

Keith Leonard

Inside of Knoxville

Judges' Comments: *A nice blend of background to bring a reader new to roller derby up to speed, sprinkled with colorful and memorable details like the perfect sprinkles on a doughnut. Go get 'em Barbara Bushwacker!*

Second Place:

Playoff Soccer Comes to Knoxville

Tommy Bateman

Inside of Knoxville

Judges' Comments: *A bit more of a column than a pure sports report, but the obvious affection between this team and its city is depicted nicely.*

NEWSPAPER (LARGE)

SPORTS REPORTING

First Place:

The backstory that made Vols fans connect with their quarterback differently

Adam Sparks

News Sentinel

Judges' Comments: *In the hands of this reporter, the tale of Joey Aguilar's road to Tennessee reads like a novel. Never self indulgent and not a football cliché in sight. Bravo!*

Second Place:

Why Major League Baseball took a big swing on Bristol Motor Speedway

Mike Wilson

News Sentinel

Judges' Comments: *This project had an endless lineup of moving parts to make it happen. The reporter seemingly included them all in an article with a narrative that never felt weighed down by them, but enriched. Use of construction video a nice touch to demonstrate the sheer scale of this project.*

NEWSPAPER (SMALL)**SPORTS REPORTING****First Place:**

Tequila propels One Knoxville past Naples, into final of USL League One

Matt Rankin

BLANK Newspaper

Judges' Comments: *A richly detailed game day report for the hardest of hardcore fans.*

RADIO**GENERAL REPORTING****First Place:**

In rural Tennessee, Crypto miners try to 'sweet talk' locals into bitcoin mine development

Pierce Gentry

WUOT

Judges' Comments: *The kind of vital reporting about significant impacts of development on a rural community that didn't ask for them, nor were their considerations taken into account. A classic example of shining a spotlight where it was sorely needed. Even handed and fair considering the lack of comment from project reps.*

Second Place:

Campus firings over Charlie Kirk comments chill free speech in Appalachia

Pierce Gentry

WUOT

Judges' Comments: *A highly emotional subject addressed with civility and fairness.*

STUDENT JOURNALISM

STUDENT- PHOTOJOURNALISM: BEST NEWS PHOTOGRAPHY

First Place:

Brian Disoso Best News Photography

Brian Disoso

Overlooked in Appalachia

Judges' Comments: *True photo journalism where each photo depicts an important aspect of a community recovering from natural disaster.*

Second Place:

Jordan Bond Best News Photography

Jordan Bond

Overlooked in Appalachia

Judges' Comments: *Innovative use of angles and focus.*

STUDENT JOURNALISM

STUDENT - PHOTOJOURNALISM: BEST SPORTS PHOTOGRAPHY

First Place:

Cole Moore Photography

Cole Moore

The Daily Beacon

Judges' Comments: *A keen eye for the relationship between movement and color. These photos grab you by the throat!*

Second Place:

Photos by Cambree Gliessner

Cambree Gliessner

The Daily Beacon

Judges' Comments: *This photographer put the human emotion firmly in focus in each shot. Every photo tells a story.*

STUDENT JOURNALISM

STUDENT - COMMENTARY

First Place:

Corey Ray: Commentary

Corey Ray

Overlooked in Appalachia

Judges' Comments: *There was this entry, and then all the rest. This author came at this topic with a flamethrower so hot I could feel my eyebrows getting singed - but never let their emotions get ahead of making the case with enough facts and research to get a 9-0 ruling in front of the U.S. Supreme Court. Simple one of the best commentaries I've ever read - including the pros.*

Second Place:

Brian Disoso: Commentary

Brian Disoso

Overlooked in Appalachia

Judges' Comments: *A deeply personal story which couldn't have been easy to tell, but served a much higher purpose.*

STUDENT JOURNALISM

STUDENT - SPORTS REPORTING

First Place:

Danny White's UT is thriving

Jack Church

The Daily Beacon

Judges' Comments: *What a surprise to realize after selecting the winning entries that both were written by the same journalist. First place barely edged second place, but the thorough treatment of the subject with the thoughtful selection of quotes surrounded by crisp writing shows the effort put toward this exceptional feature story.*

Second Place:

Does food fuel victory?

Trevor McGee

The Daily Beacon

Judges' Comments: *So tasty! This feature is the journalism equivalent of a nutritionist's perfectly constructed meal plan. Every element of the story added value, from the lead to the details and data, and the exploration of nutrition's contribution to performance. Maybe there should be a tie for first place!*

NEWSPAPER (LARGE)

PHOTOJOURNALISM – BEST SPORTS PHOTOGRAPHY“

First Place:

Best Sports Photography: Caitie McMekin (Knox News)

Caitie McMekin

News Sentinel

Judges' Comments: *Perfectly captured the perfect moment — filled with action and emotion. Nice job.*

Second Place:

Best Sports Photography: Angelina Alcantar (Knox News)

Angelina Alcantar

News Sentinel

Judges' Comments: *Excellent timing, and great composition.*

Judges' Comments on Category: *Amazing photos all around. The top winners captured the perfect moment.*

NEWSPAPER (SMALL)

PERSONAL COLUMNS/REVIEW/CRITICISM

First Place:

Fifteen Years of Blank - Matt Rankin's Knoxville Story

Brittany Norvell

BLANK Newspaper

Judges' Comments: *Nicely written feature.*

Second Place:

A moonlight hike

Shanon Adame

The Daily Times

NEWSPAPER (LARGE)

ARTS & CULTURE REPORTING

First Place:

Steamed and storied: Knoxville dining as identity in a changing city

Joanna Hayes

News Sentinel

Judges' Comments: *The idea of eating a soggy sandwich does not sound at all appealing but by the end of the story, I was hungry. And I just had eaten! The image certainly stayed with me. I love the local history thrown in as well.*

Second Place:

Where Knoxville dances, listens and belongs

Keenan Thomas

News Sentinel

Judges' Comments: *A need to belong is an eternal human concern in mixed society. Regardless of personal pronouns, a safe space for anyone to dance freely without judgment is a song that remains the same: sometimes it takes courage too. I found this story compelling.*

DIGITAL ONLY

FREELANCE WRITING

First Place:

Abortion Saved Her. Now It Could Cost Her Freedom.

Angela Dennis

Capital B News

Judges' Comments: *This is an excellent piece and highlights a critical issue that needs more attention.*

Second Place:

Three Women, Three Paths in Equestrian Sport

Leslie Bateman

Inside of Knoxville

Judges' Comments: *Beautiful, vivid prose that highlights the passions these equestrians have for their sport.*

TELEVISION**CONTINUING COVERAGE****First Place:**

Edward Kelley, Jan. 6 defendant
Brittany Bailey, John North, Tim Dale
WBIR

Judges' Comments: *Great jail interviews! Accompanying file video and use of graphics were helpful and edited very well. Overall, a fascinating series to watch.*

Second Place:

The Trial of Megan Boswell
Anslee Daniel, Jeff Keeling, Murry Lee, WJHL News Team
WJHL

TELEVISION**BEST DIGITAL CONTENT****First Place:**

Camruinn Morgan-Rumsey's Best Digital Content
Camruinn Morgan-Rumsey
WVLT

Judges' Comments: *Great digital-only extras – info-charts, uploaded letters, etc. It made the digital content stand out from the broadcast work. Nicely done!*

Second Place:

Where Are They Now?
Matt Hollingsworth
WATE

TELEVISION**SERIES/PACKAGE/PROJECT WRITING****First Place:**

Unsolved

Ryan Renfro, Kristen Quon
WCYB

Judges' Comments: *Beautifully shot and produced. Network-level quality. Great job!*

Second Place:

Good News
Andrew McClung
WBIR

STUDENT JOURNALISM

BEST STUDENT JOURNALIST

First Place:

Olivia Lee
Olivia Lee
The Daily Beacon

Judges' Comments: *Excellent, committed reporting around a thorny but timely subject.*

Second Place:

Aubree Curran Reports
Aubree Curran
The Volunteer Channel

Judges' Comments: *Very well-shot and produced, focusing on an interesting array of subjects.*

Judges' Comments on Category: *I wanted to say that even though I could only select two winners, I am highly impressed by the quality of work these students have submitted. It speaks to a professionalism beyond their years, and a true passion for their coverage.*

TELEVISION

BEST PODCAST

First Place:

Ask Isaacs
Lori Tucker, Hope McAlee
WATE

Judges' Comments on Category: *Fantastic camera presence. Anchors do an excellent job catching listeners who may be new to a topic up before diving into the nitty-gritty that a podcast listener may be looking for. I think these journalists do a phenomenal job adapting to the medium they're using and love the personalization while maintaining professional on-camera presence.*

DIGITAL ONLY

FEATURE REPORTING

First Place:

Abortion Saved Her. Now It Could Cost Her Freedom.

Angela Dennis

Capital B News

Judges' Comments: *This deeply reported and powerfully written story exemplifies journalism at its most urgent and humane. Through intimate, character-driven storytelling, it illuminates how sweeping policy decisions reverberate in the lives of those most affected, particularly Black women in the South.*

Second Place:

Black Union Soldier Helps Fortify Knoxville

Jan Dickens

Knox TN Today

DIGITAL ONLY

CONTINUING COVERAGE

First Place:

Gay Street Bridge: From Structural Crisis to Reopening

Alan Sims, Leslie Bateman

Inside of Knoxville

Judges' Comments on Category: *This coverage was kept viewers in the loop throughout the entire process. It highlights importance of this historic bridge while addressing the challenges of bringing new life to the bridge. It also recognizes the tension of the need for pedestrian/bike friendly infrastructure in a car dominant area.*

RADIO

STUDENT - BEST FEATURE STORY

First Place:

'Home Runs and Home Teams' at East TN History Center captures state's baseball past
Luke Lamoree
WUOT

Judges' Comments on Category: *This entry gives listeners a glimpse of an engaging exhibit that helps tell Tennessee's intriguing baseball history. The reporter's track has a nice cadence and I appreciated how the reporter included cheeky lines like "the gallery covers all the bases."*

TELEVISION

SPORTS BEAT REPORTING

First Place:

Motorsports
Heather Williams
WCYB

Judges' Comments on Category: *Representing folks who know very little about motor-sports, I enjoyed learning more about the competitors and sport through the reporter's videos. The reporter does a fantastic job of creating an entry point for viewers to learn about the drivers, connection to community and the sport. In particular, I was impressed by the story about how a retired NASCAR competitor and other drivers helped the community in the aftermath of Helene. It was a fantastic example of combining a breaking news/wide impact issue, human interest, sports and community impact.*

NEWSPAPER (LARGE)

PHOTOJOURNALISM - BEST PHOTOGRAPHER

First Place:

Best Photographer: Brianna Paciorka (Knox News)

Brianna Paciorka
News Sentinel

Second Place:

Best Photographer: Saul Young (Knox News)
Saul Young
News Sentinel

Judges' Comments on Category: *The winner presented work showing a creative and imaginative use of form that made the images evocative and packed with subtle story telling.*

TELEVISION

PHOTOJOURNALISM – BEST NEWS PHOTOGRAPHY

First Place:

Santa Train
Jason Hutchinson
WCYB

Judges' Comments on Category: *A vivid view of a dynamic event.*

NEWSPAPER (LARGE)

CLIMATE AND ENVIRONMENT REPORTING

First Place:

Why a gas pipeline fight in East Tennessee feels so personal
Daniel Dassow
News Sentinel

Judges' Comments on Category: *A captivating and impactful story with evocative writing.*

RADIO

CLIMATE AND ENVIRONMENT REPORTING

First Place:

Inside the race to restore Tennessee's native grasslands, before it's too late

Pierce Gentry

WUOT

Second Place:

The climate of Christmas tree farming in Appalachia

Heather Haley

WUOT

Judges' Comments on Category: *The winner included important historical context that gave depth to the story. Informative, clearly written, well researched.*

DIGITAL ONLY

CLIMATE AND ENVIRONMENT REPORTING

First Place:

Sustainability in the Urban Landscape

Leslie Bateman, Heather Ryerson

Inside of Knoxville

Judges' Comments on Category: *A thorough and informative series.*

DIGITAL ONLY

GENERAL REPORTING

First Place:

Magnolia Redevelopment & the Fight For Chilhowee Park

Leslie Bateman

Inside of Knoxville

Second Place:

First Creek at Austin

Leslie Bateman
Inside of Knoxville

Judges' Comments on Category: *The winning piece provided evocative background and historical information that ungirded the piece.*

NEWSPAPER (LARGE)

BEST PODCAST

First Place:

The real fallout, the real stakes, the real Tennessee sports story
Adam Sparks
News Sentinel

Judges' Comments on Category: *For sports fans, this detail oriented view into the nitty gritty brings us background that requires the hosts expertise to more deeply understand.*

DIGITAL ONLY

ARTS & CULTURE REPORTING

First Place:

Reclaiming The Bottom: Renee Kesler Brings Legacy to Covenant Health Park
Angela Dennis
Inside of Knoxville

Second Place:

Art and Its People
Leslie Bateman
Inside of Knoxville

Judges' Comments on Category: *The historical context and deep reporting made the article feel thorough and deeply relevant.*

RADIO

FEATURE REPORTING

First Place:

Santa swaps his sleigh for a train to spread Christmas cheer along the rails in Appalachia

Jacqui Sieber

WUOT

Second Place:

Museum of Appalachia draws students, families with sheep shearing event

Pierce Gentry

WUOT

Judges' Comments on Category: *The context of this story made what would have been a simply holiday report a deeper and more grounded story about impacted communities. Playful and serious at the same time.*

NEWSPAPER (LARGE)

GOVERNMENT & POLITICS REPORTING

First Place:

Knox County education adapts to state and federal decisions

Keenan Thomas

News Sentinel

Second Place:

Translating local government into accessible, useful information for the community

Allie Feinberg

News Sentinel

TELEVISION

LOCAL IMPACT OF FEDERAL CHANGES

First Place:

Walking Tom' continues to delight Great Smoky Mountains visitors thanks to coalition

keeping park open
Sarah Oppmann
WBIR

Second Place:

East TN Model Train Company Fears Industry Shutdown Amid Tariff War
Ella Wales
WATE

Judges' Comments on Category: *The first place story has a compelling character who gives viewers an entry point into the ramifications of the federal funding cuts. The story demonstrates the importance of maintaining public access to natural spaces and grassroots efforts that can be rising to the current challenges.*

DIGITAL ONLY

BEST DIGITAL CONTENT

First Place:

A Multimedia Look at Big Ears
Leslie Bateman
Inside of Knoxville

Second Place:

Historical community stories by Beth Kinnane
Beth Kinnane
Knox TN Today

NEWSPAPER (LARGE)

PHOTOJOURNALISM – BEST NEWS PHOTOGRAPHY

First Place:

Best News Photography: Brianna Paciorka (Knox News)
Brianna Paciorka
News Sentinel

Judges' Comments: I liked how this photo showed the progression. One of the smokestacks is starting to fall over while the other is already just a cloud of dust. Very good timing.

Second Place:

Best News Photography: Caitie McMekin (Knox News)

Caitie McMekin

News Sentinel

NEWSPAPER (LARGE)

PERSONAL COLUMNS/REVIEW/CRITICISM

First Place:

Sam Venable on Politics, Culture and the Joy of Pointing It Out

Sam Venable

News Sentinel

Judges' Comments: *Really nice entry. There was a nice mix of humor in the commentary, with a bit of history thrown in. These were three varied subjects that showed the writer could captivate an audience regardless of topic.*

Second Place:

A columnist who doesn't hesitate to zig when others zag

David Moon

News Sentinel

STUDENT JOURNALISM

STUDENT - BEST FEATURE STORY

First Place:

Remembering first Black man to attend UT

Shelby Wright

The Daily Beacon

Second Place:

March for the Fallen

Aubree Curran

The Volunteer Channel

TELEVISION

SPORTS REPORTING

First Place:

Edwin Spillman, from Nashville, Tennessee
Brittany Tarwater
WVLT

Second Place:

Noah's Comeback
Andrew McClung
WBIR

TELEVISION

BEST NEWSCAST

First Place:

Hurricane Helene: One Year Later
Naomi Hillmer, Bo Williams, Lori Tucker, Emily Makapagal, Connor Hester, Matt Condon,
Ken Weathers
WATE

Second Place:

Vitello Leaves the Vols
WVLT News
WVLT

TELEVISION

DOCUMENTARY/PUBLIC AFFAIRS PROGRAMMING

First Place:

The Tennessee Circle Drill
Seth Reynolds
Land Grant Films

Second Place:

Hunter
Jack Hanning
Land Grant Films

TELEVISION

FEATURE REPORTING

First Place:

The Dancing SRO
Sarah Oppmann
WBIR

Judges' Comments: *Great video. Extremely relatable main subject, along with fantastic soundbites makes this one a winner.*

Second Place:

Edwin Spillman, from Nashville, Tennessee
Brittany Tarwater
WVLT

Judges' Comments: *Compelling storytelling and beautiful subject.*

NEWSPAPER (LARGE)

BUSINESS & TECHNOLOGY REPORTING

First Place:

From reactors to rollercoasters, East Tennessee is thinking big
Mariah Franklin, Joanna Hayes, Devarrick Turner
News Sentinel

Judges' Comments: *These three articles provide a comprehensive view of the major trends affecting the economy of Knoxville and Est Tennessee. This is coverage that helps readers make sense of economic changes.*

Second Place:

Why Knoxville's new development feels more like home than hype
Joanna Hayes
News Sentinel

Judges' Comments: *Joanna Hayes' articles offer intriguing insights into the trends and figures behind Knoxville's business world.*

DIGITAL ONLY

BUSINESS & TECHNOLOGY REPORTING

First Place:

Innovation and Adaptation

Alan Sims, Leslie Bateman, Keith Leonard

Inside of Knoxville

Judges' Comments on Category: *Inside of Knoxville provides strong local business coverage. A good job by a local independent online website.*

DIGITAL ONLY

INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING

First Place:

Two Acts of Vandalism

Leslie Bateman

Inside of Knoxville

Judges' Comments on Category: *Two excellent examples of investigative reporting by an independent online site. The use of probability statistics was especially creative.*

NEWSPAPER (SMALL)

ARTS & CULTURE REPORTING

First Place:

The Birdhouse Endures

Steve Wildsmith

BLANK Newspaper

Judges' Comments: *A richly reported and evocatively written feature that captures both the history and evolving identity of The Birdhouse. The narrative voice is strong and confident,*

with vivid imagery that brings the space to life while grounding the story in solid reporting and multiple perspectives.

Second Place:

Mr. Mack: 865 Forever

Steve Wildsmith

BLANK Newspaper

Judges' Comments: A compelling and deeply reported profile that captures both the personal journey and cultural impact of its subject. The story balances narrative momentum with strong context about the local hip-hop scene, offering readers a clear sense of place and significance.

STUDENT JOURNALISM

STUDENT - CONTINUING COVERAGE

First Place:

Continuing Coverage: Keeping Campus Safe

TVC Staff

The Volunteer Channel

Judges' Comments: This is an impressive and highly professional body of work that demonstrates a clear understanding of journalism's role in serving a campus community. The reporting is thorough, thoughtful, and grounded in strong use of data, particularly in the way Clery Act statistics are contextualized and made accessible to a student audience. Rather than stopping at surface-level coverage, the team consistently pushes for clarity, accountability, and follow-up. What stands out most is the commitment to public service. The coverage treats safety as an ongoing issue rather than a series of isolated incidents, and the inclusion of student voices alongside administrative perspectives creates a well-balanced and credible report. The team's ability to report quickly during breaking situations while maintaining accuracy and avoiding speculation reflects strong editorial judgment. Overall, this is excellent, impactful journalism. It is clear that The Volunteer Channel has built trust within its community by prioritizing accuracy, transparency, and meaningful engagement on issues that directly affect students' daily lives.

Second Place:

Academic Freedom

Olivia Lee, Caden Dyer, Patrick Busch

The Daily Beacon

Judges' Comments: *This is an outstanding and ambitious package of coverage that reflects a mature, newsroom-level approach to a complex and sensitive issue. Across the series, The Daily Beacon demonstrates strong editorial judgment by expanding beyond the immediate controversy to examine broader questions of academic freedom, institutional decision-making, and campus climate. The reporting is deeply sourced, particularly through extensive use of public records, which adds both credibility and depth to the storytelling.*

STUDENT JOURNALISM

HURRICANE HELENE ONE YEAR LATER

First Place:

Healing from Helene

Eli Patterson

Land Grant Films

Judges' Comments: *A powerful and intimate documentary that brings the long-term impact of Hurricane Helene into sharp focus through deeply human storytelling.*

Second Place:

Hurricane Helene One Year Later

Corey Ray, Brian Disoso, Faith Vance

Overlooked in Appalachia

Judges' Comments: *The coverage demonstrates a strong sense of place and sensitivity to the community, particularly in how it balances scenes of destruction with moments of unity and hope.*

STUDENT JOURNALISM

LOCAL IMPACT OF FEDERAL CHANGES

First Place:

Academic Freedom

Olivia Lee, Caden Dyer, Patrick Busch

The Daily Beacon

Judges' Comments: *The Daily Beacon's coverage of the fallout surrounding Charlie Kirk's murder captures, with clarity and nuance, the tensions unfolding on college campuses nationwide. While not centered explicitly on federal policy, the series reflects the broader*

political climate and the pressures universities face in responding to it. The reporting is deep and well-sourced, drawing from administrators, faculty, and students to present a comprehensive view of a highly charged situation. What sets this work apart is its willingness to engage difficult questions around academic freedom, challenging readers to consider whether it can truly be upheld in such an environment. Overall, this is thoughtful, wide-ranging, and courageous coverage of a complex issue.

STUDENT JOURNALISM

STUDENT - PODCAST

First Place:

Rising Rock Podcast by Megan Cooper

Megan Cooper

UT Chattanooga

Judges' Comments: A strong and well-produced podcast that demonstrates excellent storytelling and audio craftsmanship throughout. The use of natural sound is particularly effective, creating an immersive listening experience that enhances the emotional weight of each segment. Strong interviewing and sourcing add credibility and depth, allowing voices to feel authentic and grounded. The stories reflect the theme of communities coming together to help one another through difficult times. The structure is clear and intentional, guiding the listener smoothly through each narrative while maintaining strong pacing and clarity. The production shows strong editorial judgment in how material is selected and organized, and both stories reflect thoughtful reporting and sensitivity to lived experience.

STUDENT JOURNALISM

STUDENT - BEST NEWS COVERAGE

First Place:

Academic Freedom

Olivia Lee, Caden Dyer, Patrick Busch

The Daily Beacon

Judges' Comments: The Daily Beacon's academic freedom coverage captures a moment that feels bigger than a single campus dispute. It speaks directly to the climate universities

are navigating right now, where a single social media post after a social media post can trigger institutional response, public pressure, and questions about where the line between speech and consequence actually sits. What stands out is the way the reporting holds that tension without flattening it, showing administrative decision-making, faculty pushback, and the uncertainty around policy in real time. The tone of the coverage mirrors the stakes. It is careful and measured, but it is not afraid to sit in discomfort. Paired with the print edition's striking visual of a silenced mouth, the package reinforces the central question running through it all: what academic freedom looks like when pressure is coming from multiple directions at once.

Second Place:

A Stadium's Last Stand

Kayleyn McCaslin, Clara Paulson, Ryan Conley, Malcolm Key, Delaney Holman

UT Chattanooga

Judges' Comments: A Stadium's Last Stand stands out for its strong sense of place and deeply human storytelling. The piece captures Engel Stadium not just as a physical structure, but as a living archive of community memory and identity in Chattanooga. What makes the coverage especially effective is the way it blends history, personal testimony, and present-day impact without losing narrative clarity. The reporting is grounded in strong interviews and thoughtful sourcing, allowing the voices of those most connected to the stadium to shape the story in a meaningful way. The multimedia work elevates the entire package. The video, photography, and audio each bring a different dimension to the storytelling, helping the audience experience the stadium's history and current condition in a more immediate and layered way. The visuals powerfully contrast decay with memory, while the audio adds intimacy and presence through voice and sound that deepen the emotional resonance of the reporting.

TELEVISION**GOVERNMENT & POLITICS REPORTING****First Place:**

Johnson City's \$28M settlement with Sean Williams victims

Caleb Perhne

WCYB

Second Place:

Leadership Under Scrutiny

Brittany Bailey, John North, Tim Dale
WBIR

Judges' Comments on Category: *This reporter exemplified the doggedness needed to take on government officials when they are dodging interview requests. The reporter asked questions that got to the heart of the community's concerns and kept them in the loop when the government leaders did not.*

RADIO

INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING

First Place:

My skin is itching off of me:' US Nitrogen downplays harm of chemical leaks, spills in Tennessee
Pierce Gentry
WUOT

Second Place:

Tennessee can charge people for crimes they didn't commit, advocates want reform
Pierce Gentry
WUOT

Judges' Comments on Category: *This reporter's ability to weave the narrative together through the main source, experts and voicemails made this story incredibly strong. It shows the direct impact and the need for change.*

NEWSPAPER (LARGE)

INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING

First Place:

Family seeks justice after sheriff's office botches investigation into son's death
Tyler Whetstone
News Sentinel

Second Place:

How a prosecutor's posts shook trust in Knox County's justice system

Tyler Whetstone
News Sentinel

Judges' Comments on Category: *This reporting exemplifies a journalist's job of holding government and law enforcement officials accountable. The reporter's continued coverage of the botched crash investigation showed persistence and tenacity. It centered the family's voice and brought in experts who could accurately and fairly show the problems with the investigation. The story also showed the missed opportunities for government leaders and law enforcement officials to rectify the issues.*

STUDENT JOURNALISM

STUDENT - PHOTOJOURNALISM: BEST PHOTOGRAPHER

First Place:

Clara Paulson Best Photographer
Clara Paulson
UT Chattanooga

Judges' Comments on Category: *The photos included in this entry give viewers a glimpse of daily life in the communities. I was particularly impressed by the portrait of the bluegrass musician. The photo is captivating.*

TELEVISION

GENERAL REPORTING

First Place:

Veteran seeks to restart his life after shooting charges dropped in I-75 road rage incident

John North, Shea Smith
WBIR

Judges' Comments: *This entry demonstrates the reporter's understanding of this years long case. The reporter crafted a thorough retelling of the incident and incorporated expert voices.*

Second Place:

The Warmth of Webb

Andrew McClung
WBIR

Judges' Comments on Category: *This entry demonstrates the reporter's understanding of the years long case. The reporter crafted a thorough retelling of the incident and incorporated expert voices.*

NEWSPAPER (LARGE)

BEST DIGITAL CONTENT

First Place:

Snow days, sound waves and stadium vibes

Angelina Alcantar, Joanna Hayes, Caitie McMekin, Brianna Paciorka, Devarrick Turner, Ryan Wilusz, Saul Young

News Sentinel

Judges' Comments: *Compelling digital storytelling using photo galleries, immersive recaps and energetic visuals to let readers feel the snow, the Big Ears festival buzz and the stadium-sized experience of a live music festival.*

DIGITAL ONLY

SERIES/PACKAGE/PROJECT WRITING

First Place:

Reclaiming Knoxville's Baseball Legacy

Angela Dennis, Alan Sims, Paul James, Leslie Bateman

Inside of Knoxville

Judges' Comments: *A fascinating series about minor league baseball in Knoxville that shined a light on both the sport and the complicated legacy of urban renewal.*

Second Place:

Augusta Quarry Reopens

Leslie Bateman

Inside of Knoxville

NEWSPAPER (SMALL)

SERIES/PACKAGE/PROJECT WRITING

First Place:

Sounding out Big Ears

Amelia Bartlett, Wayne Bledsoe, Daniel Britt, Jennifer Duncan Rankin, Bill Foster, John Flannagan, Matt Rankin

BLANK Newspaper

Judges' Comments: *Great coverage of a large music festival by a scrapping small newspaper that has become a major playing in Knoxville media.*

STUDENT JOURNALISM

STUDENT - SPORTS BEAT REPORTING

First Place:

Sydney Banks Sports Beat

Sydney Banks

UT Chattanooga

Judges' Comments: *Comprehensive, spirited reporting of men's basketball through the championship final.*

Second Place:

Alex Sarkis Baseball

Alex Sarkis

The Daily Beacon

NEWSPAPER (LARGE)

SERIES/PACKAGE/PROJECT WRITING

First Place:

Black in Business 2025

Joanna Hayes, Hayden Dunbar, Devarrick Turner, Keenan Thomas, Ryan Wilusz, Caitie McMekin, Brianna Paciorka

News Sentinel

Judges' Comments: *A fascinating project that powerfully celebrates the Knoxville Black community's entrepreneurship, creativity and economic impact. Important coverage at a time when American diversity is not always celebrated.*

Second Place:

Scrutiny forces mayor to shelf secretive plan to sell public parkland to private religious group

Allie Feinberg

News Sentinel

DIGITAL ONLY,RADIO,NEWSPAPER (LARGE),NEWSPAPER (SMALL),TELEVISION

HORACE V. WELLS JR. COMMUNITY SERVICE AWARD

First Place:

Holding power to account when trust is on the line

Tyler Whetstone

News Sentinel

Judges' Comments: *Reporter Tyler Whetstone exposed the racist and fascist social media posts of a county prosecutor, forcing the district attorney to immediately fire the man. By holding a powerful figure to account, this was truly a community service.*

Second Place:

Watchdog reporting forced changes to bolster accountability and transparency

Allie Feinberg, Tyler Whetstone

News Sentinel

TELEVISION

INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING

First Place:

The Last 12 Hours of Lester Isbill

John North, Shea Smith

WBIR

Judges' Comments: *This reporter showed expert use of public records, in-depth reporting*

and source building. The story is heart-breaking and demonstrates the importance of this continued, persistent reporting.

Second Place:

Well-traveled cops and the liabilities they pose

John North, Robin Wilhoit

WBIR

Judges' Comments on Category: *This reporter showed expert use of public records, in-depth reporting and source building. The story is heartbreaking and demonstrates the importance of this continued, persistent reporting. It's a strong piece of investigative accountability reporting.*

TELEVISION**ARTS & CULTURE REPORTING****First Place:**

Dirty Guv'nahs reflect on 20 years together

Brittany Bailey, David Raborn

WBIR

Judges' Comments: *I appreciated how the reporter weaved in archival footage and connected the band's history from past to present. It showed the reporter did the work to get to know the band mates and continue coverage over time.*

Second Place:

Hispanic Heritage Month

Yannia Nordello, Troy Prater

WCYB

Judges' Comments: *I appreciated how the reporter shared her own connections to the food. She incorporated fantastic video clips of the food and cooking.*

Judges' Comments on Category: *I appreciated how the reporter weaved in archival footage and connected the band's history from past to present. It showed the reporter did the work to get to know the band mates and continue coverage over time.*

TELEVISION

BUSINESS & TECHNOLOGY REPORTING

First Place:

On board the first Washington, D.C. flight from the Tri-Cities

Caleb Perhne

WCYB

Judges' Comments: *I thought the framing of this story was clever - having the reporter fly the new route. I enjoyed the sig out - "From 35,000 feet..." This reporting gave viewers all they needed to know about the new plane, route and travel details.*

Judges' Comments on Category: *I thought the framing of this story was clever - having the reporter fly the new route. I enjoyed the sig out - "From 35,000 feet..." This reporting gave viewers all they needed to know about the new plane, route and travel details.*

NEWSPAPER (LARGE)

DEADLINE/BREAKING NEWS REPORTING

First Place:

How a trusted insider raised troubling questions for Tennessee football

Adam Sparks, Tyler Whetstone, Mike Wilson

News Sentinel

Judges' Comments: *Comprehensive reporting that shone light on the fraudulent behaviour of a former football player.*

Second Place:

Yes, that was an earthquake, and aftershocks are possible

Sarah Riley, Mike Wilson

News Sentinel

DIGITAL ONLY

DIGITAL COMMENTARY

First Place:

When National Politics Hit Home

Leslie Bateman

Inside of Knoxville

Judges' Comments: *This is what deeply vested local journalism looks like, Bateman writes with clear passion about the issues affecting her community; how transit is essential to equity, the struggles the LGBTQ have had to face and most importantly, how federal policy continues to hold back initiatives to move communities forward.*

Second Place:

Good Lives and Better Policies

Mark Harmon

Tennessee Lookout

Judges' Comments: *The stand out piece here was a harrowing, moving account of the writer witnessing a shooting in his church. A very powerful and moving account.*

NEWSPAPER (LARGE)

FEATURE REPORTING

First Place:

How a tiny, quirky venue has helped keep creativity alive in Knoxville

Hayden Dunbar

News Sentinel

Second Place:

How Morgan Wallen's ticket sales end up improving lives back home

Ryan Wilusz

News Sentinel

NEWSPAPER (LARGE)

BEST NEWS VIDEO

First Place:

Smokies still draw a crowd amid shutdown

Sophie Szydlik, Joanna Hayes

News Sentinel

Second Place:

Orange and White X2: Whataburger Comes to Cumberland Avenue

Sophie Szydlik
News Sentinel

Judges' Comments on Category: *The interviews with visitors during a government shutdown gave a timely snapshot of how a national political event played out locally. It's a great example of how video can supplement traditional reporting.*

DIGITAL ONLY

BEST PODCAST

First Place:

The Redemption Project
Brandon Burley
Spotify

DIGITAL ONLY

SPORTS BEAT REPORTING

First Place:

Lady Vols coverage
Maria Cornelius
247Sports Tennessee

Judges' Comments on Category: *Nice range of stories. Clear writing and effective storytelling.*

NEWSPAPER (LARGE)

SPORTS BEAT REPORTING

First Place:

Inside Tennessee football, from people to power to money
Adam Sparks
News Sentinel

Judges' Comments: *Great accountability reporting that follows the power and the money at a consequential time in college sports.*

Second Place:

Capturing the joy, grief and grind of Tennessee women's sports

Cora Hall

News Sentinel

Judges' Comments: *Intimate storytelling that brings readers along through crisp reporting and writing.*

NEWSPAPER (SMALL)

SPORTS BEAT REPORTING

First Place:

The One Knox Beat

Matt Rankin

BLANK Newspaper

DIGITAL ONLY

LOCAL IMPACT OF FEDERAL CHANGES

First Place:

Federal Changes, Local Consequences

Leslie Bateman, Alan Sims, K.W. Leonard

Inside of Knoxville

Judges' Comments: *Authoritative, clear reporting and writing on the federal impact locally, framed for local audiences.*

Second Place:

Trump cuts hit Oak Ridge National Laboratory and Great Smoky Mountains National Park; Charlie Kirk fallout

Thomas Fraser, Ben Pounds, Elan Young, JJ Stambaugh

Hellbender Press

NEWSPAPER (LARGE)

LOCAL IMPACT OF FEDERAL CHANGES

First Place:

What Washington's shakeup really meant for higher education at Tennessee's flagship university

Keenan Thomas

News Sentinel

Judges' Comments: *Thorough reporting that explains federal impacts on higher ed and boils down complex policies and decisions for readers.*

Second Place:

How Trump changes rippled through Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge tourism industry

Devarrick Turner

News Sentinel

Judges' Comments: *Clear reporting and writing detailing the economic impacts of federal changes on the local tourism industry and helping readers to understand complex visa and immigration policies.*

NEWSPAPER (LARGE)

CONTINUING COVERAGE

First Place:

How persistent reporting uncovered the full circumstance of David Batts' death

Hayden Dunbar, Myron Thompson, Tyler Whetstone

News Sentinel

Second Place:

A Facebook post spurred a reckoning over free speech at the University of Tennessee

Keenan Thomas

News Sentinel

RADIO

GOVERNMENT & POLITICS REPORTING

First Place:

Knoxville City Council slated to vote on controversial sale at Chilhowee Park, Here's everything you need to know

Jacqui Sieber

WUOT

DIGITAL ONLY

DEADLINE/BREAKING NEWS REPORTING

First Place:

UT Moves Forward with Maplehurst Deal

Leslie Bateman

Inside of Knoxville

NEWSPAPER (SMALL)

FEATURE REPORTING

First Place:

The Last Chair in Burlington - At 98 years young, Ernie Barnes lets his story be told

Steve Wildsmith

BLANK Newspaper

Second Place:

K-9s in the community: Lt. Fernandez & K-9 Java

Shanon Adame

The Daily Times

NEWSPAPER (SMALL)**GENERAL REPORTING****First Place:**

Tensions rise in Friendsville over juvenile behavioral health center

Shanon Adame

The Daily Times

Second Place:

18 years later, Blank Newspaper is still keeping you filled in

Amelia Bartlett

BLANK Newspaper

NEWSPAPER (LARGE)**GENERAL REPORTING****First Place:**

How a flawed wildfire plan fueled Gatlinburg's devastating fire

Tyler Whetstone

News Sentinel

Second Place:

How a promised water park reshaped – and failed – three iterations of Rocky Top.

Hayden Dunbar

News Sentinel

Judges' Comments on Category: *Close competition. First place goes to reporting that lays out, clearly and in compelling detail, missteps local fire officials made in responding to a wildfire. Second place goes to enterprise reporting that takes readers into Rocky Top to meet the town's people, businesses and history. A compellingly intimate portrait of a community trying to define itself.*

DIGITAL ONLY

HURRICANE HELENE ONE YEAR LATER

First Place:

A Bold New Year's Day Adventure: Exploring the Chestoa View Scar

Thomas Mabry

Knox TN Today

Judges' Comments on Category: *Struck a great tone, while bearing witness to the ecological devastation in the aftermath of Helene.*

NEWSPAPER (LARGE)

HURRICANE HELENE ONE YEAR LATER

First Place:

East Tennessee reckons with what remains after Helene

Hayden Dunbar, Caitie McMekin, Tyler Whetstone, Joanna Hayes, Mariah Franklin,

Brianna Paciorka, Knox News Staff

News Sentinel

Judges' Comments on Category: *A comprehensive retrospective on a devastating disaster befitting a truly great hometown paper. Helene was a collective trauma, and this series – with its focus on people, businesses and public infrastructure – is a critical part of the historical and emotional processing that is required.*

NEWSPAPER (LARGE)

DIGITAL COMMENTARY

First Place:

Clear-eyed local takes on America's big questions and how to strengthen local connection

Joel Christopher

News Sentinel

Second Place:

Personal stories reveal East Tennessee's spirit and style

Hayden Dunbar, Joanna Hayes, Devarrick Turner
News Sentinel

DIGITAL ONLY

GOVERNMENT & POLITICS REPORTING

First Place:

City Council Game Show Forum

Leslie Bateman - Inside of Knoxville, Scott Barker - Compass, Rachel Woods - Photographer

Inside of Knoxville

Second Place:

Abortion Saved Her. Now It Could Cost Her Freedom.

Angela Dennis

Capital B News

RADIO

HURRICANE HELENE ONE YEAR LATER

First Place:

Healing After Helene: One year after the storm that changed East Tennessee

Pierce Gentry

WUOT

TELEVISION

HURRICANE HELENE ONE YEAR LATER

First Place:

News Channel 11- Hurricane Helene 1 Year Later

Chris Greer, News Channel 11 News Team

WJHL

Second Place:

Helene One Year Later: Unicoi County Hospital
Caleb Perhne, Ryan Renfro
WCYB

Judges' Comments on Category: *This was a very tough category to judge. Lots of amazing television coverage of the one-year anniversary. WJHL stood out because its entries were at once comprehensive and creative. WCYB's entry was not comprehensive as many others but stood out for its excellence in storytelling.*

TELEVISION

DEADLINE/BREAKING NEWS REPORTING

First Place:

Monroe County Wildfires
Connor Hester, Emily Makapagal, Don Hudson, Dominic Webster
WATE

Judges' Comments: *Great coverage and strong work!*

Second Place:

Megan Boswell found guilty on all 19 charges
Kailee Harris, Thomas Moore
WCYB

TELEVISION

BEST ANCHOR

First Place:

Katie Inman - The Out & About Anchor
Katie Inman
WBIR

Judges' Comments: *Lots of versatility and enthusiasm! Strong work.*

Second Place:

Journalist Brittany Bailey
Brittany Bailey

WBIR

Judges' Comments: *A VERY close second. She's clearly an established and confident anchor. Wonderful work.*

GOLDEN PRESS CARD

BEST OF SHOW

Black in Business 2025

Joanna Hayes, Hayden Dunbar, Devarrick Turner, Keenan Thomas, Ryan Wilusz, Caitie McMekin, Brianna Paciorka
News Sentinel

Judges' Comments: *This is an exemplary series that underlines the power of journalism to provide mind-opening insight through careful and informed story-telling. The work is detail-oriented, uplifting, thoughtful, and has a keen approach to highlighting stories that bring a reader in, bring people's worlds to life with words. At a time when journalism is facing all sorts of challenges, this work reminds readers that the craft of telling stories is a fundamental and visceral craft. The series weaves contemporary stories with historical background, underlining for readers the many reasons why these kinds of portraits matter. It also shows us through practice what ethical journalism can look like today*