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Investigative reporter Jerry Mitchell to receive UGA's first McGill Medal for Journalistic Courage

Athens, Ga. – A Mississippi journalist who has endured death threats for bringing civil rights-era killers to justice will be honored by the University of Georgia for journalistic courage.

Jerry Mitchell, an investigative reporter for *The Clarion-Ledger* in Jackson, will receive the McGill Medal for Journalistic Courage on Thursday, April 30, at the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication.

“Ralph McGill showed us what courage truly is,” said Mitchell. “He is, and always will be, one of my heroes. To receive a medal named after him is the ultimate honor.”

Mitchell, 50, is the first to receive the McGill Medal, named for the late editor and publisher of *The Atlanta Constitution*. McGill was regarded by many as “the conscience of the South” for his editorials challenging racial segregation in the 1950s and '60s.

“Mitchell has done more than any journalist to open cold civil rights cases that beg for resolution, reconciliation, and justice,” said Grady Dean E. Culpepper Clark. “His work on the Byron de la Beckwith case, the person who in 1963 murdered Medgar Evers, the NAACP chief in Jackson, Miss., is reason enough to present Jerry with the courage medal, but he has done and continues to do so much more.”

Mitchell was selected from a dozen journalists nominated by reporters, editors and producers from across the U.S. All of the nominees are “working U.S. journalists whose career has exemplified journalistic courage.”

The selection was made by the 2009 class of McGill Fellows, 12 Grady College undergraduate and graduate students chosen for academic achievement, practical experience and leadership.

“The McGill Fellows were struck by the courage Jerry Mitchell demonstrated as he worked, and still works tirelessly, to find justice for the wrongdoings time has covered up,” said Marona Graham-Bailey, the McGill Fellow who researched the Mitchell nomination. “He is an exemplar of what it means to demonstrate journalistic courage, and we are honored to have him accept the first McGill Medal.”

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Since 1989, Mitchell has unearthed documents, cajoled suspects and witnesses, and quietly pursued evidence in the nation's notorious killings from the civil rights era.

His work so far has helped put four Klansmen behind bars. In addition to Beckwith, they include Imperial Wizard Sam Bowers for ordering the fatal firebombing of NAACP leader Vernon Dahmer in 1966, Bobby Cherry for the 1963 bombing of a Birmingham church that killed four girls and, most recently, Edgar Ray Killen, for helping orchestrate the June 21, 1964, killings of Michael Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andrew Goodman.

Over the past two decades, Mitchell has endured his share of threats from Klansmen and others. The FBI is currently investigating a series of recent death threats against him, Mitchell said.

For his work, Mitchell has received more than 30 national awards, including the George Polk Award twice. In 2006 the Pulitzer Board named him a Pulitzer Prize finalist, praising him "for his relentless and masterly stories on the successful prosecution of a man accused of orchestrating the killing of three civil rights workers in 1964." A year earlier, Mitchell became the youngest recipient ever of Columbia University's John Chancellor Award for Excellence in Journalism.

Mitchell joined *The Clarion-Ledger* in 1986. He has been profiled by ABC News' *Nightline*, *USA TODAY*, *The New York Times*, *American Journalism Review* and others. He has regularly appeared as an expert on CNN, PBS' *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* and other programs.

Mitchell received a master's degree in journalism from The Ohio State University in 1997, where he attended the Kiplinger Reporting Program. He lives in Jackson, Miss., with his wife and their two children.

The McGill Medal is the latest development in the growth of the McGill program at the UGA Grady College.

For 31 years, the McGill Lecture has brought significant figures in journalism to UGA to help the university honor McGill's courage as an editor. In 2007, Grady College added the McGill Symposium, which brings together students, faculty and leading journalists to consider what journalistic courage means and how it is exemplified by reporters and editors. And, this year, the inaugural McGill Medal will be awarded to a U.S. journalist whose career has exemplified journalistic courage.

"All of this is for a single purpose—to advance journalistic courage," said John F. Greenman, Carter Professor of Journalism. Greenman and Diane H. Murray, the Grady College's director of public service and outreach, oversee the McGill program.

The McGill Medal is funded by the McGill Lecture Endowment. Contributors include the James M. Cox Jr. Institute for Newspaper Management Studies.

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For more information about the McGill program, see www.grady.uga.edu/mcgill or contact Greenman at 706/542-1081, jgreenma@uga.edu or Murray at 706/542-5038, murrayd@uga.edu.

Established in 1915, the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication offers seven undergraduate majors including advertising, broadcast news, magazines, newspapers, public relations, publication management and telecommunication arts. The college offers two graduate degrees, and is home to WNEG-TV, the Knight Chair in Health and Medical Journalism and the Peabody Awards, internationally recognized as one of the most prestigious prizes for excellence in electronic media. For more information, see www.grady.uga.edu.

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