

To the judges:

When he walked out of prison in 2008, Brian Culwell stepped right into a modern day gold rush. That's when the very first Gold and Silver Buyers opened in an H-E-B grocery store and by 2010, the owner was reporting gross revenues of \$16 million a year.

It didn't matter at all that he had three felony convictions for crimes including grand theft and fraud and once tarnished the name of local basketball legend Hakeem Olajuwon through one of his schemes.

In "The Peddler" (*Houston Press*, 9-22-11), staff writer John Nova Lomax spent two months investigating the background and present day activities of Culwell, one of the most resilient con men to ever operate anywhere. Lomax began the story on a tip and chased him through a paper trail leading through local, state and federal court documents. Culwell himself refused to speak with Lomax.

Lomax was able to obtain all the county information (civil and criminal complaints and judgments) and a contact in the federal courthouse furnished him with dozens of pages of federal information.

The key to this story was a highly-confidential Harris County District Attorney's inter-office report on Culwell's activities in the early 2000s with his crooked Internet diamond-selling business. That document spelled out the workings of Culwell's mind in astounding detail and also showed the mud Culwell splattered on Olajuwon. It also reported that Culwell claimed to have corrupted a ranking deputy in the Harris County Sheriff's Office. (That deputy is now a constable and denied the allegation.)

A few days after the story broke, the head of the DA's Consumer Fraud Division praised Lomax's story but wanted him to tell her where he got that interoffice report (request declined.) There was also a confidential sworn statement Uri Cohen, a diamond broker swept up in Culwell's schemes, gave to former Harris County Assistant DA Russel Turbeville. That document shed light on Culwell cheating an old woman out of a home she owned in order to pay Cohen, whom he owed many thousands of dollars. A transcript from a federal sentencing hearing offered some levity as the judge hammered Culwell's inability to directly answer yes and no questions.

In an exceedingly odd turn of events, thinking he could buy our silence, as he has reportedly done with other media outlets around town, Culwell responded to Lomax's questions by taking out a full-page ad in the *Houston Press* for an entire quarter. Editorial didn't realize at first that the ad was even there. Once we did, we carried on regardless; the story appeared with our cover on one side and his ad on the inside cover. He canceled immediately afterward.

We submit this for your consideration in this year's The Payne Awards for Ethics in Journalism competition.

Sincerely,

Margaret Downing  
Editor, *Houston Press*