



# South Carolina Press Association

# Hall of Fame

## JOHN C. SHURR 1947-2015

John Carter Shurr was a longtime journalist and tireless open government advocate. He was South Carolina's Associated Press Bureau Chief and served as the S.C. Press Association's Freedom of Information Chair for 23 years.

Shurr will long be remembered as a leading force in the fight for open government in both the Palmetto State and the Cherokee Nation in his native Oklahoma.

"I know of no journalist who has done more for the cause of open government in South Carolina than John," said Bill Rogers, executive director of the S.C. Press Association. "His efforts have been a key part in significant improvements to the state's Freedom of Information Act, and in building the understanding of the importance of open government to both professional journalists and public officials."

During his tenure as the S.C. Press Association's FOI Chair, Shurr worked with the state's newspapers to hold public officials accountable, challenge access denials in court and tweak the state's FOIA numerous times to make it stronger. He spearheaded two statewide FOI audits, the first being the third audit of its type done in the country. He also worked with Press Association Attorney Jay Bender to get rid of criminal libel in South Carolina and to get a reporters' shield law on the books.

After the S.C. Supreme Court unanimously voted to refuse to allow cameras and recorders in courts, Shurr's almost single-handed efforts brought the media's cameras and recording devices back inside S.C. courtrooms, a practice considered commonplace by journalists today.

Shurr was creator and author of the *Public Officials Guide to Compliance with South Carolina's Freedom of Information Act*, a plain-language guide to the state's FOIA. Tens of thousands of copies have been distributed statewide to public officials and journalists. In the guide's introduction, Shurr wrote: "The best governments – state, county and community – offer the greatest access to their activities and records. The FOIA is the people's law, although it is most often used by the news media in its watchdog role of reporting from the Statehouse, the county courthouse or from city hall."

Following Hurricane Hugo, Shurr worked with law enforcement to create a universal press pass in South Carolina. Those credentials are used by S.C. journalists today.

Shurr was born in 1947 in Muskogee, Oklahoma, the son of Dr. Raymond Carter Shurr and Okla Gladys Dannenburg Shurr.

He was a member of the Cherokee Nation and served as Chair of the Editorial Board for *The Cherokee Phoenix* in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. He was instrumental in writing the Cherokee Nation's Freedom of Information Act, Independent Press Act, and Free Press Protection and Journalist Shield Act. He was a longtime member of the Native American Journalists Association. After passage of the Independent Press Act in 2000, *The Cherokee Phoenix* was awarded NAJA's Elias Boudinot Award, which recognizes dedication and commitment to upholding

freedom of the press, information and transparency in Indian Country.

Shurr was a U.S. Navy veteran, serving on river patrol boats in Vietnam in 1967-68. His Navy honors include two Presidential Unit Citations, two Unit Commendations, a Combat Action Ribbon, three Battle Efficiency Awards, a Vietnam Gallantry Cross, a Republic of Vietnam Campaign Medal and a Vietnam Service Medal with three bronze stars.

After his discharge from the Navy, Shurr attended the University of Oklahoma, graduating with a degree in journalism in 1973. While on campus, he served as executive editor of the school's student newspaper, *The Oklahoma Daily*.

Shurr's 51-year journalism career began at the *Muskogee Phoenix*. He also worked for *The Norman Transcript*. At AP, he worked in Indianapolis, Indiana, and Providence, Rhode Island, before being named Chicago Assistant AP Bureau Chief and later, Oklahoma AP Bureau Chief.

In 1984, Shurr was named South Carolina AP Bureau Chief, a role he held until his retirement in 2007. Shurr was passionate about quality journalism, open government, The Associated Press and its members. Under his leadership, the bureau covered major news stories including Hurricane Hugo; the Susan Smith trial; and the University of South Carolina President James Holderman scandal, which served as a catalyst to improve the state's FOIA.

"Just covering the news was great fun," Shurr said. "Giving back on the FOI and helping people pursue those important stories the public needs to know was what made every day worthwhile for me."

Shurr was twice awarded the S.C. Press Association Montgomery Freedom of Information Award, a top honor that recognizes unusual diligence and courage in furthering access to public information. In 2017, the coveted award was renamed the Montgomery/Shurr Freedom of Information Award in memory of Shurr.

Shurr was also a recipient of the S.C. Press Association's Distinguished Service Award, given to those who have gone above and beyond the call of duty to the association and its member newspapers.

He received a Gavel Award from the American Bar Association for an investigation into abuses of a compensation system and in 2007, was awarded The Order of the Palmetto, South Carolina's highest civilian honor.

"South Carolinians have been the beneficiaries of John's commitment to open government without ever knowing of John or his efforts because his focus was always on the result and never on getting credit for what he had accomplished," said Bender, Shurr's longtime friend and admirer.

After his retirement, Shurr remained an avid photographer, shooting for *Sandlapper* magazine and other publications.

He died in 2015 at the age of 67.