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## Jerry Mitchell's entry and biography

He has been called "a loose cannon," "a pain in the ass" and a "white traitor." Whatever he's been called, Jerry Mitchell has never given up in his quest to bring unpunished killers to justice, prompting one colleague to call him "the South's Simon Wiesenthal."

Since 1989, the 50-year-old investigative reporter for The Clarion-Ledger in Jackson, Miss., 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: Byron De La Beckwith for the 1963 assassination of NAACP leader Medgar Evers; 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 Edgar Ray Killen, for helping organize the June 21, 1964, killings of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Schwerner (popularized by the movie, Mississippi Burning, about that case).

And he continues to collect other possible evidence. Four suspects are alive in the Mississippi Burning killings, including Olen Burrage, who owned the property where the trio's bodies were buried.

An FBI informant quoted Burrage as bragging to Klansmen shortly before those killings that he had a dam that would "hold a hundred" civil rights activists. The reporter's efforts have hardly been popular. Some have complained bitterly in letters to the editor. Others have cancelled their subscriptions. One angry missive suggested that Mitchell be "tarred, feathered" and run out of the state of Mississippi: "If your paper cannot begin to represent the majority population of this state more civilly, then we do not need you."

Over the past two decades, Mitchell has endured his share of threats from Klansmen and others. The FBI is currently investigating a series of death threats against him. He recently received the Ralph McGill Medal for Courage for his work over the past two decades.

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.

David Halberstam said in helping bestow the Chancellor award, "Mitchell pursued these stories after most people believed they belonged to history, and not to journalism. But they did belong to journalism, because the truth had never been told and justice had never been done."

Halberstam described Mitchell as "the most distinguished reporter in the entire country, an ornament to the profession and a model for any young person who ponders whether or not to enter our business, a reflection of what one reporter with a conscience can do. I simply marvel at him and what he has done."

Two other awards also recognized his entire body over work over the past two decades, including the Toni House Journalism Award and the Tom Renner Award for Crime Reporting from Investigative

Reporters and Editors, where the judges said, "Mitchell's crusading work is even more heroic because the cases he's investigated were decades old but the threats against him were modern."

In 2006, Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting recognized Mitchell's two decades of dedication, selecting his collection of work as one of 20 national stories that have made a difference over the past two decades.

Mitchell has also received the John Peter and Anna Catherine Zenger Award for Freedom of the Press for his persistence in exposing these injustices, the Vernon Jarrett Award for Investigative Reporting, and the Elijah Lovejoy Award, named after the nation's first martyr to freedom of the press.

In 1989, Mitchell was a court reporter for The Clarion-Ledger when the fictional film Mississippi Burning inspired him to look into killings from the civil rights era that had gone unpunished. Through dogged reporting, which cut across the grain of his paper and many of its readers, he investigated leads long ignored.

His work inspired others. Since 1989, authorities in Mississippi and six other states have reexamined 29 killings from the civil rights era, leading to 23 convictions. The Justice Department is now reexamining dozens of other slayings from this time period.

"It is fair to say that without Mitchell's dogged and often courageous reporting ... many murders from the civil rights era would have remained unvindicated, locked forever in the vaults of regional amnesia," wrote Tribune syndicated columnist Kathleen Parker.

In 2005, Newsweek featured Mitchell as one of "America's Best," and CNN nominated him as a Person of the Day. The day of Killen's conviction, ABC Evening News featured Mitchell in its "First Person" segment.

Nightline, USA TODAY, The New York Times, American Journalism Review, Mother Jones and others have profiled Mitchell, who joined The Clarion-Ledger in 1986. He has appeared as an expert on all the major networks, the Lehrer News Hour, CNN, National Public Radio and others.

In 1996, he was portrayed in the Rob Reiner film, Ghosts of Mississippi, and has been featured in numerous documentaries, including the just-released Neshoba, which details Killen's successful prosecution.

For his investigative work, Mitchell received the Sigma Delta Chi Award for Public Service. "The rules of this contest require that a winner be chosen based on the significance of the reporting; enterprise, including courage in the face of opposing forces, and results," wrote Jerry Ceppos, executive editor of the San Jose-Mercury News. "By every measure, Jerry Mitchell should win the Sigma Delta Chi Award for Public Service in journalism — and should win the admiration of every citizen of Mississippi and of journalists everywhere."

In addition to the Sigma Delta Chi award, Mitchell has received the Heywood Broun Award, the Sidney Hillman Award, the American Legion's Fourth Estate Award, the National Association of Black Journalists' Award for Enterprise Reporting, the Abraham Lincoln Marovitz Award and the Inland Press Association Award.

In 1999, Gannett honored him with the Outstanding Achievement by an Individual Award, the Best Investigative Reporting Award, the Best In-Depth Reporting Award and its highest honor — the William Ringle Outstanding Achievement Career Award — making him the youngest recipient ever to receive it. Two years later, he received the Best Beat Reporting Award from Gannett for his continued work to shine light on these dark crimes of the past, and in 2002, Gannett honored Mitchell as one of its top 10 journalists in the company over the past quarter century. In 2006, Mitchell received the Outstanding Achievement by an Individual Award a second time, this time for work leading to Killen's conviction. The judges called his stories "the work of a generation. People said to let it go. But Jerry Mitchell never gave up."

Peers have recognized Mitchell's work. In 2000, he received the Silver Em Award from the University of Mississippi, where he was called "a true hero of contemporary American journalism." In 2002, editors Judith and William Serrin featured his work in their anthology of the nation's best journalism

over the past three centuries, Muckraking! The Journalism That Changed America.

In October 1998, Mitchell was recognized along with three other journalists at the Kennedy Center in Washington. ABC's Chris Wallace told those gathered for the Anti-Defamation League event, "Jerry Mitchell isn't comfortable being called a hero, or being portrayed as one in the film, Ghosts of Mississippi. It is difficult, however, to find a better word than 'hero' to describe Jerry Mitchell. Today, justice — long delayed — has been served, and Sam Bowers and Byron De La Beckwith grow old in jail."

But there's more to Mitchell's work than just hard-hitting reporting. His 10-chapter narrative, "Genetic Disaster," described his family's often losing battle against a rare genetic ailment and his journey to find out if he himself had the deadly disease. In 2008, he became a human guinea pig for a University of Kentucky genetic study investigating this rare disease.

He received the Associated Press' Outstanding Writing Award for his 13-chapter narrative, *The Preacher and the Klansman*, which also received a Columbia Journalism School Citation for Coverage of Race & Ethnicity. Thousands have been touched by this story of how a preacher-turned-civil-rights-activist became friends with a former Ku Klux Klan terrorist, a true story of reconciliation. One reader wrote: "What a wonderful series, not only because of the heroic reporting and beautiful writing, but because it is at its core the embodiment of hope."

In addition to his writing, Mitchell is an inspiring speaker. In 2003, he was a featured speaker at the Ford Foundation's conference in New York City on "Journalism and Justice." In June 2005, he served as the commencement speaker for more than 10,000 graduates at Queens College, where Andy Goodman once attended. And in October 2005, he spoke at the dedication of the National Civil Rights Memorial Center in Montgomery, Alabama — an event attended by thousands. He regularly shares his stories of justice and redemption across the United States.

In 1997, Mitchell received his master's in journalism from Ohio State University, and in 2006, he received an honorary doctorate from Colby College in Waterville, Maine. He lives in Mississippi with his wife. They have two children.

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