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MORE INFORMATION AND OPINIONS ON TODAY'S TOPICS: An opinion column discusses mileage based vehicular taxes. For more information:

> ONLINE:

Mileage tax proposed for state's drivers
www.oeregister.com/ocr/2004/08/19/ocr/news/article_208035
Oregon to Test Plan that Taxes Motorists by 1
Driven: www.heartland.org/Article.cfm?artId=

TRUTH IN JOURNALISM

Scooped by students? Believe it

What if you do everything right, and you still get accused of cheating? What if your student newspaper is so good that a contest judge says your work must have been stolen? The staff of *The Southerner*, the highly acclaimed student newspaper at Atlanta's Grady High School, has found itself in that peculiar place. In a recent national competition, a judge accused the newspaper's staff of plagiarism.

The unidentified judge cited no evidence to back up the allegations. His (or her) comments in an evaluation of the newspaper merely indicated that he believed the work was too sophisticated to be done by high school students.

"I have a hard time believing any HS student uses phrases like . . . ill-fated precedent," let alone did research on the laws of the Geneva Conventions," the judge wrote.

The *Southerner* has lodged a complaint with the Columbia (University) Scholastic Press Association, which sponsors an annual competition for high school newspapers. Its editors and reporters want to set the record straight: They do excellent work, and they don't cheat.

"I find it sad an evaluator of high school newspapers has expectations so low that he or she can't believe it when a work of truly great journalism comes along," David Suits, a Grady

senior and one of two managing editors, wrote in his complaint.

Last year, *The Southerner* took particular pride in its local angle on a story of national interest — the controversy surrounding Lt. Col. Allen West, who was disciplined and allowed to retire after threatening an Iraqi prisoner with a gun while interrogating him. West, a decorated officer, was initially charged with assault, despite his contention that he acted to save his troops. Because West is a graduate of Grady High School, *The Southerner* reported on the controversy.

In fact, one of *The Southerner's* star reporters, Kimberly Hagan, scooped *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* with a story about West in November 2003. (This newspaper didn't publish a staff-produced news story on West until December.) It was in that story that Hagan used the phrase "ill-fated precedent" and referred to the Geneva Conventions.

Not only did the judge doubt Hagan's vocabulary and research skills, but he also found the idea that a high school journalist might come across such a story incredible. "Are your readers to believe that the reporter — a Kimberly Hagan — got a tip about the pending charges . . . and actually interviewed his brother, Arlen West?" the judge wrote testily.

Had the judge done a bit of reporting of his own — a phone call to *The Southerner* would



BITA HONARVAR / Staff

Grady High School seniors David Suits and Kimberly Hagan are protesting a contest judge's allegations of plagiarism.

have done the trick — he would have learned that Arlen West, who lives in Atlanta, approached faculty adviser David Winter about doing a story. "I thought this was the best story we'd have in 10 years," Winter said.

Hagan's first story quoted Arlen West about the controversy and included recollections about the Army officer from Grady teachers. In the same edition, Suits wrote a column suggesting leniency for Lt. Col. West. Later, Hagan was able to interview him.

The *Southerner* has a tradition of excellence. A nearly

monthly publication (eight editions a year), it has won several prestigious awards from high school journalism associations.

Hagan said she was surprised, but not angry, at the accusations. "More than anything, I am frustrated and disappointed at the idea that this judge . . . [has] such low expectations for students and student journalism. [He] must believe students are not capable of good work," she said.

Like Hagan, Suits has managed to put the controversy in perspective. "I started thinking about it a little bit more, and I realized what an amazing compliment it is to suggest that your work is so outstanding that it's not believable that you did it," he noted.

With that sort of equanimity, they're ready for the rough-and-tumble of real-world journalism.

> Cynthia Tucker is the editorial page editor. Her column appears Wednesdays and Sundays.



CYNTHIA TUCKER

cynthia@ajc.com

MY OPINION



Credibility too perishable a commodity