



## **UNDER SCUTINY: CITIZEN BRINGS DOWN COUNTY AUDITOR THROUGH PUBLIC RECORDS USE**

By Daniel DeMay

STEVENSON -- Not far from the steep banks of the Columbia River, in the heart of the Gorge, sits a quiet little town called Stevenson.

It's the kind of town where everybody knows everybody. It's the kind of town, says longtime resident Gloria Howell, where your neighbors, after learning that your television has given up the ghost, leave a new one, in the box, on your doorstep anonymously.

That kind of neighborly love is what drives Gloria to care so deeply about her community. So deeply, in fact, that when she smelled something fishy about the Skamania County Auditor a few years ago, she kept digging until she had uncovered a trove of defrauded expense vouchers, mishandled records and misuses of county money.

"It's home," she said during a recent interview in the lush front yard of her Stevenson home. "When you get through the good times and the bad times with people, you form a bond. And when that's violated, you feel it."

Gloria was given a Key Award by the Washington Coalition for Open Government in 2010 for her use of Washington's Public Records Law to uncover expense reports and other documents that showed how then-auditor Michael Garvison had misused public money and overbilled for personal expenses.

Gloria's work led to Garvison's 2009 resignation, and eventually to criminal charges for illegally destroying documents.

She was the 2011 winner of the American Society of Newspaper Editors' Sunshine Week Local Hero Award, annual national recognition of a person who helps shed light on government activity. It all began with the firing of her daughter.

### **From personal to public**

Garvison had made it clear that he wanted to hand-pick his own staff, Gloria said. To that end, he had fired one longtime employee — who sued the county for her dismissal — and another had moved to a different office to avoid her own termination. Gloria's daughter, Angela Moser, was accused in early 2009 of stealing funds from the auditor's office, put on leave and put under investigation, Gloria said.

Beyond the frustration over the unsubstantiated claims against her daughter (Moser was terminated, but later settled with the county and was cleared of any wrongdoing), Gloria had heard that Garvison might be misusing the county's money. So, she decided to look into his records a bit.

She requested records of his expenses but was initially ignored by the auditor's office. She then brought in her lawyer, Brad Anderson, a former county prosecutor, to help force the county to release the records. But when they finally got them — after a court ordered the

documents release and awarded Gloria \$4,500 for the trouble — some were missing while others revealed years of questionable spending reports.

“Little things kept coming up, so you knew something was wrong,” Gloria said.

After thorough review of Garvison’s expense records, Gloria and her attorney prepared a thick white binder detailing all the ways the auditor had spent public money on trips, personal education and personal vehicles, and even double-billed for mileage while working, among other things. They handed the report to Skamania County Sheriff David Brown and urged the prosecutor’s office to investigate further.

The sheriff’s investigation showed Garvison likely misused public money and directed staff to destroy records. Further, some staff interviewed told investigators they were asked to meet with the prosecutor to discuss responses before interviews with law enforcement.

But it didn’t stop there. Gloria and her attorney pushed the state auditor to investigate as well, and that office found multiple violations of Washington law by Garvison and other staff in his office.

Garvison resigned as auditor in 2009, was later charged with misdemeanors in Skamania County, then charged in 2011 with felonies for destroying records. When that case ended, the judge told him he could never serve in public office again, Gloria said. “He knew the rules,” she said. “He was educated and all the things he was educated on he turned on people and hurt them.”

### **A tough row to hoe**

Gloria’s tireless pursuit of Garvison’s criminal activity was inspired by her love of her community and a desire to protect it, she said. And those who know her say she holds public officials to the highest standards.

“Gloria is one of these people who has a deep-seated belief that people who hold the public trust in their hands as elected officials have a responsibility to discharge that trust legally and faithfully,” said Sam Pace, a board member with the Coalition who has known Gloria since he was a child. “It’s not just a difference between right and wrong for her, that difference has to matter.”

But she wasn’t always interested in politics, Gloria said. In fact, even during her many years on the local school board, she wasn’t very interested in it, though her time there did help prepare her for the ordeal that the Garvison case would later bring her.

“I wasn’t uncomfortable looking around and trying to get to the bottom of things,” she said.

Born in Vancouver, Wash., in 1939, Gloria was 69 when she first started looking into Garvison. Now, five years later, she said she paid a price beyond money and time.

“I still hurt from it,” she said. “It just wears you down, politics wears you down. There’s no doubt about it.”

Her office, where she compiled an exhaustive library of records, letters, news clippings and other Garvison artifacts, is now a place that causes her stress. She doesn't even want to go in it now, she said.

The only way she survived the ordeal was the support of the community she loves so much, she said. Groups like the Eagles Club and WCOG, as well as the local newspaper, the *Skamania County Pioneer*, supported Gloria throughout, she said. And Joanna Grammon, the editor of the *Pioneer*, was vital to helping her.

"I wouldn't have survived if it weren't for them," she said.

She might be a rare breed to most people, but Gloria doesn't think she's such an unusual person. Plenty of people could do what she did, she said.

"I think there are a lot of people out there like me that have a desire to do something about something," she said. "If you see a fire, don't you want to go put it out? And if you see a place that needs to have a fire, don't you want to go start it?"