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Washington Coalition for Open Government

6351 Seaview Avenue NW

Seattle, Washington 98107-2664

www.washingtoncog.org

Phone: (206) 782-0393

Western Washington University Student Journalists Recognized with Open Government Key Award

Seattle – Two collegiate journalists were recently honored by the Washington Coalition for Open Government for their use of the state Public Records Act and their dogged investigation of their university’s handling of complaints of sexual assault and sexual harassment.

WCOG is recognizing Asia Fields and Erasmus Baxter for their reporting for student publications at Western Washington University, published during the 2017-18 academic year.

The two drew on the Public Records Act, court records and extensive reporting to reveal and analyze occurrences of sexual harassment and sexual assault on Western’s campus, and the university’s handling of the incidents. Their articles covered several recent incidents, including one involving a professor; interviews with survivors; and descriptions of resources available to students. Their efforts have raised awareness of sexual assault and harassment on campus, and students have pressured the administration to be more transparent about their policies, especially in regard to university penalties assessed against students charged and convicted of assault. Articles also were frequently accompanied with background on how the student journalists obtained the information they reported, which often relied on Washington access laws.

The articles ran in both *The Western Front*, the student newspaper; and in the *AS Review*, which is published by the Associated Students organization. A number of student journalists participated in the coverage, but it was spearheaded and overseen by Fields (*Western Front* editor during winter quarter) and Baxter (*AS Review* editor).

The awards were presented Sept. 21 at WCOG's annual Madison-Andersen-Bunting Award Breakfast, which honors efforts by advocates for government transparency.

"Asia and Erasmus made extensive use of the Public Records Act to report numerous stories," said Toby Nixon, WCOG president, who presented the award. "They have pressured the administration to be more transparent about their policies, especially in regard to university penalties against students charged and convicted of assault and general awareness of the issue."

Nixon noted that journalists often face "some blowback from those whom you report on. It is especially true for student journalists reporting on the administration and faculty of their own institution. It takes courage to do the kind of dogged reporting these student journalists have done."

The pair said they appreciated the recognition, but more work remains. Fields acknowledged the resources and advice of the Student Press Law Center and the DART Center for reporting on trauma, as well as access attorneys who helped them navigate access laws.

"We also thank all the survivors who were willing to speak out and have their names in the paper and talk about their experience," she said. Fields received her journalism degree in June 2018 and is an intern at *The Seattle Times*.

Baxter, a senior at Western majoring in journalism, said he expects student journalists will continue to report on the issue.

The Washington Coalition for Open Government presents Key Awards to individuals and organizations throughout the year for using or furthering the state's Open Public Meetings Act/Public Records Act.

WCOG was founded in 2002 by a group of individuals representing organizations with a broad spectrum of opinions and interests but all dedicated to the principles of strengthening the state's open government laws and protecting the public's access to government at all levels. WCOG stands for the principle that transparency and public participation are essential building blocks of good government.

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