

IN THE CIRCUIT COURT OF MADISON COUNTY, MISSISSIPPI

PHIL BYRANT

PLAINTIFF

VERSUS

CIVIL ACTION NO: 45CI1:23-cv-00238-JM

MARY MARGARET WHITE &
DEEPSOUTH TODAY d/b/a MISSISSIPPI TODAY

DEFENDANTS

AFFIDAVIT OF ADAM GANUCHEAU

STATE OF MISSISSIPPI
COUNTY OF Hinds

PERSONALLY APPEARED before me the authority for the county and state aforesaid,

Adam Ganucheau, who on his oath states that the following things are true:

1. I am the Editor-in-Chief of *Deep South Today* d/b/a *Mississippi Today* newspaper, and I make this Affidavit on personal knowledge.

2. The accuracy of “The Backchannel” reporting has never been challenged. In fact, on April 3, 2022, we published a series intro piece — a post announcing the series we were about to publish — that included this exact passage:

Each story in the series will delve into an aspect of Bryant’s entanglement with the welfare agency’s spending — whether the ties to his personal business dealings, his relationships with players in the scheme, patterns in his leadership, agency directives or nepotism.

While he was Mississippi’s governor, the welfare department that Bryant oversaw misused and squandered at least \$77 million in federal funds meant to assist the state’s poorest residents — and so far he’s skirted all accountability.

3. After that series intro piece published, Bryant’s public relations manager Denton Gibbes texted our reporter, Anna Wolfe, “Very balanced intro piece. Thx.” No representative of Bryant ever challenged any reported fact in that piece, and we never had to issue any correction or clarification regarding “The Backchannel” reporting.

4. My goal with writing the Pulitzer Prize announcement story that published on May 8, 2023, was to describe the reporting as succinctly as possible for people who may not have seen

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“The Backchannel” series the prior year. I drafted the article completely on my own, without help from any other staffer at Mississippi Today or any other person. The first two sentences I wrote for that story read:

Mississippi Today reporter Anna Wolfe won the 2023 Pulitzer Prize for Local Reporting for her remarkable investigation “The Backchannel,” which uncovered the depth of the sprawling \$77 million welfare scandal, the largest embezzlement of federal funds in the state’s history.

The investigation, published in a multi-part series in 2022, revealed for the first time how former Gov. Phil Bryant used his office to steer the spending of millions of federal welfare dollars — money intended to help the state’s poorest residents — to benefit his family and friends, including NFL Hall of Fame quarterback Brett Favre.

5. Those sentences are a completely accurate portrayal of “The Backchannel” reporting — the accuracy of which, again, neither Bryant nor his representatives has questioned to this day. I based these sentences wholly and directly on the reporting that we published in “The Backchannel.”

6. Our outlook on “The Backchannel” reporting and the dozens of follow-ups that we’ve published since has been this simple: We want to give Mississippi and American taxpayers — the people whose money was misspent, squandered and, in some cases, embezzled — as complete an understanding about what happened as we can.

7. We felt then and feel now that scrutinizing the government system Bryant led is vitally important to that understanding. The perfect summation of why we pursued this series in the first place and why we felt using Bryant’s communications as a lens through which to view the scandal can be found in “The Backchannel” intro piece — the same piece that, again, Bryant’s PR guy called “very balanced.”

8. We do not have malice toward Bryant. We have taken extraordinary care to be fair to him throughout the course of our reporting — much fairer, in fact, than some other news outlets that have independently reported about the former governor’s role in the scandal for larger audiences than ours.

9. Since *Mississippi Today* began reporting on the welfare scandal in 2020, we have published at least 32 stories that explicitly state that Bryant has not been charged with a crime.

10. Part of my focus on the Pulitzer win was a special recording of our podcast, “The Other Side.” On the morning of Tuesday, May 9, 2023, I met my colleague Anna Wolfe to record a conversation with her about her Pulitzer win. The entire purpose of that podcast was to discuss the reporting that won her and Mississippi Today the Pulitzer Prize. That recorded podcast conversation was, as was directly framed throughout, about Wolfe’s “The Backchannel” reporting that won the Pulitzer Prize and that reporting alone. When we recorded that podcast, I did not understand that Mary Margaret White had mistakenly used the term “embezzled” at the Knight Media Forum.

The next day, Wednesday, May 10, 2023, Mississippi Today and Mary Margaret White were served with a Demand for Retraction from Bryant's counsel. That is the first time I became very directly and clearly aware of what Mary Margaret had said at the Knight Media Forum. At that point, I was involved in conversations with our attorney about how we should handle the situation which led to a correction and apology.

11. After "The Backchannel" published, numerous other journalists at nationally renowned newsrooms followed up with their own reporting. They independently verified our reporting and found similar findings as us. And in several cases, they found even more evidence of Bryant's involvement in the scandal than we had.

12. And it's also important to note that Bryant's involvement in the scandal isn't just being reported by the press. Some defendants who face state and federal criminal charges or have been named in the state's civil lawsuit to recoup welfare funds have argued in legal proceedings that Bryant was involved.

13. Following the broad range of court filings and dozens of independently reported stories from news outlets around the country, there have been high-profile calls for a federal investigation into Bryant's role.

14. U.S. Congressman Bennie Thompson wrote a letter on July 15, 2022 to U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland to request an investigation into Bryant's role: "I urge you to work with the Department of Health and Human Services to conduct a federal investigation into the Mississippi TANF embezzlement scheme that centers around the role of former Governor Phil Bryant. The people of Mississippi deserve answers, and accountability for breaking the law must be upheld for all who were involved: especially for Governor Bryant."


ADAM GANUCHEAU

SWORN TO AND SUBSCRIBED before me, this the 30th day of October, 2023.


Notary Public

My Commission Expires:

9/16/24

