

High School Journalist Exposes School Corruption Does Better Job Than Some Mainstream Media Reporters

story and photo by LEO E. LAURENCE, J.D. • San Diego News Service

A South Bay high school journalist is exposing corruption at the Sweetwater Union High School District using methods usually known only by experienced, investigative reporters. It's no surprise that he's straight-A and headed for Harvard.

Gordon Siu, now 17 and a senior at Bonita Vista high, launched his reportorial adventures on *The Crusader*, the official student newspaper at Bonita Vista in Chula Vista.

He exposed possible misuse of millions of dollars of voter-approved monies to "repair local schools." The money was used differently.

The Sweetwater district took heavy criticism about how it spent nearly \$40 million of the \$187 million in bond money approved by voters in November 2000, according to Siu's first investigative story, published when he was only a sophomore and his newspaper's ad manager.

Notice, also, that this story involves two other schools in the Sweetwater school district, not just Bonita Vista.

Prop. BB was a ballot initiative which promised to "... relieve crowding, repair local schools and improve safety conditions for students" in the Sweetwater district. But this teenage journalist did some digging and found that the money wasn't spent for that purpose.

"The district used the bond money to build two new gyms, one at Sweetwater High costing \$10.8 million, and a second at Mar Vista High costing \$10.9 million. This resulted in complaints of misuse of money and a grand jury investigation," Siu reported in *The Crusader*.

"The teachers said they never wanted those huge gymnasiums, but the district said they did," Siu said in an exclusive interview.

"The district built those gymnasiums even before it modernized the classrooms of the schools, which were much in need of modernization," the teenage reporter added while discussing his exposé.

"From what people told me at the district, they wanted to build something that could be seen from the street so that they could show the community that they were making progress in doing something with the money.

"Teachers and a bunch of community leaders believe they should modernize the classrooms before they spent the money on building brand new gymnasiums."

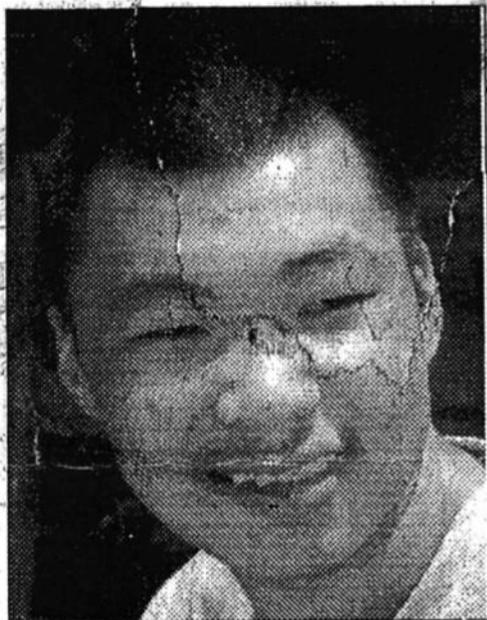
A subsequent San Diego County Grand Jury investigation into the matter found no illegalities, but did question the district's money-spending priorities.

"The district has a contract with the Pepsi corporation to solely sell their products in all (Sweetwater) schools. The district received one million dollars in up-front money from Pepsi," Siu said his investigative reporting revealed.

Using the state's Public Records Act (rare even for an accredited reporter) to force disclosure, Siu exposed that the district was using part of that money to spend on gala dinners.

The district even sent their board secretary to Paris, among other suspicious expenditures.

Another questioned contract was with the Jostens in 1998 to provide class rings, caps and gowns. The district allowed the company to overcharge the students in exchange for a \$50,000 contribution in up-front money to be controlled solely by district Superintendent Ed Brand.



Gordon Siu

The Sweetwater district throws an annual "Hall of Fame" dinner to honor graduates who have distinguished themselves. The idea supposedly is to "inspire (current) students by showing them what district graduates have done," Siu reported. But he discovered that the "real" purpose was totally different.

"I believe 99.9 per cent of the students in the district have no idea what the 'Hall of Fame' is, or the people in it," Siu explained, debunking the so-called "inspiration" excuse for the gala events.

The district requires its high schools to purchase 10 tickets to the event at a cost of \$650 per school. Last year, Bonita Vista paid the mandatory charges from parking ticket fines.

Last year's gala at the elegant U.S. Grant Hotel cost the district over \$25,299, money diverted from schoolbooks and supplies.

Why hold the expensive gala? "One of the board members told me that they (the awardees) might in the future donate money back to the district," Siu said. In other words, simply money. It has nothing to do with "inspiring" students.

The school board was unhappy with Siu after he investigated two candidates running for election to the board, challenger Stan Canaris and incumbent Pearl Quiñones. Both raised huge sums, "commonly unseen in school board races," Siu reported last October.

To dig up the dirt, Siu went to the county's Registrar of Voters' office and demanded to see the candidates' financial disclosure forms.

Quiñones, he discovered, had received \$18,050 from 17 donations made by developers and others doing business with the district. They included construction companies that had designed and built several schools for the district.

Similarly, Canaris raised \$16,300 from similar companies, raising serious conflict-of-interest issues for both candidates.

The Sweetwater district board killed publication of a popular magazine written by and for district students, according to Siu's continuing investigative reporting. It reveals how often school districts throughout San Diego County, including and especially San Diego Unified, take actions against anything that students really like.

The popular magazine, the *Blurb*, was launched in 2002 and "run by Michael Inzunza, a district teacher on special assignment, along with two teaching assistants," according to Siu's investigative reporting.

Stories ranged from the war in Iraq to teen health. Only one issue was published this year, however.

"Public opinion seems to run against Inzunza," Siu reported. The teacher also published a local newspaper, the *South Bay Review*, and is a member of the well-known, and now controversial, Inzunza political family, which some believe to be at the core of the death of the student magazine.

San Diego Magazine offered to come to the rescue of the popular student magazine. Writing to the district, they offered to sell ads for the *Blurb* and pay the costs of publication. Unfortunately, true to many school district habits, the assistant superintendent didn't like the idea and never forwarded the proposal to his board.

When his school's assistant principal, David E. Rylander, was arrested for importing, possession and distribution of child pornography, Siu wanted to cover the courtroom proceedings.

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"I tried to cover his arraignment at the Superior Court downtown, but after asking the court clerk, the bailiff said "no, because I was only a student and (the courts) don't allow student (journalists) the same privileges that (mainstream, SDPD credentialed) reporters have." That, by the way, is inconsistent with state law.

A common characteristic of a professional reporter is to be persistent, and Siu is just that. Dissatisfied, he went to the courthouse press room where he was provided with copies of a "Media Request Form" to be filed five days in advance of a court hearing to obtain a judge's permission to take photos in the courtroom.

For Rylander's sentencing hearing, Siu filed that request and was granted the judge's permission to cover the proceeding and also take news photos.

Siu almost didn't get that opportunity, however, even with the judge's signed approval. The bailiff insisted Siu produce press ID, which he didn't have. Only after some tense negotiations was he allowed by the bailiff to cover the story.

Enter the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ), an organization of the working press in both print and broadcast news. The SPJ board of directors in September will consider sending the president judge of the Superior Court a letter urging that all courtroom clerks become more familiar with student journalist's rights, which are identical to those of regular working reporters.

The SPJ is also working on designing standard press ID cards for student reporters countywide, all as a result of Siu's experiences.

KGTV Channel 10 managing editor J.W. August, a member of the SPJ board, is also inviting Siu to accompany his studio's investigative news team on a working assignment sometime in September.

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