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Dear judges,

Amid nationwide calls for police reform, one of the most important missions of local journalists is to hold their community's law enforcement officers accountable.

To that end, Chronicle staff writer Matthias Gafni spent nearly a year studying a case that would have caught the eye of few other journalists. A killing in an out-of-the way town. An elderly, forgotten victim. A disabled chief suspect.

Leola Shreves lived in Yuba City, a rice-farming community in Northern California. Someone broke into her home, beating and torturing her. The intruder, Gafni wrote, "left Shreves next to her bed — her red aluminum walker by her side — after breaking her jaw, neck, back and 17 of 24 ribs, shattering her teeth, strangling her and almost separating her ears and scalp from her skull. It appeared he'd beaten her with her own cane."

Police focused on 20-year-old Michael Alexander, her next-door neighbor. They interrogated him, they arrested him, they charged him with capital murder and they left him in jail for more than 3½ years. Then they arrested someone else.

It was a single tweet about this second arrest, by a journalist in rural Sutter County, that caught Gafni's attention. Investigators had used genetic genealogy to pinpoint the real killer. Gafni had been tracking how genealogy was upending the legal world, so he thought he had an interesting story to tell.

But as he got to work, the answers were more tangled and disturbing than Gafni expected. He soon realized the real story was much bigger. Yet those who targeted Alexander would not cooperate, nor would they provide basic documentation of the case.

Undeterred, Gafni spent nine months interviewing people and reviewing thousands of pages of documents he obtained from confidential sources: court records, police reports, interrogation transcripts, search warrants, autopsy reports, DNA results, private-investigator reports, school files and medical records.

Telling the story as both a true-crime narrative and an accountability investigation, Gafni laid out a gripping tale of corruption and incompetence that shows how the most common law enforcement failures can ensnare the most vulnerable people.

Perhaps the most shocking revelation: Authorities in Sutter County not only hid their dramatic missteps in the case, but refused to admit they had done anything wrong. Despite freeing Alexander, and with not a shred of physical evidence, they still called him a killer.

By writing the story, Gafni publicly cleared Alexander's name — even when police and prosecutors would not.

We are honored to nominate “The Suspect Next Door” for a CNPA award for In-Depth Reporting.

Thank you for your consideration,

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz, editor in chief
Demian Bulwa, managing editor