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'Sunshine Heroes' are persistent pair

Men are honored for different battles, same open-records fight.

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COLUMBIA • If John Chasnoff and Ed Golterman have anything in common, it's this:

Neither of them likes to take "no" for an answer.

On Monday afternoon, the two St. Louis residents were at the University of Missouri together, collecting awards for their persistence in ignoring those who got in their way.

Both won "Sunshine Hero" awards for using the state's open meetings and records law to seek records that public officials would rather have never seen the light of day.

Neither man is done fighting.

In fact, Chasnoff started his Monday in a St. Louis courtroom, continuing his battle to obtain records related to the alleged scheme by some St. Louis police officers to confiscate scalped 2006 World Series tickets and then distribute them to family and friends.

In 2007, after the Police department denied his request to see the records — which should have been public — Chasnoff sued. He won.

Sort of.

The judge determined that internal affairs complaints and investigative reports are public records. But the police have since countered that another federal rule allows them to keep some of the information private.

So despite the judge's ruling, Chasnoff has only some of the records.

That's why he's still in court trying to get them all. And, Chasnoff said Monday, he's pushing another battle.

A bill before the state Legislature would change the Sunshine Law so that only those internal affairs reports that allege criminal activity by police would be public. And the police would decide which complaints might be criminal and which shouldn't see the light of day.

That's a little like the fox keeping an eye on the hen house, Chasnoff said.

So, hero award in hand, he's keeping an eye on that bill while continuing to wage his battle in the courts.

Golterman, meanwhile, is in constant battle mode.

If the Internet were a war zone and e-mail were his weapon of choice, Golterman would be a dangerous man.

He started his Monday as he does most:

e-mailing reporters to remind them not to forget about the St. Louis conspiracy to close the Kiel Opera House. Golterman wrote a book in 2008 about the alleged conspiracy, and that's what the year-old Missouri Sunshine Coalition honored him for on Monday.

Golterman dramatically paraded to the stage holding aloft a framed picture of the Kiel in its glory days, and he told the crowd at Fischer Auditorium what he tells reporters nearly every day: There isn't a story involving the St. Louis community — not one — that isn't somehow tied to the effort to kill (or save) Kiel.

Chasnoff, a long-haired, jeans-wearing member of the American Civil Liberties Union, is sort of like Woodstock compared to the 70-year-old Golterman's opera.

But the two men both understand that when it comes to keeping public officials accountable, it often doesn't matter that the law is on your side.

While the Sunshine Law clearly states that the people's business should be public, its lack of sharp enforcement teeth often puts citizens in a position of waging Don Quixote-like battles against powerful government interests.

Chasnoff and Golterman know that well. So, too, does the third "hero" honored by the Sunshine Coalition this year, Deborah Marshall, publisher of the Boonville Daily News.

When folks in Boonville wanted to know why the school newspaper disappeared, Marshall's staff started asking questions in the small river town in mid-Missouri. Officials were mum. But public records held the answer, and Marshall had to fight to get them.

Just the very act of filing a Sunshine Law request in a small town can make a person quite unpopular, Marshall said.

Golterman understands that feeling. His combative and persistent tone has earned him plenty of enemies. But, he told me in one of his e-mails, getting an award for his work has re-energized him.

Tuesday morning, he went to the Kiel Opera House and picked up two bags of trash.

"I've been very down," Golterman said of the delays in the plans to reopen the performing arts center. "This award brought back the fight."

