

TITLE: Nigel Jaquiss

*Willamette Week* reporter nominated for Pulitzer Prize for uncovering 30 years of secrets and lies

By Bridget Barton

There's an old adage that if you set out to kill the king, you had better be *sure* that you kill the king.

That's the dilemma that faced *Willamette Week* reporter Nigel Jaquiss, his editor Mark Zusman and publisher Richard Meeker as they embarked on the path that would end with the downfall of Neil Goldschmidt. Easily considered the most powerful man in Oregon, second not even to the governor, Goldschmidt was, if not a king, then certainly a kingmaker. Jaquiss knew that if he did not "kill the king," the ramifications were ruinous. If his facts were wrong, if his sources were not reliable, verifiable, and confirmed by other sources, his career would be over and his newspaper could be financially devastated by lawsuits.

But on May 6, 2004 Jaquiss ran the first story on *Willamette Week's* website and on May 12 the first print story, "The 30-Year Secret, *A crime, a cover-up and the way it shaped Oregon,*" was published. Jaquiss "killed the king."

It was certainly the most fascinating story of this past year, and reporter Nigel Jaquiss earns the most fascinating person award for bringing it to Oregonians.

Jaquiss recently learned that he is one of three finalists nominated for the Pulitzer Prize for Investigative Journalism, a stunning feat for an alternative newsweekly reporter. On April 4 (after publication of this article) the prize will be awarded. If Jaquiss wins against nominees from industry giants, the *New York Times* and the *Des Moines Register*, it will be the first time for an alt-weekly reporter to win this prize. The nomination alone is a powerful commendation of his work.

The investigative story that Jaquiss researched and wrote, for anyone who may have been in a soundproof closet for the past year, detailed Goldschmidt's ongoing sexual abuse of his 14-year-old neighbor during the time he was mayor of Portland. Jaquiss found evidence of the repeated sexual abuse, of the ensuing web of problems that befell the victim, and of the web of deceit that covered up his criminal behavior.

Jaquiss acknowledges that in the 80s the documents that exist today, didn't exist, making it a harder story to get. Testimony about a separate rape in Seattle—where the victim mentions the Goldschmidt abuse (not by name)—hadn't happened yet. But Jaquiss knew that the *Oregonian* had wind of the sexual abuse story as early as 1986, and he believes that other influential people heard rumors and did nothing to bring them to light. "Why wouldn't you put every reporter on it?" he asks.

But Jaquiss knows the answer to his question. “People feared retribution,” he says. “Goldschmidt was a beloved figure. Goldschmidt made the city. We were concerned about how (the story) would be received.”

But neither Jaquiss nor his bosses flinched at the possible repercussions to their reputations. “They never said, ‘We’re going to lose a shitload of advertising.’ But that was an issue,” says Jaquiss. “They have a commitment to investigative journalism. *Willamette Week* is far from perfect, but the ownership is committed to putting news in the paper regardless of the consequences. The guys that own it are fearless.”

And they would need to be for the job ahead of them.

Like many big stories, it began when Jaquiss was researching another story—this one on the business dealings of Goldschmidt following the announcement of his appointment by Texas Pacific Group (TPG) to the board of the new Oregon Electric Utility and their efforts to buy Enron-owned PGE. He stumbled upon much, much more.

“I was calling around looking for people who knew stuff. (State Senator) Vicki Walker said there was a rumor about the girl and she had part of a document. Walker had four pages of it. I went and got the rest in Washington County Court.

“The victim was in bad shape so they had appointed a conservator—Phil Margolin’s wife. She (the victim) had been arrested a lot. She was in Las Vegas; she worked in casinos. I made lots of public records requests in Multnomah County, Clatsop County, in Nevada, Washington, California. That’s how I got up to speed.”

Jaquiss launched a relentless investigation that included communications with other Oregon reporters.

“Phil Stanford had a piece of the document,” says Jaquiss, “but the girl, her mother, Goldschmidt, they would not confirm. The (*Portland Tribune*) never had the Seattle document. That was a stroke of pure luck,” he says. “In the Seattle document her defense attorney said she’d been missing court dates in Clackamas County because of the Seattle rape case. And she also talks about sexual abuse for years. She doesn’t name Goldschmidt, but parts are sealed that may name him.”

The story was heating up, but there were rough days ahead. In the small town/small state environment of Portland, Oregon, it’s easy to imagine how many doors would be slammed in Jaquiss’ face, especially when he came asking about the most well-connected man in the state. One Oregon corporate public relations specialist says that people in her profession cringe when they hear that Jaquiss is on the phone or in the office with a question.

“Nobody would talk to me,” says Jaquiss. “I went to their offices unannounced. It was encouraging, but it wasn’t proof. The Seattle document was really big.”

Next Jaquiss flew to Las Vegas to interview the victim. “I knew she couldn’t talk on the record,” he says. “I was expecting confirmation off the record. She showed evidence of a hard life—she was very shaky. I knew it was true, but she denied it. She denied everything. That was a low point. I knew she was lying. I feared it was a dead end.

“Only one other person knew I was working on it—I spent a lot of time in Zusman’s office. I got some calls after Las Vegas that reaffirmed it was true. We were meeting with our lawyer saying here’s what we have. We knew we weren’t going to get confirmation from the victim, her mother or Goldschmidt. And the documents were all good, but not smoking guns. There was a lot of pressure.”

And this is the point in the story where other news media in the state had probably backed away, where other reporters, worried about the repercussions or lacking the time and energy to keep going, had given up. That would have been easier than what Jaquiss chose—to continue to show up and knock on doors and get the cold shoulder from Portland’s business and government elite.

Jaquiss remembers two strange preludes to the story’s publication—shortly before the story ran, he says that Goldschmidt called out of the blue and asked to meet with Zusman and Meeker. By that time, says Jaquiss, Zusman and Meeker were convinced it was true, but the pair met with Goldschmidt for lunch. Although the story was days from breaking and all were aware of its imminent publication, the topic was never discussed. In retrospect, says Jaquiss, it was clear that he wanted *them* to bring it up so he could talk them out of it.

Another odd event—“The week we were ready to go,” says Jaquiss, “(*Portland Tribune* reporter Jim) Redden called Zusman and said, ‘I don’t think this girl is credible.’ He said the police didn’t like Goldschmidt, so they would have nailed him if it were true. One of the most chilling calls we got may have been when the most knowledgeable guy in town (Redden) said, ‘Be careful.’

“After Las Vegas,” says Jaquiss, “Zusman said ‘This is a reporter’s worst nightmare—a reporter’s biggest story and it may never get printed.’ But he never said stop. Zusman really wanted it.”

Zusman, who describes Jaquiss as internally self-motivated, says that Jaquiss was at his lowest after the Vegas trip. “He was quite depressed. I gave him a kick in the butt and reminded him that if the story was easy, someone would have published it a long time ago.”

Jaquiss had a family vacation planned to Florida in mid-April. “I told my wife I couldn’t go,” says Jaquiss. “They went anyway.” He stayed behind, committed to the story.

A major concern remained—Goldschmidt, the victim and her mother had not confirmed the story. But says Jaquiss, the final decision was made to publish based on the

documents and statements he had collected. As soon as the story broke, Goldschmidt publicly confirmed key elements voluntarily.

“By Goldschmidt going to the *Oregonian* he took care of that concern for us,” says Jaquiss. “The real problem would have been if there were questions about whether it was true or not, but when Goldschmidt said yes, it’s true, we didn’t have that problem.

“The weight of me showing up in people’s homes and offices was what convinced Goldschmidt he was going to have to give up. In retrospect the game was over a month before publication.”

Jaquiss wrote multiple additional news stories about the Goldschmidt case, including a critical look at the *Oregonian*’s lack of reporting, and new information about Bob Burtchaell, the Goldschmidt confidante who helped him orchestrate the cover-up. In December 2004 Jaquiss published “Who Knew?” which developed more details about influential people who knew about Goldschmidt’s sexual relations with the 14-year-old.

In early 2005 Jaquiss wrote a cluster of scathing reports about the Texas Pacific Group’s buyout strategy for PGE—the story that originally started him down the path to the Goldschmidt story. In February 2005 Jaquiss reported on TPG’s Goldschmidt-connected law firm, Ater Wynne. Then in early March 2005 Jaquiss published “Goldschmidt’s Web of Power,” which detailed his labyrinth of connections to high-level corporate and government insiders.

Eventually TPG’s offer for PGE would be turned down. The stain from the Goldschmidt scandal may well have had some bearing on that decision—TPG never convincingly distanced themselves from Goldschmidt to satisfy public scrutiny in Oregon.

“The problem is where do I go from here?” says Jaquiss, who has been with *Willamette Week* since ’98.. “There are people who won’t talk to me. There were people who didn’t like me. Now there are more. I still have a job to do, to report stuff that’s not groundbreaking.”

But reporter Jaquiss says he’s where he wants to be. “I’ve gotten more good tips since then. There are downsides to small local publications—compensation and resources—but there’s a huge amount of freedom,” says Jaquiss.

For Jaquiss that freedom came with a high price tag. Jaquiss quit his Wall Street job trading oil for Cargill, Morgan Stanley and Goldman Sachs for a new life as a reporter at an alternative newsweekly—an unusual step, to put it delicately. And there’s probably not a better-educated reporter at any alt-weekly in the country. Jaquiss graduated from Dartmouth College in ’84 and from the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University in ’97. And yes, that is the same Columbia University where right now Jaquiss is being considered for a Pulitzer Prize in Investigative Journalism.

This fascinating reporter is also the father of three children, a 10-year-old daughter and two sons, six and four, and he's married to Meg Remson. And about that missed Florida vacation? "I never made up the vacation," says Jaquiss. But he takes a month off every summer to go back to Connecticut where his wife's family lives. He goes to the beach for fun. And he likes to cook and hike.

"I'd like to write a book about Goldschmidt," he adds.

Watch out Portland power players, you may soon be seeing your name in lights. Let's see—whom to cast as Bernie Giusto? Maybe Joe Pesci? Richard Dreyfuss, of course, would make a great Goldschmidt.