

Cranston lawyer doubles as award-winning columnist

By: Pat Murphy December 10, 2015



If you're a regular reader of Steven Frias' sharp-edged commentary on state and local government in *The Providence Journal*, the fact that he's been recognized with a \$20,000 award for excellence in journalism shouldn't come as a surprise.

What is surprising is that the winner of the 2015 Coolidge Prize for Journalism is not a career newspaperman. Monday through Friday Frias commutes from his home in Cranston to his "day job" in Boston representing gas and electric companies as a regulatory

lawyer at Keegan Werlin.

Though in private practice now, it's his eight years as a government lawyer with the Rhode Island Public Utilities Commission and the Rhode Island Energy Facility Siting Board that give Frias a keen perspective on the inner workings of government agencies.

That perspective helps him write with authority. For example, in a recent column he criticized the "opaque process" for awarding millions in grants to community organizations based on the "arbitrary whims" of General Assembly leadership intent on granting favors to those with the right connections.

Frias writes two pieces a month as guest columnist for *The Journal*. A writer with a conservative bent, he is also Rhode Island's Republican Committeeman.

The Coolidge Prize is awarded annually by the Calvin Coolidge Presidential Foundation to the author who "best captures the spirit and style" of the 30th president, including the values of independence, thrift, balanced budgets and a "restrained" federal government. Frias received the national award in October at a banquet held in New York City.

The 43-year-old Frias spoke recently with *Lawyers Weekly's* Pat Murphy about his "other" career as a columnist.

Q. *Were you surprised when you won the Coolidge Award?*

A. When I was told I was a finalist, I was extremely pleased and happy. I never thought I would win the award because journalism for me is sort of a hobby or more of a part-time job. So it was exciting to say the least.

Q. *How did you become a guest columnist for *The Providence Journal*?*

A. I'm active in politics. The *Cranston Herald* was looking for someone to provide a column every couple of weeks from a conservative's viewpoint. Not knowing that I could do this, I agreed to give it a try. I started writing columns every couple of weeks for almost a year. Then, Ed Achorn of *The Providence Journal* saw my columns in *The Cranston Herald* and suggested that I could write for them. That was in the summer of 2013.

Q. *What do you think makes your commentary stand out?*

A. I was a government attorney for approximately eight years. Of course, I'm also of a conservative viewpoint; I'm a Republican. Usually, in journalism, conservatives are a minority. What I think actually adds to it is that I don't just

provide opinion. Usually I also provide a lot of historical information, which I think is what makes my columns somewhat different or unique. Everybody has opinions, not everybody has facts.

What I tend to do is a lot of first-hand research of Rhode Island history, going through old newspapers and microfilm, and sometimes looking at government records, whether they be at the Secretary of State's Office or in some other archive. My quest usually is [to answer]: "How did this get so messed up? How did we get to this point?" Once you do that, you can kind of understand why it happened, why things are bad, and how things can be fixed.

Q. *Are there any subjects you have to avoid as a columnist because of your clients or the agencies you practice before?*

A. I practice almost exclusively in Massachusetts, although there will sometimes be a matter that involves a public utility in Rhode Island. But readers will notice I do not write about energy policy. You will not find a column with me speaking about the state's energy policy or the history of the state's energy policy because of its potential impact on public utilities that I represent. It's a lot easier not to write about it than to have to put down disclaimers about what are my opinions and the opinions of a client.

Q. *Is there a greater problem with a lack of ethics in government in Rhode Island than in other states?*

A. Every state has crooks. But what I find interesting from an historical perspective about Rhode Island is that there's a blatancy about the corruption or ethical problems, and a lack of public uproar or consequences due to it. I don't know if Rhode Island is much worse than other states, but I do believe that it is certainly problematic. It feeds off those two things, which is elected officials who believe they can get away with it and a public that seems to allow them to get away with it sometimes.

Q. *What are some of the more significant ethics issues in state and local government? Is it a lack of transparency?*

A. One problem is the transparency issue. If you look at our Access to Public Records Act, these are very robust laws, but they obviously grant discretion to public officials to decide whether a record is public or confidential. When there's a judgment call, they will err on the side of confidentiality many times.

I tend to think that a lot of it is an insularity and a culture, for lack of a better term. Rhode Island is a small state, so it's an insular state. A lot of things are done based on personal relationships. So there are issues about needing to know somebody to get somewhere. When you base policy on personal relationships rather than on principle, you will have ethical problems.

Q. *If you could fix one thing about ethics in government in the state, what would it be?*

A. I would allow for some form of voter initiative in my state, because if you have voter initiative, once the General Assembly adopts something or refuses to adopt something, you always have the safety valve of voter initiative to allow the people to require something to occur.

When you look at how reforms come about in other states, some of it comes about because there was the threat that they could always have done a voter initiative. People could have taken it upon themselves to draft a petition, gotten enough signatures, and put something on the ballot. So people serve as a check on the public officials.

Q. *Do you think the state's system of appointing judges needs to be reformed?*

A. There should not be lobbyists on the Judicial Nominating Commission. If the purpose of the Judicial Nominating

Commission is to try to minimize the political nature of the judicial selection, appointing lobbyists who are dependent upon the General Assembly leadership or public officials for their livelihood is problematic on its face.

Q. *Does it bother you to get negative feedback from readers about your columns?*

A. In a free society, everyone has the right to express their opinion. Sometimes, if people want to be critical of me for whatever reason, that's their opinion and God love 'em. It just doesn't bother me. My own view is, if you don't want to be criticized, don't say anything.

My objective in every column I write is, even if you disagree with me, you learned something. I think I accomplish that in almost every column I write. What I hope is enough people think about it and somehow or some way policy changes.

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