

# MIZZOU

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## Around the Columns

### Information belongs to you

The National Press Club has given Missouri School of Journalism Associate Professor Charles Davis one of two 2010 John Aubuchon Freedom of the Press Awards. The awards honor important contributors to press freedom and open government. From 2005 to 2010, Davis directed the National Freedom of Information Coalition, which is housed at MU.

“Some say Charles Davis has done as much as anyone to illuminate what many in power want to keep hidden from the press and public,” said club president Alan Bjerga Nov. 15, 2010, at the presentation ceremony in Washington, D.C.

If that all sounds like the stuff of Woodward and Bernstein, Davis brings it down to earth with the story of a man who had recently completed his get-away-from-it-all retirement home in rural Virginia. One morning he spotted surveyors on his property, but they wouldn't tell him why the county had hired them. He drove to the county offices to examine the work order, but they wouldn't show it to him.

“All they'd say was that it was for economic development, and that scared him to death,” Davis says. “He moved out there to be by himself.” An Internet search soon led the homeowner to






Journalism Associate Professor Charles Davis won an Aubuchon Freedom of the Press Award from the National Press Club. Photo by Rob Hill

the idea of freedom of information (“a new concept to him”) and to Davis, who gave him some advice. “Long story short,” Davis says, “he sued the county for the information and learned that a nearby property owner was considering selling a narrow strip of land behind him for zero-lot-line homes, where they build McMansions 40 feet apart.” Armed with information, the homeowner organized a neighborhood association that successfully opposed the development. Happy ending.

Davis loves helping people “stick it to the man,” but he says the big-picture message goes something like this: “Everybody, at some point in their life, regardless of what they do, will need government information in the worst way, and they won’t know it until they do.”

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