



Conversation with

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Open Vallejo's Geoffrey King

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A hero. A rabble rouser. A terrorist.

Since launching his award-winning newsroom in February 2019, Open Vallejo founder Geoffrey King has been called a lot of things—and for good reason. The Vallejo native has spent the past two years upending an already scandal-plagued community, uncovering corruption, incompetence, and malfeasance within the city’s government and police department. But at his core, the civil rights lawyer turned journalist is interested in only one thing: the truth.

We spoke to King, discussing Open Vallejo’s impact, the community’s response, and the stories that have shaken a city—including new details on the Vallejo police’s alleged practice of bending badges to mark fatal shootings.

The interview has been edited and condensed for space and clarity.

By Casey Cantrell

So, you’ve been pretty busy?

[Laughs] Definitely. But seriously, I’ve done First Amendment litigation, I’ve worked in international human rights, I teach, and this feels like some of the most important community work I’ve ever done in my life. I feel very grateful.

What inspired you to start Open Vallejo?

It started as an experiment in transparency, accountability, and civic engagement on February 9, 2019. That morning, I went to [City Councilmember] Hakeem Brown’s first town hall and tried to ask him a couple of questions about police reform, thinking he’d be more receptive than he was.

He wasn’t. He was very aggressive and not very nice to me. And then that night, [Willie McCoy was killed](#).

That's what really did it: the pushback I got from a couple of city officials, and then Willie McCoy was shot dead.





Open Vallejo's Geoffrey King

I definitely want to talk more about that. Before we do, I was curious because you come from a background as a lawyer working on journalism-related issues. What got you interested in journalism, both legally and professionally?

I was always interested in it, even as a 5th grader [when] we did a unit on the Constitution. I'm the same person that I was then.

[When] I transferred to Berkeley, the first class I ever walked into was a course called "The First Amendment and the Press." Either I'm very easily swayed or it was sort of fated, right?

When I started spending more time here [in Vallejo]—my dad died when I was 30, and my mom had early onset Alzheimer's. I'm an only child, so I was making sure she was okay, taking care of the bills. I started spending more time in Vallejo, and I was just reminded of how amazing this community is—and learned how messed up the government is here.

I had to try and help, in solidarity with my neighbors. Really, the best thing to do was to tell the truth.

At first, I thought I'd be an expert source/pro bono freelance researcher and then pitch stuff to people I know in the journalism community. And that worked. There were a lot of stories that came out that were things that I found and quietly gave to folks.

But what I realized was that [journalists] are overstretched. So okay, is it going to be a better use of my resources to try to push through that with people who I know want to cover these things but also have other [priorities], or should I just to learn AP style and WordPress?

This past summer has been an eventful one for Vallejo, to say the least, and you've played a big part in that: First, the story on Interim City Attorney Randy Risner's [past professional misconduct](#); next, the disturbing revelation that a group of Vallejo police officers bent their badges to mark fatal shootings; and most recently, the extensive history of domestic violence allegations, charges, and convictions [against Councilmember Brown](#). What does it mean for you to be a part of this moment that's propelled the city back into national headlines?

I don't want to sound too melodramatic. This is genuinely how I feel. It is truly an honor and a privilege to feel useful to my neighbors and to stand with them. I have nothing but gratitude for being in a position to try to help and seemingly have some impact.

We're not a daily paper. Vallejo needs that, too; every small town needs that. But part of why I launched this, almost reluctantly, is because I was seeing how other people were being retaliated against, and my entire career has been defending people who have spoken up on matters of public concern and had been censored or silenced. You know, people speak up at City Council meetings or post a comment on Nextdoor or Facebook, and they'd get harassed. People's loved ones get killed, and there are credible reports of the police driving by their houses and shining spotlights into their homes. I've personally spoken to people who have [been victims] of intimidation—unlawful, probably criminal intimidation by the government. That's not how the United States of America is supposed to work.

I figured, well, it's going to be harder to do that to me, and I'm not going to stop. I'm very stubborn. I just built that into the strategy [behind Open Vallejo]. So, the pushback I have received—there's a strategy for that. I thought about that before this thing started.

Have you experienced any similar retaliation or intimidation?

Yes. I think less than other people, because I think there's a sense that it will have [legal] consequences. I can't get into these things, but I will say that threats will not be tolerated. Intimidation is not going to work, harassment is not going to be tolerated, including against other people.

It's not just me saying that. This community has reached an inflection point. It's the families who have been speaking up for years in spite of threats and retaliation and harassment, being ignored and being belittled—including publicly, including at City Council meetings. Being unlawfully ejected from City Hall, in my opinion, [from a meeting that was unlawfully restarted in May 2019](#).

Cesar Chavez said, "Once social change begins, it cannot be reversed. You cannot uneducated the person who has learned to read. You cannot humiliate the person who feels pride, you cannot oppress the people who are not afraid anymore."

Do you feel that's the mission of Open Vallejo, to help the community to get to the point where they don't feel afraid anymore?

I think that already describes this community.

Here's the thing: [the stories reported by Open Vallejo] are things that people knew were probably true. People know that the [Ralph M.] Brown Act [which protects the public's right to attend and participate in meetings of local legislative bodies] is being violated. People know the California Public Records Act [which requires the inspection or release of governmental records to the public upon request] is being violated. People know that the rate of police killings is off the charts, and that many of them are entirely avoidable. Vallejo has an incredibly high rate of shootings by police.

I'm really just proving things so that people can say, "See? This is true."

I think that a lot of people who aren't journalists don't realize how much work you've done to produce these stories. Could you share a little bit of the process that goes into these stories?

Now, we get more tips, but [at launch], it was often looking into everybody and seeing what popped up. So, with the Randy Risner story, it was several months filing public records requests. I wasn't planning on writing it [in January 2020], but the city agendized I think on a Thursday his appointment to be the interim city attorney. And then the vote was set for that Tuesday.

I worked on it a little bit on Friday, as best I could. I went to bed around 1:30 [a.m.], got up at 5:30, flew to Los Angeles, rented a van, helped somebody move ... to Sacramento that day, got home at like 11:30 [p.m.], got back to work a little bit, and then wrote the rest of it on Sunday.

That's an extreme example, because it had to get out there—just so people knew, just so the city council knew, if they didn't already.

The badge story took nine months. It started with a tip from someone—not John Whitney [the veteran Vallejo police captain who was fired soon after pushing for an investigation into the badge-bending practice]. Whitney was a very late conversation in that process. There were concerns about this beyond Vallejo, in other law enforcement agencies.

Other law enforcement agencies knew about this?

Yeah. I've got to be careful here, but let me make a couple of things clear. First of all, the 14 people who allegedly bent their badges—I identified a handful of them—are *not* the same as the so-called "[Fatal 14](#)." There's maybe 40–50 percent overlap. And the 14 that I referenced, those were at least two sources who were eyeball witnesses or really knew, plus photographs that either I made or that I was able to find by spending hours and hours and hours looking at the city's webpage and Facebook and the Vallejo Police Department's Facebook.

There are more. I say it's a clique, but it seems to be a larger tradition than that, and it probably goes further back than I referenced. I'm not in a position to prove that definitively yet. There were many hours of talking to sources—building up trust and checking everything that anybody said to me. And building a database of every known police shooting—there are actually a few that I discovered that the department did not disclose.

Wow.

Yeah. But I built a database of every person shot or shot at and every person killed by some other means [by the police], going as far back as we could. I'm confident in the completeness [going back] to at least 2000. And of course, part of the way through, I started getting threatening messages and all of that.

The Hakeem [Brown] story—I want to make it very, very clear. That was not politically motivated at all. It took 500–1,000 hours to research and write and edit and pass it with my legal counsel. You know, when you’re speaking with survivors, when you’re speaking with other sources who may not want to be identified for safety reasons or professional reasons, that’s something to approach carefully and respectfully, and that takes time. And it just came out when it came out [in mid-October]; that’s when I was able to finish it.

On that note, it’s obvious that your work has had an impact—even if it’s just people saying [you’re a terrorist organization](#)—

[Laughs] Well, that was one person who said that, and now you know why. He also said, “I bet I’m next.” And I was kind of like, “Well, you’re not entirely wrong about that.”

But it’s important! It’s not stuff that people want to hear, but good lord, they have to.

Right. I think it’s widely acknowledged that if you weren’t reporting these stories, they would’ve remained buried. And there’s a good possibility that we would be talking about *Mayor Brown* right now if it weren’t for that story. Knowing that these articles are going to make waves, and for better or worse, that they’re going to upset people, what effect does that have on you and your work?

It is sobering. We choose stories that I believe are solidly in the public interest. We never want to be gratuitous, we never want to be gossipy, we never want to fail to give somebody a chance to tell their side.

All the people named in the badge-bending article got a phone call [at work] and an email and a phone call on their cellphone. I called Sean Kenney and talked to him for a while.

Hakeem Brown threatened me personally and Open Vallejo with a libel lawsuit—I believe without merit—after I reached out for comment a couple times and he ignored me. And then I sent him a list of I believe 44 detailed questions. “Is there some context you want to give? Did this happen? This person alleged this. Would you like to comment or elaborate? Are there things you would like us to know about how you’ve changed?”

And I got one line back that said, “Dear Mr. King, I will respond by the deadline that you gave me.” And then I got a letter from his lawyer.

We are going to be fair to everyone. And the only way we can do that is if we are completely aboveboard and transparent and ethical ourselves. It is an enormous responsibility and one I take seriously.

That’s something I actually want to talk about, because while I think journalism is trending in this direction, you seem unique among news organizations in that you’re very open about what goes on

behind the scenes—you'll tweet about public records requests you've filed, you'll publish city and court documents that you've sourced, you'll release audio files from interviews. Why so much transparency?

The whole point of this is to serve the public. It's not self-glorification or awards. It's not even the scoop, except insofar the scoop is important for impact. It's making sure that people have the information necessary for democratic self-governance.

It's wild. We're 45 minutes away from San Francisco, an hour from Sacramento, but I guess that's just far enough from each media market that it doesn't get a lot of attention. So, it's really just about giving people the information they need so they can choose how their city's run, because it's the people who are sovereign.

One of the most radical things I've read in a long, long time is [the preamble to the Brown Act](#). It reads like a Three Percenter creed. [Laughs] I was like, "Whoa!" But that's what it's supposed to be. [City officials] are public servants.

So, you know, it's for credibility's sake, because some of this stuff—I didn't believe the badge-bending stuff when I first heard it. I had to prove it to myself first.

One of the criticisms about your organization I've heard is that during the first year of Open Vallejo, you didn't publish bylines—nobody knew it was officially you behind the articles. How come you didn't put your name out there from the start?

The original idea behind the anonymity was two-fold. One is—and we see this now—that Open Vallejo is getting called the [Ku Klux] Klan by Councilmember Brown, getting called a terrorist organization. That might chill other people from publishing.

Two is I heard a lot about retaliation, unlawful retaliation, by the government. That was part of the decision.

And then I had an exclusive with Otis R. Taylor with the *San Francisco Chronicle* about our coming out, and for a number of months, that was the reason. It was just honoring that agreement.

[But] I think the works spoke for themselves, as do the ones with the bylines. If you read the Hakeem Brown article—I personally went and got those records, every single one of them. I either went off to Santa Barbara, or I drove up to Yolo [County]. My girlfriend started crying when I was reading the Chana Brown transcripts. I almost did, which I don't do very often.

The point is, it's not about me. It's not about whether we have some Pulitzer Prize-winning writer who does a freelance story for us. It's about the actual work.

But there are lots of great things that are anonymous. There's a great line in a U.S. Supreme Court Case called *McIntyre v. Ohio Elections Commission*. It was about anonymous leafleting, and there was a statute that said you had to identify who you were if you were handing out political leaflets. The Court said,

“Under our Constitution, anonymous pamphleteering is not a pernicious, fraudulent practice, but an honorable tradition of advocacy and of dissent. Anonymity is a shield from the tyranny of the majority. ... It thus exemplifies the purpose behind the Bill of Rights, and of the First Amendment in particular: to protect unpopular individuals from retaliation—and their ideas from suppression—at the hand of an intolerant society.”

Sometimes we exercise elements of our First Amendment rights, and that is the point. A lot of the things happening in Vallejo are things that operationalize civil liberties, civil rights, human rights issues. It's a very active city for rights abuses.

That gets to a point you made in another interview where you called Vallejo is a “uniquely troubled” city. Could you expand on what you mean by that?

I think Vallejo is unique for a number of reasons. According to [Campaign Zero's police scorecard](#), Vallejo police use more sublethal force per arrest than any other [police] department in California's 100 largest cities. Vallejo police kill more people per capita [than anywhere in Northern California](#), and it has the third-highest rate in the entire state.

According to our research—and this is not finalized—it appears that the Vallejo police are responsible for possibly more than 10 percent of all homicides in Vallejo over the last 20 years. That is off the charts. That is maybe twice the rate of other cities.

And then you take the badge bending, and it starts to get maybe a little more insidious. The deepest concerns that were expressed to me by a number of senior law enforcement folks were around incentives. Were shootings happening, or could they begin to happen, because somebody wants a bend?

I haven't written this story yet, but I pulled a bunch of municipal compensation data, and from what I can tell—this is just crunching one year; I want to do at least a 10-year spread—your average Vallejo [city] employee is far better paid than the average employee in any other city in the state. The pension liability and other benefits—it's like a huge spike at the very end, and that's Vallejo. That includes Los Altos and Palo Alto and Brentwood and Beverly Hills.

By any measure, Vallejo is definitely, demonstrably an outlier in a bad way. And then you see policy decisions get made with minimal public input, and they're often questionable in terms of the public interest.

I want to return to one case that you mentioned already—the Willie McCoy shooting. It really sounds like, in terms of the timing and just how violent that shooting was, it really stuck with you.

Willie McCoy was a 20-year-old musician. He was going to Laney College. He had a very tragic childhood—both of his parents died when he was very young.

This is a guy who fell asleep in his car in a Taco Bell drive-thru, and officers were called on a wellness check. These officers get there, and there's allegedly a gun in his lap—there are crime scene photographs consistent with that—but the kid is out cold. Meanwhile, the car is blocked in by at least one SUV. There's a cinderblock wall to his right, there's the Taco Bell on the left—he's not going anywhere.

[More] officers keep showing up. Inevitably, he starts to stir and scratches his left shoulder with his right hand. [The police] scream at him for three seconds, and then fire at him for 3.5 seconds.

It's almost merciful that he never woke up. You're sitting there, watching it—have you ever seen it?

Yeah, I have.

I don't recommend people watch it. I think the most disturbing thing is not even the moment of the shooting, but the several minutes of really bizarre decisions and commentary [beforehand]. It seems very avoidable, and that's not just me saying that. From a tactical point of view, time and distance, right? You back off, you block him in, you vacate the Taco Bell. You yell through a bullhorn or shoot a beanbag at his car window. If he gets out, that's one thing, but he was asleep.

I made several requests of the city of Vallejo for [the police body cam] footage. The city denied them and said they were exempt [from the California Public Records Act]. Then Councilmember Brown held another town hall where he was asked about it, and he mentioned that he had seen the video.

That's a waiver of the California Public Records Act. There's a case called the [Black Panther Party v. Kehoe](#) that says the government cannot selectively disclose public records, and that waives all exemptions. So, I made that argument and a few days later, the city released the footage.

It's a terrible, terrible incident that I think could've been avoided. And then you start to realize from there how prevalent police shootings are in Vallejo.

Again, I don't think people should watch it, because it's really upsetting—even if you think the officers are justified. But it's hard to watch that and think there weren't other options.

That got me interested in what the heck was going on—that and the aggressive reactions from Councilmember Brown and [former] City Attorney [Claudia] Quintana. I asked questions, and that led to public records requests, and that led to me learning things and people reaching out. And the more I learned, the worse it got.

To take this in a slightly different direction—a sentiment I've heard over and over again from some Vallejoans, it really feels like they've been the punching bag of California since 2008, if not before—

Before. Having grown up there, definitely before.

Yeah. And they're sick and tired of feeling like the city's getting kicked when it's down, and to them, it feels like Open Vallejo is piling on. How do you respond to that?

You cannot have reconciliation without truth. You can't change until you acknowledge it. This is not about making Vallejo the butt of a joke. This is hopefully doing work that says Black and brown lives matter, because they do.

The city—pretty much every single decision I've seen them make is not a great, well-thought-out decision. They don't seem to be taking serious steps to address the problems; they just want to stop talking about it.

All that does is exacerbate the problems. We're exposing what is wrong, so that we can do better. It's like [Albert] Camus said: "Freedom is nothing else but a chance to be better."

Again, these are things that folks in the community have been saying for years, and it shouldn't take me echoing them for elected officials and administrators and police leaders and the press and other state and federal lawmakers to get them to listen. But if that's what it takes, then it's a good use of my time and energy.

Well, I think your work shows the value of local news media in shining a light on these issues. And you've been explicit about how you believe Vallejo is a "news desert"—an area with limited access to credible and high-quality news sources—and that you, in your own small way, want to fix that. What lessons have you learned from the past two years about how to solve this issue?

I think one of the things [we've learned] is always be fair. By that I mean really think about, deep down, how can we always do the most ethical thing.

I send back [donations] to people. We're new, we're tiny. Sustainable? I don't know, maybe we will be, and I think we're earning that with the work we're doing—and the community has been very, very generous. But I think that one of things is to be completely aboveboard. You couldn't do this work if you weren't.

I've returned money to a family member of a city councilmember twice. The first time, I was like, "Thank you, but we can't, even though this doesn't actually violate our donation policy." And then we got another one! "No, really, no thank you!" A friend of mine is running for local office in a city hundreds and hundreds of miles away and sent us \$5. And I was like, "Thank you so much, [but] this actually does violate our donation policy. I have to return your \$5." Another person donated before, and that was fine, but they ended up being a source through circumstance and had recently donated a second time, and we had to give it back, even though we need it.

I think those kind of decisions will pay off in the long term. The editorial, the financial—the ethics just have to be there. We're not beholden to anyone; we don't have to hold back if something touches upon the established order of something.

Open Vallejo is actually going to be the first permanent project of the Informed California Foundation, which is the attendant 501(c)(3) I founded. The idea is—without further harming struggling small

newspapers—to study almost scientifically what works and what doesn't work as well, and then try to distill that down into something as universal as possible that can be turned into [free] toolkits and trainings that people can repurpose in their own communities.

We're just trying to be entirely independent. We're telling truths that are even uncomfortable for us. It's an experiment; we'll see if it works.

And for the city of Vallejo—what do you hope to accomplish?

Ultimately, my hope is that Open Vallejo will disincentivize bad behavior, and folks who want to get into public service will do so because they want to get into public service.

I think there are going to be other consequences for some of this stuff—potentially legal consequences, financial consequences. In Bell, California, which [got raided by the FBI and people went to state prison](#)—it was a mess. But the activists ended up on city council. They have enormous problems to work through. They're going to spend many, many years trying to get that city on the right path, but at least now, there are people with the best intentions working hard to do so.

It's not just me working on [Open Vallejo]. Brian Krans did amazing work on the Season 1 of the [Open Vallejo] podcast. Scott Morris wrote this incredible piece analyzing what happens to officers who end up costing the city money in these lawsuits, and [two-thirds of them get promoted or get an award](#). We have a number of contributors who do incredible work.

Honestly, it's a sense of duty. I'm very lucky to be from here. It's the most fascinating thing I've ever done. And I think the impact has been enormous: [The city attorney \[Claudia Quintana\] retired](#) five years early in a major blow to her pension. Risner is [not the city attorney](#). There are police officers under investigation, [including in other cities](#), because of this work. The [stingray \[a cellular surveillance tool for police use\] that Vallejo bought](#)—I found that by accident. I was just going through the agenda items, and I was like, “A stingray? I know what that is, I teach privacy law. What the heck?”

These conversations are happening. People feel a sense of empowerment. It's not like I'm empowering anybody; it's that people are wielding the power they already have. They're feeling more comfortable in their power.

To end on something lighter: What do you like to do in Vallejo?

Work all the time. [Laughs] I loved Bud's Giant Burgers as a kid. I went to Blue Rock Springs [Park] a lot.

The people here are incredible. I've been to a lot of places. I've traveled internationally for work; I lived in [Washington, D.C.], I lived in London. No joke, Vallejo is amazing.

I'm looking forward to the day where everybody—including police officers—can feel safe and included in the community. I'm really hopeful we can get to a place where Vallejo has the governance and the peace and sense of community that everybody really wants and deserves.

Soon after this interview, Open Vallejo published an investigative report revealing that Vallejo City Manager Greg Nyhoff pushed for altered terms that benefited the developers of the Mare Island megaproject [after undisclosed meetings with executives from those same developers](#). We followed up with King to discuss this latest story.

So, Open Vallejo has dropped yet another story that's creating quite a stir.

That's the idea.

Definitely. Just to start, how did this story come about?

The three fired high-level city employees [Will Morat, Slater Matzke, and Joanna Altman], much like Captain John Whitney, tried to express concerns about matters within the city—in this case, about the Mare Island deal as well as some acts of alleged discrimination within city hall. They were made to participate in [a city] investigation of Greg Nyhoff in which he was ultimately cleared, and they were subsequently fired on the same day [on April 23, 2020].

Once they were fired, they came to us. Basically, they wanted to alert the public about their concerns. We have been working on this story for several months now.

One thing that really stood out to me, especially the ending of the article, is just how brazen the behavior and attitudes of the people involved—the complete indifference to transparency and the improper, if not illegal, use of government power.

I don't want to give you a cliché that it was shocking but unsurprising, but what's so compelling to me is how familiar that response has become. Just the “what are you going to do about it?” mentality that seems to pervade many, if not most or all, of the decisions we see coming out of the city. You would think there might be more variation based on different circumstances, different departments, but we see that time and time again from the city, as if there will never be any consequences for actual or alleged misconduct.

Can they change? Absolutely. But right now, it is constant.

There's a note in the article about how if the City Council doesn't like what Nyhoff is doing, they can do something about it. So, why don't they?

That's a very good question, and it's a hard one to answer. Whether it's this situation or others, it seems like the City Council has largely thrown in its lot with the status quo—even when they're now getting a great deal of coverage from [Open Vallejo] and from national, international publications.

One thing I learned early on was that the ordinary mechanisms of pointing out suboptimal conditions and the government responding to those, either out of newfound awareness or even shame, none of that seems to work very well in Vallejo.

Yet, in the extreme cases, it kind of does work. You see people retiring—for example, the former City Attorney Quintana. You don't see the more subtle responses of a city trying to do the right thing. I don't know why, but I know that's not what we're seeking to accomplish at this point.

What are you seeking to accomplish?

Impact. Indictments, retirements, investigations, new laws, ballot initiatives. We're strictly nonpartisan, we're independent. We point out when things are wrong, and then hopefully our work gives residents the information they need for democratic self-governance—to push for investigations, to hold hearings, to protest.

It seems like, outside of the lawsuit being filed by the former three employees, there isn't much legal recourse against Nyhoff's actions unless the City Council decides to do something about it. [Note: Late last month, the City Council [unanimously approved](#) Nyhoff's changes to the proposed Mare Island deal.] Knowing that there isn't an easy answer for how to fix the things you're covering in this reporting—how do you and your team deal with that?

The reason I founded Open Vallejo ... is that this is not the kind of situation where any one-off story or series of stories is going to be enough. You have to have a dedicated newsroom with a long-term approach of uncovering what needs to be fixed, until ultimately—hopefully, ideally—you have a model open city.

Vallejo is very far from that, but that's why I felt that the best or most useful thing I could contribute was a dedicated, long-term, investigative project to stay on these stories and these actors, so that there's accountability but also a realignment of incentives towards good government. We want to make it not worth it to engage in either illegal or unethical or unseemly or wasteful government.

Vallejoans deserve great government. Vallejoans deserve government that represents this diverse and amazing community. I'm not expecting to change anything overnight—in fact, I'm shocked by the impact we've already had—but it's the follow-through that's going to be critical to changing things.

Read King's latest work at openvallejo.org.

The Preamble to the Brown Act

In enacting this chapter, the Legislature finds and declares that the public commissions, boards and councils and the other public agencies in this State exist to aid in the conduct of the people's business. It is the intent of the law that their actions be taken openly and that their deliberations be conducted openly.

The people of this State do not yield their sovereignty to the agencies which serve them. The people, in delegating authority, do not give their public servants the right to decide what is good for the people to know and what is not good for them to know. The people insist on remaining informed so that they may retain control over the instruments they have created.



Heavy Losses: Turning Pain Into Power

January 27, 2021

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October 01, 2020

