Energy boost: the Asbury Park Press plummeted after Gannett bought it from independent ownership. Then an aggressive editor named Skip Hidlay look over. Now the paper is known for its investigative edge, exemplified by its award-winning, 72-article series on how New Jersey legislators profit from their jobs.

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On Sunday, September 21, 2003, the Asbury Park Press launched a compelling series titled "Profiting from Public Service: How Many N.J. Legislators Exploit the System." For eight days, the newspaper detailed abuses and provided examples that filled 38 pages with 72 stories. The series was dispatched over the Gannett wire to the chain's six other New Jersey papers, which had all contributed at least one reporter to a five-month effort spearheaded by the Press and captained by its energetic new executive editor, William C. Hidlay.

Among the findings: A third of the 120 Senate and Assembly members held at least one other public job in addition to their $49,000-a-year legislative posts, which allowed them to qualify for yearly state pensions as high as $100,000 when they retire. Those same lawmakers could legally skip work for days at a time for legislative business. No-bid state contracts to handle bond sales were routinely awarded by state agencies to politically connected law firms that "can then plow part of the proceeds back to the political parties through campaign contributions." Almost one in five lawmakers had at least one family member on the payroll. The Legislature's financial disclosure laws, among the weakest in the nation, allowed members "to hide their business clients," and there were virtually no laws to prevent ethics violations.

None of these practices was illegal. But they were appalling. The paper labeled it "legislated greed."

The Press followed up the series with eight days of impassioned editorials demanding major reforms. The New Jersey Legislature, the paper said, was "a cesspool of greedy, self-serving politicians," interested only "in getting rich off of your tax dollars and making sure you don't know it."

Timed to run before the November election and boosted by commentary on a Trenton radio station, the series unleashed a fresh tide of voter rage among already angry New Jerseyans. If you live in the Garden State, explains Joseph Farren, director of communications for the Senate Republicans, "You're paying the highest property taxes in the country, high auto insurance rates and then you find out the guys and gals you elected are taking your money. It was the last straw."

Depending on whom you count, five or six incumbent legislators went down on ethics issues, including an influential Republican state senator in the Press' home district, who was also the copresident of the Senate. A Republican Party poll in the spring showed that the issue ranked second only to property taxes among voter concerns.

During the 2004 journalism awards harvest, the series won two lucrative prizes, the $35,000 Selden Ring Award for Investigative Reporting from the USC Annenberg School for Communication and the $25,000 Farfel Prize for Excellence in Investigative Reporting from the Scripps Howard Foundation, plus the National Headliner Award for Public Service and the SPJ/SDX National Award for Public Service for papers with more than 100,000 circulation. In August the Associated Press Managing Editors named the series its winner for public service in the 50,000-plus-circulation category, trumping entries...

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