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Wednesday, Jan 23, 2000

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Advocates say crash records should be open

AUSTIN (AP) — A state law limiting access to traffic crash records violates time-honored public information traditions in Texas and should remain on hold indefinitely, newspaper and freedom of information advocates said yesterday.

The Texas Daily Newspaper Association and the Texas Press Association asked Travis County District Judge Paul Davis to extend an injunction against the law passed by the Legislature in 1997. Davis granted the original injunction in the fall of that year.

Under the law, anyone seeking information about a traffic wreck must know the name of at least one person involved and either the location or date of the wreck.

The law also limits public access to motor vehicle records that contain personal information about Texans and would make it illegal for such information to be posted on the Internet without permission from the person involved.

"The restrictions would severely limit the ability of newspapers and television stations to report the news," Dolph Tillotson, president and publisher of *The Galveston County Daily News*, said.

"Public records in Texas are not only for the media. They are for the public in general," he said.

"The law was passed to protect personal information that people might want to keep private, such as addresses and driving records," Assistant Attorney General Heather Horton said.

Lawmakers hoped to prevent ambulance chasing by attorneys and other groups, such as chiropractors who might use random accident information to solicit clients.

"There is a tension between the right to know and the right to privacy. That's what this case is about," Horton said.

News organizations are concerned the Internet provisions would prohibit them from putting some stories in their online editions.

Under the law, information legally obtained and printed in the newspaper could be prohibited from distribution on the Internet and perhaps even by news services, such as The Associated Press, according to lawyers for the news groups.

News organizations also worry the law could prevent them from making their archives available to the public. Some archived stories would likely include information falling under the law's restrictions.

"If allowed to proceed, the law could force newspapers to censor or pull their archives from their Websites altogether," Tony Pederson, managing editor and a vice president of the *Houston Chronicle*, said.

Any interest of privacy in accident information would be limited and any event that happens in a public thoroughfare in plain view should be regarded as public information, the news groups said.

Bush credits spiritual awakening for putting end to drinking habit

WASHINGTON (AP) — His footsteps slowed by a nagging hangover, George W. Bush paid little heed to the majestic Rockies rising nearby as he made his daily three-mile run.

He was feeling worse than usual after a boisterous night of drinking with friends.

The night before, Bush, his wife and a half-dozen close friends from Midland, Texas, had enjoyed a festive dinner at the elegant Broadmoor resort in Colorado Springs, Colo., ordering five or six bottles of a pricey Cabernet Sauvignon as they raised their glasses in successive toasts.

They were there that July 1986 weekend to celebrate the 40th birthdays of Bush and a pal, Midland oilman Don Evans.

The evening, which came after 18 holes of golf and a visit to the Air Force Academy's chapel, was "nothing crazy," Evans recalled, just a group of friends, fueled by wine, taking sentimental stock of their lives.

But the aftereffects dogged Bush's footsteps the next day. "This run was different," he recalled in his recent autobiography.

About halfway through, he made a decision: He would quit drinking.

When he told his wife Laura, she was skeptical. "I'm not sure she believed me, at first," said Bush, who was known for being the life of the party since his days as a frat boy at Yale.

A spiritual awakening that had begun a year earlier "helped me quit drinking," Bush, 53, said in a recent interview with The Associated Press. So did a growing realization that drinking could jeopardize his relationships, his health and his career. Bush's Texas oil business was going through tough times as well, with severely depressed oil prices bringing an uncomfortable level of debt.

Friends have suggested that Bush's decision to quit drinking was driven partly by concern that he not do anything to embarrass his father, George Bush, the vice president who was gearing up for a run for the White House.

The younger Bush, now in the midst of his own campaign, offers a different explanation.

"I am a person who enjoys life, and for years, I enjoyed having a few drinks," the Texas governor wrote in his book. "But gradually, drinking began to compete with my energy. I'd be a step slower getting up. My daily runs seemed harder after a few too many drinks the night before."

Bush, who had a fondness for bourbon and beer, also had some awkward run-ins while drinking.

In one episode, *The Wall Street Journal's* then-Washington bureau chief, Al Hunt, recalled being accosted by a "clearly lubricated" Bush in a Dallas restaurant in 1986, and sworn at for some perceived slight against Bush's father. Bush called Hunt to

apologize after the anecdote surfaced in his autobiography, *First Son*, published in 1999.

Bush credits his wife, who had been helping him to quit drinking, with helping him. Bush says he is solely responsible.

"Everyone quits everything by themselves," Bush said in an interview. "So he did that. George disciplined."

"Gradually drinking began to compete with my energy. I'd be a step slower getting up."

The decision, which Bush describes as a point in his life, came during an unusually speculative period.

The previous summer of 1985, a fire started about religion with the Rev. Billy Graham and a Bush family retreat in Kennebunkport, Maine, launched Bush on a spiritual quest that first sharpened his interest in public service.

"I don't remember the exact words, but the power of his example," the younger Bush said.

Bush had long attended church, taught Sunday school and served on church committees. But it was not until the meeting with Graham that he began to deepen his faith in what he called his study classmate, Don Jones, called "a long steep hill."

"I think George sensed that there was a void in his life," said Jones, a Midland oil and natural gas company executive. "I think a lot of people who are Christians or proclaim to be Christians and truly haven't been converted."

Bush, who describes Graham as his mentor, said the famous evangelist "planted a seed in my heart that grew over time."

In an interview at his Austin campaign headquarters, Bush said: "I was a married man with kids, prior to forty. I'd been a Sunday school teacher, I'd been a Little League coach, a business. I had a life that was a responsible life. There was something missing."

"My acceptance of Christ has provided a sense of comfort and strength, a renewed faith that I hadn't had in my life prior to that."

Bush, who has been faulted by some for turning religion into politics by stating that Jesus was the most influential thinker in his life, rejected the criticism.

Second death row inmate executed in Texas by lethal injection this year

HUNTSVILLE (AP) — Twenty-three hours into his last parole violation and footsore from a long walk with no destination, Spencer Corey Goodman saw in a red Cadillac a clean break from his past.

It was July 2, 1991, and Goodman, a twice-convicted felon, by then was almost a full day overdue at the Houston halfway house where he was supposed to report after his release from a San Antonio parole center.

Goodman had walked west on Interstate 10, spent a restless night by the train tracks and walked all the next day until he came upon Cecile Ham's Cadillac parked at a pharmacy in west Houston.

"I was going to get out of Houston and say, 'I'm starting over,' just get away from Houston," Goodman said recently.

"Like a dummy, I didn't think about reporting again."
The choice Goodman made more

than eight years ago led him to the death chamber, where he was scheduled to receive a lethal injection yesterday for killing Ham, 48, the wife of ZZ top manager Bill Ham.

When she returned to her car and stepped into the driver's seat, Goodman slammed his fist into her neck, knocked her unconscious and pushed her limp body to the floor.

After driving a few miles, Goodman later told investigators, he "then used martial arts and broke the lady's neck."
His victim's body in the trunk and her

credit cards in his wallet, Goodman took off for a month before police captured him in Eagle County, Colo., on Aug. 7, 1991, and solved what had until then been "Ham's disappearance."

Goodman, 31, would be the second Texas death row inmate executed this year and the 201st since capital punishment resumed in the state in 1982.

The execution is also the second of seven scheduled for January, the busiest month since May and June 1997, when eight inmates each were killed.

Goodman's appeal and a request to stay the execution are pending before the Supreme Court.
A Fort Bend County jury convicted and sentenced him to death on June 10.
While testifying at his trial, Goodman admitted knocking out Ham, but breaking her neck or planning to kill her.

"He broke a woman's neck with his bare hands because he didn't feel like walking."

— Fred Felman
Assistant district attorney

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