

Production Note: The Tip Off was produced as an audio series. If possible, we encourage you to listen to this episode wherever you get your podcasts. The following transcript is for reference only and may contain typos. Please confirm accuracy before quoting.

---

**Maeve:** Patrick Lohmann, a journalist from New York State, had been on the lookout for one particular man for weeks. He had the feeling this guy may have vital information about a shady group he was looking into. He didn't have much to go on. He had seen a photo of him on a Facebook page.

**Patrick:** And all I saw was a kind of a strange, filtered photograph. And the name on the Facebook was "Trigger Hippie." And that's all I knew about this person.

**Maeve:** Despite his best efforts, Patrick had had no luck making contact. But he couldn't shake the feeling that this "Trigger Hippie," might be the key to all of it.

Then, one day, Patrick was leaving the office...

**Patrick:** ...to go to lunch. And I walked across the street. And I see the guy standing there in the street. And I knew I had to talk to him. But I didn't have anything to say except, "Excuse me, sir, are you Trigger Hippie?" And he said, "Uh Yeah, I am."

**Maeve:** Patrick had found his man.

**Patrick:** And he told such a remarkable story.

**Maeve:** This fateful run-in marks just a single piece of a much larger puzzle – one that would ultimately take not only Patrick, but a fellow local reporter, to fully piece together. But we don't start here. I'm Maeve McClenaghan, as ever, we start with the tip off.

Back in 2018, Patrick Lohmann worked at [syracuse.com](http://syracuse.com), and its paper, the *Post-Standard*, an outlet that covers Syracuse and the surrounding area of Central New York State. At that time, Patrick was working mostly on crime stories. But that didn't stop him picking up leads wherever he could get them. And as a known journalist, he'd often find people he'd bump into, pitching him ideas.

**Patrick:** And you know you kind of learn at some point not to believe it right away. So you learn to talk yourself out of things, not to get your hopes up too much.

**Maeve:** So it was one day in summer that Patrick was enjoying the warm weather. He went to sit out on the shared patio area of his apartment complex. Out there, too, was the building manager.

**Patrick:** He was having a cigarette, and I was sipping a beer.

**Maeve:** The two started chatting away about this and that. Patrick's building manager was known to be a bit of a wild storyteller.

**Patrick:** He had lived an interesting life. And he was a recovering alcoholic. And he was kind of going through some of the wild experiences he'd had in Syracuse and just mentioned, "You know, you really got to do a story about the Butternutters." He said, "Those guys are crazy." So it just seemed like another crazy thing coming out of his mouth.

**Maeve:** He started laying out all these interesting details of an organisation called "the Syracuse Group," who also called themselves, "the Butternutters," a kind of non-official Alcoholics Anonymous, a place for people struggling with addiction. But this man had been to the group's sessions, and seen some worrying things.

**Patrick:** Stories about an immense amount of control over a newcomer, or someone who's recently getting off of alcohol or drugs.

**Maeve:** For example, the group had told a friend of his to...

**Patrick:** ...stop taking his bipolar medication.

**Maeve:** The building manager went on and on, talking about the things this group and made him and others do. As Patrick headed inside that evening, he was intrigued. The way the building manager had been talking, the group was acting in a potentially dangerous way. So, back in the office, he started to have a look around. As he dug into the origins of the group's peculiar name, he learned that they were known colloquially as "the Butternutters," because their centre was on Butternut Street. They had a

website, branding, and had been running since the '90s. Surely, if this group was really that harmful, someone would have raised issues before.

**Patrick:** There was a lot of kind of strange internet detritus about the group, but nothing... no one had written anything about them ever.

**Maeve:** And yet, there was one major find. There on the group's website, a potential goldmine. Dozens and dozens of recordings from the group's meetings.

**Patrick:** It would start and there would be, like, a rambunctious sound of inside the meeting hall. Then they would stop, and in unison they would say the AA prayer and then it would fall completely silent as they were just these, like, riveted audience members listening to these people speaking about their experiences with sobriety, and I was just interested in them as kind of pieces of audio I'd never really heard before.

**Maeve:** This was highly unusual. Addiction support meetings are usually really secretive. To Patrick, it was a red flag that this group was acting in a strange manner.

Patrick pulled down files, saving them to his hard drive. In any spare moment, he would open one up and listen, straining to pick out any names or details. But let's leave Patrick for a moment.

Across town, another reporter is about to stumble upon the same story, and in doing so, she'll help crack everything wide open.

**Marnie:** My name is Marnie Eisenstadt, and I'm a reporter.

**Maeve:** Marnie worked for the same paper as Patrick, though her beat covered things like social services, so the two didn't interact all that much. One day, Marnie was out, working on a story about mental health issues faced by students in high pressure medical schools.

**Marnie:** There was a high suicide rate among med students, especially in the US.

**Maeve:** She was talking to the parents of a brilliant young student, Ben Kress, who had died by suicide.

Marnie: And at one point, the moms are talking about his struggles with substance abuse and his struggles with depression and how he'd recently started taking a new antidepressant and had a new therapist. And how he started going to an AA group. And the mom was like, "It's this crazy place called the Butternutters."

**Maeve:** Marnie jotted down the name, but there was plenty more to talk about. So she didn't think too much more about it. That was, until she was back in the office later. And by chance, mentioned details of the interview to the paper's health reporter.

Marnie: And I said, "Have you ever heard of this place? It's called, it's like called, the Butternutters? Am I saying that...? I don't even know." You know, I had, I had no familiarity with it at all. And he goes, "Hang on. I think Pat has been talking to some people from there."

**Maeve:** It was an incredible moment. Two reporters at the same paper coming to the story from different angles.

Patrick had heard all these worrying rumours about practices of the group. And now Marnie had found someone who had died after going there. They knew they had to work together. But where to start? Addiction support groups are shrouded in secrecy. Members of organisations like AA are not supposed to reveal the names of fellow members. But Marnie and Patrick knew they were going to have to find as many people as they could to talk to. So they began by trawling through the recordings that Patrick had found and pulled down.

Marnie: And we split them up, but it's just hours and hours and hours of a lot of mundane stuff, but then tucked in there – just crazy... you know, the stuff that we're looking for, then listening to these interactions happen. And you can hear the powerplay.

**Maeve:** They would get glimpses of people – a first name here, maybe the initial of a surname there. It was a start. Then, Patrick had an ingenious idea.

**Patrick:** Google would have reviews, like if you go and you're like, trying to figure out whether this restaurant is nice or not.

**Maeve:** Patrick wondered. He had the address of the hall the group used. So he put it into Google Maps. And there in the reviews, the hall...

**Patrick:** ...had a bunch of reviews on it. And so one of the first ones I saw was, just like a one-star review.

**Maeve:** The person who left this review had gone by the name King Makis. Looking around, Patrick found a SoundCloud user with the same name, a rapper.

**Patrick:** And then from SoundCloud, I found his Facebook, and then that was linked to his name: Marcus Suraci.

**Maeve:** Boom, a name. Excited, Patrick fired off a Facebook message.

**Patrick:** "Hey, I found your Google review. Can we meet up to talk about this?"

**Maeve:** It took a while to connect properly. Marcus was having some issues and kept going quiet. But when they finally did, it was worth the wait.

**Marcus:** I was like the Syracuse Group super soldier. I mean, you couldn't ask for a better clay to mould – you know what I'm saying? You know, this group is hiding behind what AA has worked so hard to build. And they're shady and creepy.

**Maeve:** At this point, Marnie and Patrick had gone to their editor and pitched the story. It was still early days. They didn't have all that much yet. But they were confident.

**Marnie:** Sometimes I promise without a plan, and then we figure it out. I was just like, "We're gonna do this." I think in all of journalism, there is some of that, right? Like, you know, every day is a deadline for something. And so sometimes you're just like, "This is so good, we'll get it, we'll get it, we'll get it."

**Maeve:** The editor agreed. It sounded exciting. He was in.

**Marnie:** For a while we were doing other stuff. And then they said, "No, just do this," which is, oh I'm Jewish, but it's like Christmas morning. And not only just do this, but they gave us every video resource.

**Maeve:** The pair started to hunt down anyone they could who had ever been to the Butternutters group. And each time they found someone, they ended up with more leads.

Marnie: Each person... each dot had, you know, five dots going out from it. And we struck out with tonnes. But we were also successful with so many of them.

**Maeve:** Patrick had made great progress with finding people online. And in fact, he had found an unlikely helper.

**Patrick:** Facebook's algorithm knew that I was interested in pages I'd already seen.

**Maeve:** Every time Patrick would find someone on Facebook who had been or was still going to the Butternutters group, Facebook would suggest someone else who he might want to befriend.

**Patrick:** Just because I'd looked at their profile before maybe once or twice.

**Maeve:** But if that makes it sound easy, it wasn't. People took the rules of the group seriously. Even those with grave concerns about how the group was run weren't sure whether they should talk.

Marnie: And so every person we talked to, you know, they would say, "Well... it is really important, but I'm betraying people, I'm breaking a promise." And so both of us had to do a lot of... I don't want to say convincing, but you really had to talk people through why what we were doing trumped their promise, it was more important than that. And it was a hard sell.

And some of that is maybe why this took us so long, because each interview, each person, that conversation and building that trust, that's days sometimes. That's a million "Please talk to me."

**Maeve:** But Marnie is nothing, if not persuasive. There was one guy she really wanted to hear from.

Marnie: He said no so many times. I think Pat initially made contact with him and he said no. And then I tried. And he said, "No." And I said, "Just meet me. Meet me and decide." And he's like, "I'll talk to you. But I won't talk to you on the record. And I'm

not sure what I want to tell you." And, you know, by the end of it, we're like sharing a plate of French fries. And he's telling me about his life. He was so torn, because he knew he was treated badly, and he knew people he really cared about were treated badly. But I think for people who are in recovery, where it's all about trust... he didn't want to break his promise. It's an even bigger ask.

**Maeve:** Eventually he agreed to talk. He even said he'd be filmed for the video. But then...

Marnie: ...he said, "I can't do it. I'm not going to do it."

And we had it all set up. And I said, "Well, how about we just talk about why you're not going to do it."

He said, "I don't even... why would I want to tell you why I'm not going to do it?"

And I said, "Because I'm going to convince you to do it."

And he said, "You're not. You're just not."

And I said, "I am, so let's just sit down. You tell me why you think you shouldn't do it, and I'll tell you why I think you should, and we'll just see how it goes."

And so, at the end of it, he said he would do it. But we couldn't, even in profile, disclose his identity even there. And he had a sort of a distinctive profile.

I could not let him leave and say, "Come back tomorrow, we'll set it up." Like, every single one of these interviews, you just, you've got to do it when the person is there. You cannot... There's no rescheduling.

And I said, "Well, we'll get a hat, we'll find your hat."

And I'm like "Oh, don't worry. I'll be right back." And so I'm running around our building. "Does anyone have a hat? Does anyone have any kind of hat? Does anyone

have a hat? Just give me your hat." And, you know, we found him a hat. And he was great.

**Maeve:** When he did start talking on camera his story was really powerful.

**Source (from video):** They told my best friend in the programme to throw out all of his medication, including his aspirin. And if he didn't, they were going to come over and do it for him. My mental health just completely plummeted and I ended up going to the psych ER, and I was suicidal.

**Maeve:** One by one, they were finding people with vital insights into what went on at the centre. Some took hours of persuading. Others seemed to fall into their laps.

Remember Patrick, walking out of the newspaper office building only to spot a guy had found on Facebook, the guy known online as "Trigger Hippie"?

**Patrick:** And he's an incredibly unique-looking person. He's in the story, his name is Bob Sparkman. He calls himself Syracuse's Mick Jagger. And then I ran back to the office and grabbed Marnie, and we just talked to him. And he told such a remarkable story about, you know, being in that group for 20 years and being sort of part of this operation that was telling people to stop taking their meds, that was really taking over control of people's lives.

**Bob:** And someone came in and I began to sponsor them, and they were on medication. I would tell them, "Soon, work with your doctor and get weaned off the medication. And let's see how it goes, not being on medication, and not drinking or drugging and sobriety. And if it goes okay, if it goes well, then good. You stay off the medication. If it does not go well, then you get back on the medication." Other group members... their way of thinking was no medications. Period. You stay on medications, you leave, you go. My sponsor, in particular, Ralph C. turned his back on me because I was at that point taking antidepressants to function.

**Maeve:** Slowly, the pair had built up a shocking picture of a group who pressured addicts who came to them for help to give up any medication they were on. Undertaking overnight cold turkey detoxes without medical support. They had found at least three people who had died while attending the group. They worried there could be more. People had told them about watching others collapse and have seizures while

at the centre. Patrick had put in a Freedom of Information request about police and ambulance call-outs, but much of it had been refused. So Marnie took decisive action. She went to a police chief directly.

Marnie: I just went into his office and I was like, "Oh, you have him on the screen. Can I see?" I mean, like the lesson here is just ask. "Can I see? Oh, can I see more?"

**Maeve:** The chief read from the screen, giving her vital information, not just about how many police call-outs had happened, but what had been found when they got there. There had been three reports in three years of people having seizures, apparently while going through cold turkey detox. The practice of overseeing alcoholics as they detox is against AA rules. Patrick and Marnie discovered that what the Butternutters did was also likely against the law. Detox facilities have to be licensed by the State Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services. And the group had no such licence.

The reporting team was working well. Patrick and Marnie were becoming a great partnership.

**Patrick:** And we would just kind of update each other and say, like, "Look at this amazing new thing we just learned." Or "Do you remember that guy from four months ago? He finally got back to me." No structure was needed, because we were both just so interested and just enjoyed telling each other about it enough that the ball just kind of kept itself rolling in that way.

**Maeve:** Months had passed, and the reporters had spoken to around 50 people who had direct experience of the Butternutters group. The filming for the video had gone well. But there was one more thing they thought they might try. The published audio recordings were one thing, but could they get any visual footage from inside the building?

**Patrick:** So we knew we needed if nothing else, images from inside the place.

**Maeve:** But there was a problem. While they tried to be discreet in their interviews, both reporters were sure the top officials of the group would be on the lookout for them.

**Patrick:** We knew that we couldn't just walk in there, even though it's a quasi-public sort of thing. So we, you know, so one of our photographers, just sort of on a whim, bought a buttonhole camera from Amazon. We knew that one of our sources would be willing to go in, you know, he hadn't burned his bridges there. And that he knew that if he just showed up with a box of pastries that he'd be welcomed in, and get to hang out and just poke around.

So he showed up, but he was wearing a t-shirt. And so he had no buttons. So we had to run to all these different shops, and we were downtown Syracuse, which has a lot of high-end, kind of higher-end places. And, you know, we were looking at spending like \$100 on a shirt that we were going to kind of mangle anyway. And finally we found one in one of the shops, and we ran it up. And so what we did was, we tried to cut a buttonhole into the shirt pocket. And it was incredibly difficult, because we're not very precise in this way.

**Maeve:** Finally, they managed to get the camera hidden in the shirt. Their source headed in undercover, armed with a box of pastries to smooth his return. But when they checked the footage later...

**Patrick:** ...it turns out it was a really crappy camera from Amazon, and it just didn't work.

**Marnie:** It wasn't good enough. And we were like, "So... Can you go back? Can you bring some more pastries? Do you think they'll let you in a second time?"

**Maeve:** They did go back. And this time, they got the footage they needed.

Marnie and Patrick have almost all they need now. But there are still a few bits of the puzzle missing. The Butternutters had been operating for decades. They were on the radar of many different authorities, including the drug courts, who sent a lot of people their way.

**Patrick:** It was kind of close to the courthouse. And the drug courts, as part of people's court, required a programme to stay out of jail. They would have to prove that they had gone to an AA meeting, or something like it.

**Maeve:** So courts were sending people to this group, who were operating under the

auspices of being an official AA group. And yet, these rumours were swirling around about what went on there. The reporters then heard just how lax regulations were from central AA officials.

**Patrick:** It doesn't take much to call yourself an AA group. It doesn't take much to continue to meet, get yourself on a schedule, to be invited to rehabs to talk about your philosophy, you know, and to be kind of entrusted by society and by government and other institutions for care of very vulnerable people.

**Maeve:** Patrick and Marnie had been trying to talk to medical experts, too – people who were treating and working with addicts. But that was harder than they thought it would be.

**Patrick:** So the attitude that we encountered when we were trying to find people to say, you know, "What do you know about this group?" They would say, "Oh, yeah, we know about it, but we're worried that we would do anything that could stigmatise AA."

Basically, it was like we rely so much on AA, they're a huge force multiplier that we don't have to pay for at all, you know. So the last thing we want to do is damage our ability to send people to AA or try to add any more oversight on our part of those groups.

**Marnie:** But I think, also, what you do when you're doing something like this is you try every damn door. You try every door you can. And that's what we did.

**Maeve:** Finally, Marnie found a doctor who was willing to talk to her: Dr. Tolani Ajagbe, Chief of Psychiatry at a local hospital. And talk, he did.

**Dr. Ajagbe:** I think the practice over there is dangerous. I don't think they're mainstream AA. I don't think that's what AA is about...

**Marnie:** And he just kept talking. And so I just kept asking. And he went so completely there. And that's one of those moments where you just sit back and you're like, "Oh, great. Keep talking." And then he, you know, took every follow up question after that. And I think he had just seen people who were really jeopardised, and he was tired of it.

**Dr. Ajagbe:** If you don't give them the appropriate adequate treatment for their mental illnesses, you're gonna keep perpetuating their alcoholism, because that's the only way they know to manage their psychiatric illness. I think it's dangerous for if somebody who is not well trained in handling alcohol withdrawal treatment to detox a patient on the outpatient basis.

**Maeve:** Things were coming together. They'd heard how members of the group would go out to pick up people who were stumbling around drunk and bring them to the group hall.

Other members said homeless people were often targeted for detoxing. Doctors had told them how dangerous detoxing like that was. And yet, people were still being sent to the Butternutters group by medical professionals or the courts.

The pair of reporters had worked up a powerful written piece and a short film, featuring many of their key interviewees. Now, they needed to put the findings to the group's leaders. But, finding them in the first place had been tricky.

They'd used the first names and initials that they'd managed to glean from the online recordings, and used local area census records to track down who they must be. It was gruelling work. But finally they had it. Ralph Cizenski and Frank Torcello. Here they are talking on one of the recordings.

**Ralph; Frank:** Apparently, you told somebody on medicine they're not clean.

They're not. Am I allowed to say that? Is that reasonable?

Out loud?

**Marnie:** Now, it was time to get in touch.

**Patrick:** We wanted to make sure that there was no way that they didn't know that we were going to be writing a story, potentially identifying them, and writing about their practices with this group.

We called, emailed, Facebooked, whatever we could. We sent certified letters, where we could get confirmation of us having sent them. We kind of knew by the end that there was no way that they didn't know what was going on.

And I made a house call to the guy in Syracuse after our first story ran, just to say, "Hey, just to make sure. Here's the article." And he declined to comment.

**Maeve:** Did you get a door slammed in your face? Or was it just a polite "No, thank you."

**Patrick:** No, no, it was impolite.

**Maeve:** At last, in early October 2019, the story was published. And the reaction was incredible.

**Marnie:** We kept a spreadsheet of like all the people who reached out to us afterward. They're like, 175 people on it who... And that's just people who like called us, emailed us. And what they said was the same. They were so thankful that we had done this. You know, they'd been like gaslit for so long by this group. They all felt so alone and isolated. And to just know there were more people who experienced what they experienced, that they weren't nuts. It wasn't them. They felt validated.

**Maeve:** It went further. The mayor of Syracuse was so shocked by the investigation that he wrote to the district attorney who agreed to investigate. The series and video reports were a huge success.

And last year, the news outlet was rewarded with a New York Emmy, a prestigious award for the New York State area. It was an incredible exposé, only made possible through the deep collaboration and teamwork of two reporters thrown together by circumstance.

That's all for this episode of *The Tip Off*. Thanks to Patrick and Marnie for talking me through that amazing investigation. I'll put a link to their work in the show notes.

Please do review, subscribe and pass on word to your friends, and visit our new website – [thetipoffpodcast.com](http://thetipoffpodcast.com) – to explore show notes, past seasons, transcripts and more.

This show is a co-production of Studiotobe. Our co-executive producers are Joaquin Alvarado and Ken Ikeda.

Maeve McClenaghan – that's me – created this podcast.

Olivia Aylmer produces the show. Chloe Behrens handles audio editing. Claudia Meza does our audio mixing, sound design, and original music. Thanks to her for editorial consultation, too. Thanks also to Soobin Kim and Rushana Miller for transcription support. Dice Muse composed our theme music.

As always, stay tuned for more stories behind the headlines.