

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: Before we start, this episode has some explicit language and mentions sexual violence and might not be suitable for all listeners.

On *The Tip Off*, we hear from expert journalists from all over the world, people who have dedicated their lives to trying to tell unreported stories, honestly, and with an objective distance.

But there are some stories that warrant a different approach. I'm Maeve McClenaghan, this is *The Tip Off*.

Maeve: I've written about homelessness and housing issues for years. I even wrote a book, *No Fixed Abode*, about one of my investigations. So I was fascinated when I heard that one amazing homelessness support organisation was delving into the world of journalism itself.

Jenny: And my name is Jenny McNeill. I'm the project manager for the Listen Up! Project at Groundswell. Groundswell works with people with experience with homelessness, and we offer opportunities to contribute to society and create solutions to homelessness. Participation is really at our core. And that's because the experience of homelessness is really crucial in making decisions that affect lives.

Maeve: Jenny, along with her teammates at Groundswell had been working away when COVID hit and changed everything. Suddenly, it was a lot harder to hear back from the cohort of people they were trying to reach and work with. So they had an idea.

Jenny: So the COVID Monitoring Project, as it was known, wanted to do something really innovative and Groundswell started to work with On Our Radar, and they specialise in working with community journalists. So the project started by recruiting community reporters, all with experience of homelessness, and we supported them with training, and gave them mobile phones to report on their stories about how COVID was affecting their lives.

Maeve: Working with the organisation On Our Radar, they set up a platform to allow people who are experiencing homelessness to easily feed in reports on how the pandemic was affecting them. It was such a success, that even after the initial focus on COVID, they decided to keep going. And so, the Listen Up! hub was born.

Jenny: Our reporters tell stories in the ways that they want to. So they might capture stories through quick audio messages. They might take films, they might use a range of methods to produce their stories. And those stories then come through to our team. And we look through the stories and we upload those on to our new homelessness hub. So every reporter on our homelessness hub has a profile and their stories are showcased on the hub. And we share these widely with decision makers through our mailing list, through social media. We really want to elevate the voices of reporters—the stories that we get, they really challenge stereotypes of homelessness.

Maeve: It's a great project, but one that's only as good as the reporters who take part. So who are they?

One is a woman called Karen. She first heard of the project when a friend asked to talk to her.

Karen: I was interviewed by Steve, who was a friend of mine. And he interviewed me. That's how, you know, it all started, really.

Maeve: Karen had met this guy when they both attended the same group for alcohol addiction. And they'd remained friends. Steve was now part of the Groundswell project, and was talking to people he knew about homelessness and issues surrounding it. And there was something about talking to Steve, someone who understood where she was coming from, that helped Karen open up.

Karen: It felt quite natural. Because I knew Steve anyway. And we both understand addiction and recovery and all that. So I felt on par with him. You know, we were both on the same level.

Maeve: This was the first time Karen had ever been interviewed. But she found she had a lot to talk about.

Karen: And I was in lockdown. And I was on the phone trying to get through to the doctors and I couldn't get through. And they'd change the format, so it was press this, press that button and then it kept cutting me off and I was really getting irate and Steve just said to me, well let me come interview you on that, you know.

Maeve: Here's a clip from Karen's interview:

Karen: So 8am Monday morning, I rang the doctors only to be completely cut off. No explanation why I was cut off, just just cut off. So I kept ringing back and ringing back and ringing back. And as I'm doing this, I'm getting more bloody angry. My anxiety was getting worse, you know, I'm in recovery. You know, I'm an alcoholic. In a couple of weeks, God willing, I'll be five years sober. But I have to be careful. You know, because it's, it's the small pebbles that catch anyone in addiction that, you know, that we trip up. We can deal with the big boulders. It's the tiny little things in life that you know, we have to be careful for.

Maeve: Steve recorded the interview with Karen. And it was posted online, on the Listen Up! hub's website. It was such a fun experience that Karen joined the project and started reporting on a range of things about homelessness and addiction. And as she did, she probed her own experience further, she began to understand more and more about her own life. Over time, she came to realise that she had experienced some forms of homelessness herself.

Karen: When I was in my teens, me and my dads, we just, we really didn't get on, he was a very strict, you know, dad. And I was already drinking, when I look back, I was already drinking heavily. So I did a lot of sofa surfing, there was a lot of arguments and him throwing me out, or I'd leave, you know, that was in my teens. And then in my mid-40s, obviously, you know, alcohol. Alcoholism is a progressive illness. So you know, it never gets any easier, any better. So in my mid-40s, I was well into my addiction. And just through circumstances, again, with a boyfriend, he'd had enough of me. And I lived in the attic of a pub, which isn't ideal when you're in alcoholic, but I didn't classify myself as being homeless, because I wasn't on the street. And that's where, you know, I said in one of my reports I was uh deluded or just ignorant, you know, maybe not ignorant, but uneducated about, you know, about homelessness, and I think that's a lot of people in society, they just they don't know, they've not been educated.

Maeve: And the more she understood, the more she realised many of the stories that she saw online or in the news didn't reflect the complexity of that reality.

Karen: The majority of the population were misinformed with homelessness and how we interpret it. And it's like the blinkers are off now, and I'm sort of seeing, seeing the world for how it is. And I'm realising that, you know, some programmes and, and some, some news channels, they sort of, when they talk about homelessness, they just immediately you see someone in a sleeping bag on, you know, on the street, and that's not what homelessness is about, you know, th- there's 1000s of reasons why that person's on the streets. But also, I didn't realise that people that are in prison and in rehabs and, and in refuges and places like that, they're all homeless, you know?

Maeve: Soon, Karen was publishing story after story. One was about how the UK is moving towards a more and more cashless society, where we rely on contactless payments.

Karen: I just think if there was no cash about and I put some report, you know, what about the man on the street that's asking for change? And also, what about the attic that leads to score, you know, drug deals are going to take, you know, sorts of contactless money. So, it just, I just felt again that the most vulnerable in society will suffer.

Maeve: So Karen is really getting into the reporting, filing one story after another, all inspired by her own experiences. Another of the Listen Up! reporters is a woman who we're calling Hannah.

Hannah: And I am a 44-year-old disabled lady who's got lived experience of homelessness, domestic abuse, family court, social services. So I have longterm severe complex mental illness. I have a personality disorder and I have complex PTSD and I also have some physical illnesses and I work with the Listen Up! project telling stories, mainly about my own experience, but I intertwine the stories of the women that I work with and support.

Maeve: Hannah has a wealth of experience, both from her own life, and through the work she does.

Hannah: I volunteer as an art therapist in an acute ward in a local psychiatric hospital. And many of the women there, if they weren't homeless before they went into hospital, they'd been made homeless by the very fact of being sectioned. And also, it's important to add that pretty much every single one of the women are Black, young and poor.

Maeve: Hannah had been working on projects with Groundswell for a while. And then one day, one of the organisers mentioned this Listen Up! project, a chance to report her *own* stories. Now, Hannah watches the news on TV. But sometimes she's frustrated by the focus that certain topics do or don't get. Take the war in Ukraine. Now, Hannah knows those people suffering should be told. She's part Ukrainian herself, she says. But—

Hannah: the dominance of the news is a reminder of, first and foremost, people care about Ukrainians because they're white. And I say this as a white woman. And second of all, people do not care about poor people in this country, they never have, and they never will. Because they see this as a rich Island. And if you're poor in this country, it's your own fault.

Maeve: And that poverty is something that Hannah thinks is missing from the dialogue, not just on the news, but in various different contexts.

Hannah: I do a lot of work in mental health, and around homelessness, and 99% of the time, they're interlinked. And every single meeting that I sit on to give my lived experience, etc. Poverty is never discussed, poverty is never mentioned. Well, how, you know everyone rings their hands: How did this happen? We have no idea. And we just don't know. And it's like, poverty, poverty, poverty, poverty, poverty every single time, every single time. Because when you look at mental illness, mental illness is not exclusively for the working class. Mental illness is a problem in the brain. But if you have money, not only do you more obviously pay for private therapy, or nice holidays, you also might have a nanny, you might have a cleaner, you might have—your children might have after school clubs, you know, so they're a bit more entertained—you might be able to pay for some babysitting at the weekend, you know. At the time that I was very unwell, not being supported, and being beaten up and raped a lot of the time—I tell it like it is—I was also really poor. I was also really poor, and I was really struggling.

Maeve: So Hannah has started reporting on these things, telling stories inspired by her own experiences, and the people she works with and for. One brilliant report highlights the importance of libraries.

Hannah: So I wrote a piece about my passion of libraries, and how the government is trying to close libraries behind the back door. And I live in Brixton, and the library is huge. And pre-COVID the library was full of teenage, Black boys. Absolutely full of teenage, Black boys. The library and the council and the youth group did a fantastic campaign. They'd made a section and they filled it with books, but also what they knew a lot of teenage boys are reading is manga. So they have a massive manga section. And the boys are safe, not just from the gangs, but they're also safe and the police.

Maeve: Here's a clip from that report that Hannah published.

Hannah: I've gone there to use the internet. And I haven't had any data on my phone. And I've been able to research where I can go to a food bank when I also haven't had food, I've gone there for human companionship after my children were taken and I was living alone in a bedsit in Wood Green. I've gone there to distract my mind when my mental health's been playing up. And the books have soothed me, the art, the poetry, the philosophy. I've had access to books in a way that I felt safe, not lingering around in Waterstones feeling guilty. Libraries are such an important part of our community and they are trying to close them by the back door.

Maeve: The reaction to the story was so strong that she published a follow-up piece exploring the idea further. Like Karen, working as a reporter has taught Hannah more about the relationship between journalist and interviewee, the power imbalance, even if unintentional, that exists in those relationships.

Hannah: An awful lot of people don't take into account when working with people with mental illness that they're—regardless of any drug addiction—the prescription drugs have a very, you know, you often can't, you're not really with it till about 11 o'clock. You know, you might wake up at six o'clock, because of nightmares, but you might be groggy for the whole morning, you know, but that's a really embarrassing thing to explain. And I think one that more journalists should consider. I think the location of the interview, how does the person get there? How easy is it for them to get there?

Maeve: But a little empathy and thought given to what the interviewee might be going through, can go a long way to making it a comfortable, respectful experience.

Hannah: Like, how did this person get here today? What was their journey to get here? Were they literally going down the back of the sofa for the bus fare? Did they have any breakfast? These questions are so important for journalists to ask before they speak to anybody, you know. And I also think that there is a lack of consideration given when journalists are in a rush, and they turn up with their big Starbucks, and their croissant in a paper bag; they're showing their wealth. You know, if you have a large coffee and croissant, it's probably about five or six pounds, which is huge amount of money to someone who's poor. I think these things are so important, and they're so often missed.

Maeve: So, as well as producing their reports, Hannah and Karen are coming to learn more about how journalism can and, arguably should be done. They keep going, talking to people, filing stories. But they're not just left to their own devices—that could get them into trouble with their reporting. Each journalist works with one of the organisers, who acts as a mentor. They record their report—

Hannah: I record stories on my phone, I write stories, and then I read them out. I sometimes put in quotes from different people that are always anonymous. We have a group chat, where we discuss ideas between each other.

Karen: Groundswell actually got me a little keyboard, so when I'm at home, I use this keyboard and type it up. I just do it on a notepad to start off with, just jot down a few ideas randomly. And then I just go back to it time and time again, you know, delete stuff, add stuff, change it about.

Maeve: Once they are ready, the reporters send their recordings to the central hub.

Karen: And it's, it's looked at in depth, you know, so my mentor will probably look at the grammar and punctuation, that type of thing, you know, and just polish it for me, it's very well organised, even though it's lived experience. They also, you know, go through it really with a fine tooth comb.

Maeve: But what about those who say reporting should be clinical, objective, unemotional, and reserved?

Hannah: I would disagree. I think I personally love reading stories that I have no knowledge of, and it's a completely different world to me, and that person has some lived experience of that.

Karen: And I just feel that if you've actually lived through it, that report comes from your heart, what it does with me, it comes from within, you know, because I've been there, I've done it, you know, I can empathise with people. And yeah, I just think it's got a bit more clout.

Maeve: Watching the stories go up online, be listened to, shared, acknowledged: Both women say, it feels good.

Hannah: It's really exciting. And then some of them have been shared on Twitter and had really good feedback.

Karen: For me, it's a bit of a wow moment. Because I've got quite low self-esteem, and a lot of people don't, don't think that because I come across as being very confident. But I've, you know, I never actually feel good enough. So when I see these reports, and I get some fantastic feedback, it's just really encouraging.

Maeve: Karen knows what she hopes for the project.

Karen: You know, hopefully we will get the message across to the decision makers to make a change. And, you know, hopefully rid the country of homelessness, because it's inhumane. You know, our mission statement is to make people aware of homelessness and what it means and how people become homeless and change the stereotypes and everything.

Maeve: Hannah has similar hopes.

Hannah: What I hope to try to do is to tell stories that everybody can relate to and connect with, even if they don't have lived experience. Because I want everyone to care about homelessness, and domestic violence, and racist police and different vulnerable groups. And most people don't care about the things they don't understand and that they can't connect to. So what I want to try and do is to pull you in and say, *This is my experience, which part do you relate to?* Because I need you all to understand that you, too, one day could, you know, there by go the grace of Gods

[Editor's note: "there but for the grace of God go I"], or whatever the expression is. But it's like, most people don't realise that vulnerability and poverty and homelessness and mental health is shit that happens and shit that can happen to anybody. And when you feel very comfortable and smug in your life, you could be in for a rude awakening one day. And it's you know, COVID was a little wake up call for lots of people in their comfortable bubbles, right? A *big* wake-up call.

Maeve: That's all for this episode of *The Tip Off*.

Do go to the [Listen Up! hub](#). Take a look, a listen, a read of some of these amazing stories. You can even sign up to their mailing list to hear more. It's journalism, but done in a different way.

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.