

MEDILL WATCHDOG ASSISTANT DIRECTOR JOHN SULLIVAN  
AND HIS PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER TEAM WIN 2012 PULITZER PRIZE.

# SERVING

# THE PUBLIC





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## THERE'S AN EASE

with which John Sullivan talks about sending people to jail. Take, for example, the tale of former Pennsylvania Sen. Robert Mellow.

Mellow was the state's highest-ranking senate Democrat. Then, in 2009, the Philadelphia Inquirer ran a story about how he used taxpayer money to rent an office in a building he partially owned. Sullivan, then an investigative reporter at the Inquirer, broke the story with a colleague.

The story led to a federal probe. The following year, Mellow retired after 40 years of public service. This past March, he was indicted on federal charges. Two months later, he pleaded guilty to conspiracy and filing a false tax return. Sullivan was just looking for a good story. "I found one," he said.

Many reporters have a story or two like this, tales of penning articles that, as journalist and humorist Finley Peter Dunne put it, "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." Sullivan has several, including "Assault on Learning," a multi-part series highlighting the violence within the Philadelphia school system. For that, Sullivan and his Inquirer team, which included fellow lead reporter Susan Snyder, won the 2012 Pulitzer Prize for public service.

Many say that sums up Sullivan, whose youthful looks belie his age of 45. He's a man who sees the power in being a reporter, especially now as assistant director of Medill Watchdog, a faculty-led group of students and recent graduates who investigate systematic failures in government. He sees the opportunity to have an impact, to change people's lives, to hold public officials accountable.

"He is determined," said Bill Marimow, the Inquirer's editor. "He's tenacious, he's very fair-minded ... and he's a maestro when it comes to the use of public records. He's also a meticulous fact-checker. I'm sure he's teaching that at Medill."

It's a reputation Sullivan has worked hard to earn, especially after a tumultuous adolescence. He was the youngest of eight, growing up in the north Chicago suburb of Wilmette in a neighborhood that at the time was filled with large, lower-middle class families. Where his siblings had been successful moving onto college, Sullivan squandered his high-school years, he said, struggling to find his place. He became listless, content to work in an upholstery shop, pump gas on the weekends and hang out with friends.

He found his way to Oakton Community College's Des Plaines campus in 1989, where he met Dr. Margaret "Peg" Lee, a professor teaching his British literature class (she's now the school's president). It was Lee's love of language, truth and developing a set of ideals that stirred Sullivan out of his malaise. "I had lived in a world where I had seen a lot of baseness," he said. "We struggle to reach this place above us. So I think I was inspired to reach for this place above me."

After a year and a half at Oakton, Sullivan transferred to Cornell College, a small, four-year school in Iowa where he majored in philosophy and politics while minoring in classics. He returned home after graduation and started working in Evanston selling title insurance. One night, he attended a party thrown by his brother, Drew, a graduate-journalism student at the University of Missouri. There, he met several investigative reporters and editors.

By the end of the night, Sullivan had found his calling. "These people

are fun," he said. "They're irreverent. They're smart. They're passionate. They care about the world, and I want to do what they're doing."

Soon, Sullivan was interning at the Chicago Reporter, where he stayed for a year before heading to Missouri to earn his master's degree in journalism. He spent more than two years as a graduate assistant doing computer-assisted reporting for the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting at Missouri before landing a job with The News and Observer in Raleigh, N.C.

Sullivan fell for a young reporter named Adrienne Lu while covering a death threat on a local country sheriff. Working on the story together, the two became close. Sullivan found Lu gutsy and persistent. She found him passionate, with a sense of humor.

After a couple years, the two started dating, though their courtship was anything but smooth. Lu went off to graduate school in New York while Sullivan took a job with the Inquirer to be closer to her. A few months later, he was shipped off to cover the war in Iraq.

Between March and June 2003, Sullivan covered the war, most times from the inside of a M113 armored personnel carrier. For Lu, it was nerve-racking; when her boyfriend called, she could hear explosions in the background. For Sullivan, he found the randomness of combat unsettling. "You live your life thinking, 'If I'm a good guy, nothing will happen to me,'" he said. "But when you're getting shot at by people, you realize, 'Well, it's just a matter of geography.'"

Sullivan returned home unscathed to a box full of letters that Lu sent him, but were returned, unopened; he moved around too much. Didn't matter. By then, he knew he would marry her. They wed in 2005.

Once he got back to the Inquirer's Harrisburg bureau, Sullivan started knocking out stories, shortly followed by officials. Then-acting secretary of the commonwealth Benjamin Ramos stepped down after Sullivan uncovered lapses in his campaign-filing record. Next was Francis Friel, a former police captain picked to head the state's gaming board. He resigned after Sullivan found inconsistencies in his résumé. "At that point, we lived for the story," he said. "We didn't much care what was going on."

With reporter Ken Dilanian, Sullivan tracked the deaths of at least 20 abused children over a three-year period in Philadelphia. The 2006 stories led to an overhaul of the city's department of human services, which handles child-abuse cases, and to a Casey Medal for Meritorious Journalism, awarded for distinguished coverage of disadvantaged children and families. Up to that point, Sullivan said, "that was the most important story I had ever done because that saved some kids' lives."

By then, Lu had joined Sullivan at the Inquirer. Sullivan moved to covering science and health, leading to a 2008 series explaining how Bush-administration policies had weakened the Environmental Protection Agency. Sullivan — along with colleagues John Shiffman and Tom Avril — was named a Pulitzer finalist in national reporting.

But Sullivan soon found himself wandering again. Unlike before, life was sweet. Work-wise, he was now on the paper's acclaimed investigative team. At home, he doted over his newborn son, Benjamin. But even after the Mellow story, "I felt like a writer trying to write the hit song," he said. "I was looking for a story for the wrong reasons."

He went back to juvenile issues, a subject that still haunted him. He spent the summer in the University of Pennsylvania Hospital's emergency room, watching doctors pull bullets out of children. He started attending juvenile court, watching kids who had been suspended as many as 40 times go before a judge. He talked to former

administrators about oversight and review.

Then, a story broke. In December 2009, 26 Asian students were assaulted at South Philadelphia High School in a mob attack. District Superintendent Arlene Ackerman chided the media for not paying attention when black students were assaulted. "Okay, we'll take that challenge," Sullivan said.

Sullivan took the school system to task, from underreporting violent incidents to flawed programs designed to curb such behavior. Education reporters talked to teachers and students. One reporter spent six months hanging out at South Philadelphia High following the attack. The subsequent series ran in March 2011, detailing several of the 4,541 violent incidents reported during the 2009-2010 school year, an average of 25 a day. That didn't include the 183 cases the district learned of after the police filed charges. Ackerman resigned the following August, although Sullivan explains the investigation was not the sole reason.

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But by then, Sullivan himself was on his way out. After Philadelphia Media Network purchased the Inquirer in 2010, Sullivan watched as Bill Marimow lost his job as editor and Vernon Loeb, Sullivan's investigations editor, left for the Washington Post.

When Medill Watchdog director Rick Tulsy, himself a former Pulitzer Prize winner from his days at the Philadelphia Inquirer, contacted Sullivan and offered him the job at Medill Watchdog, Sullivan felt it was an opportunity. He talked it over with Lu, and they agreed. It was time to go. "They were dismantling a great paper, and I didn't want to be there to see it," he said.

So far, the move back to the Chicago area has been a good one for Sullivan and his family. He's able to spend more time with his mother, Margaret, who turned 81 in July. Now living in Evanston, Sullivan enjoys living near Lake Michigan just a few blocks from his two sisters, Moira and Sheila. Benjamin, now 4, loves the lake.

"It's a beautiful area," said Lu, who covered Cook County government with the Chicago News Cooperative until it folded this past February. "[John is] really enjoying working with the students. He's been really impressed with their caliber."

But Sullivan, who received another Casey Medal for the "Assault on Learning" series, did spend a couple of days in Philly at the Inquirer earlier this year. He was in the newsroom on April 16 when his series won the Pulitzer and returned in May for a Pulitzer party. When the April announcement was made, the newsroom erupted in excitement, said Marimow, who was recently asked back to the paper. "It was great for morale, great for the people who participated, and great for the city."

For Sullivan, "It was important to tell the story," he said. "I didn't think we'd win much."

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