Dear Friends,

First, I hope that you and your loved ones are staying healthy and safe during this time. When we sent our last newsletter, no one could have imagined where we’d find ourselves today. From quarantined to slowly reopening cities, learning and managing new family obligations, figuring out new virtual modes of communication, recognizing and celebrating the critical importance of essential workers in hospitals, grocery stores, and delivery services... the COVID-19 pandemic has stretched and redefined our lives in many ways.

Then, the senseless murder of George Floyd at the hands of the police, along with the deaths of Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery, reignited the movement for Black lives, civil rights and equal justice; these past few months have transformed every part of our lives and culture as we navigate forward into what can seem like an uncertain future. It seems almost prophetic that back in March our Gala theme was, “This Changes Everything.” From the coronavirus pandemic to Black Lives Matter – it truly does feel like everything is changing.

However, one thing that does not change is the power of stories. The Initiative’s mission remains the same: to bring opportunities for writing and creative expression to those that are often unseen or unheard. By amplifying those voices, voices that for so long have been ignored, we’re able to see the complete fabric of our nation, its systems and our lives. Stories call us to listen, learn, reflect, and respond to our shared humanity. We stand in solidarity with those calling for an end to police brutality, inequality, and racism in all its forms. We stand in solidarity with demands for equality and justice, especially for Black lives. And, like many of you, we are learning how to navigate this unfolding new world.

Since January, we’ve completed our 2nd year partnership with United We Dream, giving young immigrants the tools and resources to write and share their stories. We also awarded our 2020 Collyer Fellowship, completed our third year of our Online Writing Workshops, and held our annual Spring Gala.

Currently, we’re restructuring our models so that we can continue to help others through the power of writing. We’re encouraging people to write with our online writing prompt challenge, we’ve held our first Zoom workshops (with local veterans and with LGBTQ asylum seekers), and we’re discussing how to reach new populations, like nurses and teachers on the front lines, and organizations that work nationally to end the PTSD suicide crisis among veterans and first responders.

Much has been done, but there is more to do. And, it is all possible through your generosity and support. Thank you for donating to us or sharing with others the work that we do. Every bit of it helps as we’re all learning to step forward into what lies ahead. The future may still be uncertain, but I believe that this shift is revealing who we are and what we truly value as individuals, as communities, and as a nation. We will only get through this together.

Sincerely,

Jenna Jackson
Executive Director
For two weekends, from December 7 - 8 and February 22 - 23, the Writers Guild Initiative hosted a writing workshop with seventeen immigrant youth in partnership with United We Dream. This was our second year of working with this group and digging into the craft of writing and storytelling. These workshops were a part of United We Dream’s larger shift towards using the arts and storytelling to empower undocumented and immigrant youth as culture makers and catalysts for change.

One of the most powerful moments of the second weekend came in a table share, in which several members of the community stood and read their stories to the entire group. It was a powerful moment of affirmation and encouragement to the participants and mentors, to see how their work has a meaningful impact on others. The hope is to continue to find creative avenues to share these stories broadly and continue to highlight the experiences of this community.
On April 25th and May 2nd, the Writers Guild Initiative, in partnership with the Wounded Warrior Project, brought local veterans together for our first completely virtual workshop. Originally, we planned for a two-part full weekend workshop in person, but due to COVID-19 restrictions, we shifted quickly in providing an online model - with great success! Nine veterans with six mentors met for three hours each Saturday to share the tools of writing, develop new work, and build community together. The shorter time frame gave all an impetus to get quickly to the heart of the work, and everyone made great strides in their writing. One highlight was the building of community as veterans shared mental health resources with one another.

“This workshop brought me out of my rut. It revived a passion for me that I wasn’t sure if I should continue to pursue. It gave me confidence to continue writing. It gave me a voice. And a way to express myself that I didn’t know would be so exhilarating.”

Briana, WWP Participant
Inside the Workshops: Why I’m Honored to be a Mentor
By: Mel Nieves

Words can be like X-rays if you use them properly — they’ll go through anything.

You read and you’re pierced.

Aldous Huxley, Brave New World

The scariest moment is always just before you start.

Stephen King, On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft

At 10 am we signed in from our more than six feet of distance locations of self-quarantine and safety, and for the next three hours, over the course of two days, stretched over two Saturday mornings, separated by a week, we came together.

Our goal was simply to connect with each other. Connect with ourselves. Connect with our words in a world where disconnection and the wearing of a mask to hide ourselves has become the new normal.

I was, I must admit, quite intimidated and filled with self-doubt (a normal state of being for me) but none more so than after I said yes to being a mentor with The Writer’s Guild Initiative: Wounded Warrior Project.

What did I have to offer to this group of heroes who have sacrificed such a large part of their lives to protect me and other citizens like myself?

“What did I have to offer?” was the question that I kept asking myself over and over again up to the wee small hours as I approached our first Saturday morning meeting.
Mel Nieves, c’td

And then it hit me. What was it that I needed? What was it that any human seeks and needs and hopes to give to a fellow human?

“Attention must be paid” said the character of Linda Loman in Arthur Miller’s Death of a Salesman...and that’s what I did. I paid attention.

I listened. I listened and I listened.

I took in what they had to say. I listened to their words; I listened to their short stories. I listened to their ideas. I listened to their poetry. I listened to the art within them that was bursting to come out. I listened to the voice within them that was yearning to be heard.

In this current world of Zoom in which we come to appear to each other like a bad remake of The Brady Bunch in our little gallery panels, we as group dropped our masks and found a way to connect with each other. For those three hours a day on those two Saturdays, we shared, we laughed, we cried and we gave ourselves permission to be afraid, but most of all we listened.

We as fellow humans and travelers were not separated by distance. We were connected through our spirits and open hearts. We were in our separate spaces, this is true, but we came together as humans have always come together since the dawn of man when we would gather in the caves after the days hunt and tell each other our stories. We listened.

Mel Nieves, is an actor-playwright-arts educator and a longtime member of the award-winning LAByrinth Theater Company.
The Michael Collyer Memorial Fellowship in Screenwriting is an opportunity to find diverse and emerging voices in screenwriting. With funding from the Charles and Lucille King Family Foundation and in partnership with the Blacklist, the Writers Guild Initiative selects a yearly Collyer Fellow to be mentored by a prominent screenwriter and awarded a $10,000 stipend. Our 2020 Collyer Fellow, Alishan Valiani, is a recent graduate of the University of Pennsylvania. We interviewed him about the experience of winning the fellowship and his journey so far as a writer.

When did you know you were a “writer?” And when did you know screenwriting was something you wanted to seriously pursue?

I knew I wanted to do something related to writing by sophomore year of high school. I was always a math and science person, but that year, my English teacher told me to focus on writing because she was impressed by some of my work for class. I didn’t start focusing on screenwriting until sophomore year of college, however. Getting the Michael Collyer fellowship also helped me recommit to pursuing a career in writing.
Alishan Valiani, c’td

I know your mom came with you to the WGA awards. What was that like for you? For her?

It was great. My mom was excited to go, and we both really enjoyed ourselves.

What do you think makes a good story and what kinds of stories are you drawn to?

I constantly struggle with the question of what makes a good story or what makes a story worth telling. I haven’t really figured it out, but as I see it now, a good story is one that makes you feel something. Other qualities of a good story are its ability to immerse the audience in its world while maintaining universality.

What is your writing process like?

It’s different every time. I often go several weeks without writing anything. Then, once I have a good idea of what I’m going to write, I’ll sit down and try to work consistently until I’m finished. I’ll outline a lot. I’ll also take a lot of notes. Certain scenes will be outlined in extreme detail. I’ll draw a lot of diagrams and charts. I may write background on the characters. After the outlining/planning stage, I’ll write the treatment for the script. Then I’ll make a scene list and organize all my notes chronologically. At this point, I’ll start the draft-edit-repeat cycle.

What do you hope to learn and accomplish during the course of the fellowship?

Aside from working on the craft of writing, I hope to learn how to write for an audience/market. I also want to learn how to write better dialogue, which is my greatest weakness.

I’m aiming to complete In Sects and start two to three other scripts over the course of the fellowship. I also plan to redraft my previous script, Parking Ticket. I want to then use these scripts to enter more screenwriting competitions.

What do you like to do for fun—when you’re not writing or studying?

I love to watch TV and movies. I watch about a movie a day. I also love to cook and garden, and I enjoy playing the Theremin.
Our 2020 Gala, “This Changes Everything!” was a huge success. Pictured in this group photo of actors and writers are: Mark Haviland, Bill Irwin, Marin Ireland, Iman Ahmed, Joy Cohen, C. Meyer, Liza Colón-Zayas, A. Domínguez, Christie Hicks, Jane Kaczmarek and Tatiana Maslany. Not pictured are WGI Participants Donna Renee Anderson, Vivian Knezevich, and William Milzarski.

You can watch videos from the evening on our website at www.writersguildinitiative.org.

WGI GALA Co-Chairs,
Brooke Adams and
Tony Shalhoub
WRITERS GUILD INITIATIVE: WRITING PROMPT CHALLENGE

Turn one of the last texts you sent into a story.

#wginyc #thischangeseverything #wginyctce #writers #writersofinstagram #writingcommunity #writingprompts

For so many years in our in-person and online workshops, we have seen the transformative power of writing. When the world changed so abruptly, we wanted to connect and engage with people to find their voice through writing. So, we started an online writing prompt challenge.

Every Wednesday afternoon, we share a writing prompt on our website and social media channels. These prompts have expanded our breadth and scope to a wider audience and community. The screenwriting site Screen Craft has been sharing and re-posting them.

To participate, simply go to our website every Wednesday afternoon, or follow our social media channels. There is no need to share work unless you choose to, and if you do choose to, please join in the conversation by using the hashtags #wginyc #thischangeseverything #wginyctce #writersofinstagram #writingcommunity #writingprompts.

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Twitter: WGINYC
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Writers Guild Initiative programs are made possible by your generous contribution. Your donation enables us to provide transformative writing workshops to underserved populations with powerful stories to tell.

We thank you for your support!

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