Dear Friends,

It’s an honor to write to you for the first time as the new Executive Director of the Writers Guild Initiative. Of course, my name isn’t new to you, as I’ve been working here in various capacities since 2010. I’ve watched this organization grow from a group of writers wanting to “do something good” to a non-profit organization that works with partners nationwide to amplify their voices and tell their stories.

As we look back on this year, we’ve had the amazing opportunity to work with new populations; those impacted by chronic illness, Dreamers, and the incarcerated; while continuing our longstanding work with military populations. We also showcased our participants’ writing during our annual Spring Gala, where many of the writers were in attendance to receive much deserved applause.

Of course, we couldn’t do any of this without you. These days, finding and sharing overlooked stories is more important than ever. My aim is to continue to hold space for those whose voices need to be heard and find ways to get their stories out for all to hear. I’m excited to lead us into the next chapter, and I hope that you will continue to build these stories with us.

Sincerely,

Jenna Jackson
Notes from the Field
By Susan Kim, WGI Mentor

What you are really doing is assuring people that this is even possible...
And then you stand back and marvel at what they unearth.

Being a writer is like panning for gold... minus the gold. You spend hours alone, sifting -- your dreams, your memories, your fantasies -- on the search for anything that sparkles. At first, it’s romantic. Then the days go by and then it’s years. Your back hurts. So do your eyes. And to be honest, most of the stuff you find is worthless. You keep doing it, though. And sometimes — sometimes — you find things that, when you polish them enough, don’t actually suck. Sometimes, you even make a living doing it. But it will never be as exciting as it was when you started. How can it be? You’ve strip-mined your entire life and set up oil rigs as far as the eye can see. It’s not a pretty sight.

But working with fledgling writers is something else. You are not just handing over some playbook — the rules and tools and tricks and tips. Because writing isn’t about those things... not really. What you are really doing is assuring people that this is even possible: that they can not only dream and remember and think, but then set it down on paper for others to read. You are reminding them of the stories inside them — the ones that are literally true and the others that are emotionally true — and that they are the only ones who can let them out. You are confirming that there’s only one person they need permission from. And

The writers I worked with this past April were vets who had struggled with PTSD. While they had that in common, they were vastly more complex and unique than any label. They wrote about not only deployment and return to civilian life, but also disapproving parents, the acrimony of divorce, the joys of becoming a mother, the first-time meeting with an errant father, struggles with depression, first cars, first love. Their work was wry, thoughtful, hilarious, heartbreaking... and above all, universal in its specificity, honesty, and sense of discovery.

Years ago, I read about St. Thomas and was struck by one of his teachings: that if you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you don’t bring forth what is within you, what you don’t bring forth will destroy you. This sums up how I feel about writing. The best writing — memoir, fictional, fantastical, the stuff that is seemingly not about you at all — is in fact always about you. And bringing that forth and setting it down on paper can indeed save you.
The Birth of a Writer: The Collyer Fellowship

“I’ve wanted to be a writer my whole life, and I’m humbled to be recognized in such a way for something I love so much” – Ariella Carmell, 2019 Collyer Fellow

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 Black List, the Writers Guild Initiative selects a yearly Collyer Fellow to be mentored by a prominent screenwriter and awarded a $10,000 stipend. The goal is not only finding fresh talent, but to be an avenue of support for a young person who plans to pursue a career in screenwriting as they transition from college into the professional industry. Our fellows have all fostered burgeoning screenwriting careers, from job opportunities and film festivals, to screenwriting awards like the prestigious Nicholl Fellowship. Most importantly, they’ve used what they learned to further their craft and continue writing.

Our 2019 Collyer Fellow is Ariella Carmell, a recent graduate of the University of Chicago, who will be mentored by screenwriter Susanna Styron. Her pitch, “Fathers and Daughters” is about the complex and heartfelt relationships between two single fathers and their daughters as they grow together through tragedy and trauma. It centers on the tenacity of young girls and vulnerability of grown men as their relationships provide

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I love a writing exercise called “The Ghost That You Know.” It’s a good one for late on the first day, or on the second day, once people are warmed up. I ask the participants to carefully write down the instructions, and go with their gut as opposed to asking clarifying questions. We give them 30 or even 45 minutes to work on this one, because it involves going to deep emotional places. It goes like this:

“You find yourself in a space or a physical place that fills you with dread. A ghost that you know enters that space or physical place. Write down your conversation...
And Now…
A Few Words from our Participants

“This workshop helped me look at my life and realize that I am a writer.” – Jennet, Veterans Writing Workshop

“The workshop challenged me to be more confident in myself, and I was allowed to take some of that confidence that they had inspired in me, started our own writing group.”
– Nathan, Pendleton Correctional Facility Workshop

“As a combat veteran, I questioned whether or not I was truly a "writer." But WGI mentors taught me that “writer” is a verb and not a noun! One day, I stopped doubting myself and sat down in my chair and wrote and wrote until finally, my book was finished and ready for publication.”
– Robert, Online Writing Workshop
2019 Gala: You Need To Hear This

At March 11, 2019 Gala, performers Brooke Adams, Dominique Fishback, James McDaniel, Ezra Miller, Gayle Rankin, and Tony Shalhoub read work written by our workshop participants. Following is an excerpt from “You Need to Hear This,” by Ron Keine, exonerated death row inmate.

You need to hear this.
People are under the misconception that prisoners are treated humanely. That they are protected from the cruel and unusual. In prison Constitutional rights are subject to the arbitrary whims of the warden with no oversight. That same death row did not get showers or exercise in the two years I was there. Asking for medical help only brought snickers from the prison staff. Why fix you if we’re just going to kill you anyway? I could lay on my bunk at night and hear the groans and sobs from those in pain. I was finally released when the real murderer, a police officer, confessed to the crime. I suffered through all this even though I never should have been there to begin with. I went through all the heartache and pain as an innocent man on death row. NOW YOU KNOW THIS.