

2007 Gary Young Award
David Fraher Acceptance Speech

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Thanks, Barbara (Barbara Robinson, Ohio Arts Council and Arts Midwest). And thank you as well to NASAA, its Board, staff, and membership for this honor.

Almost thirty one years ago, the poet Carolyn Kizer, who was a dear friend, teacher, and a neighbor in an old brownstone we shared on Capitol Hill, called me one evening from Lander, Wyoming where she was in the midst of a ten day reading circuit sponsored by the Wyoming Arts Council. Carolyn had watched in the two years since I'd left the graduate writing program at Ohio University—left in search not of fame, but rather of food, clothing, and a heated apartment—she watched as I struggled every day to return to a job in a DC-based public interest group where I had been forced to learn in detail about such things as fund accounting, managing client relations, business communications, non-profit tax law, and—most fun of all—the erosion of public official liability in civil courts.

Clearly, these were topics not generally part of the curriculum in an American Literature and writing program. And while I learned the subject matter quickly and well, at the end of each day I struggled with trying to draw some meaning out of what I was doing—and each day, I became just a bit more despondent.

And so when Carolyn called that evening and said, “Darling, the Wyoming Arts Council needs someone to run their Poetry in the Schools Program. You can do this, I know you can—you’re a writer, you’ve taught writing, and now you’ve actually worked in an office with budgets, and files, and reports—Darling, you simply must apply!”—I was left with no choice. I applied, and I

got the job—because in those days, any coupling of content knowledge with practical experience made one a nearly perfect candidate to work in our field.

Well, that field has grown and evolved in the years since, and our skill set and knowledge base have certainly improved—And I also have to admit that I am confident that if I applied to be an arts in education coordinator *now* at a state arts agency—applied with the same experience level I had then—I likely wouldn't make the short list, let alone get hired for the position.

But the call from Carolyn that evening is just one of many critical junctures in my life where a friend or colleague's generosity and belief in me has merged with opportunity—and pathways that I might never have dreamed possible have suddenly opened before my eyes. And so as I think back to Carolyn with gratitude, I want to acknowledge today just a few of the other critical and loving catalysts who have made the joy of these past thirty-one years possible.

I really didn't want this to sound like the Academy Awards, but I'm sorry, I have to begin with my parents who, while far from being arts patrons or even participants, nonetheless nurtured two critical elements of my being—an unending sense of curiosity that drives my life and work to this day, and a concurrent passion for books and reading, a passion which fills my head, my heart, and my house with ever evolving worlds.

And there was the bright and stubborn nun, my own Sister of Mercy, Pat Millerick, who literally put her own career on the line to save me from high school expulsion—for cause, I might add—and even more important, gave me—in 1968—this copy of Lawrence Ferlinghetti's *A Coney Island of the Mind*, which I read and read until phrases in it became part of my vocabulary that remain with me even today. And which also spurred me on to know who Morris Graves was, or what a Goya painting looked like, or to read Kafka and Cocteau and Yeats.

And my first true mentor and dearest friend, the late poet Al Poulin, Jr, who taught me to write not just poems, but also grant applications when I was only twenty. And when I was nearly thirty and in a dark patch of life, snatched me away to the island of Aegina in the Aegean sea, and

taught me again that our world is wide, and rich, and filled with wonder—and that we should each spend much more time in that broader world and much less time in meetings.

And of course there is my most long-tenured—note, not *oldest*— friend, Wayne Lawson. Set aside the obvious reasons that might spring to mind—the many, many moments—in bars and cafes in North America, South America, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East—where the two of us would sit and hatch new plans and programs, and never require even so much as a handshake to know that we could count on each other to make the deal work, to make our vision reality. Set that aside and consider this. The poet John Logan, in a wonderful poem called *Three Moves*, wrote:

I have a friend named Frank—
The only one who ever dares to call
And ask me, “How’s your soul?”

Wayne has been *my* Frank for close to twenty-five years, and those calls, always well timed, have kept me sane.

And Susan Chandler, who is more than an assistant director, but rather an alter ego, a better conscience, and an extraordinarily gifted manager. Susan, who has the uncanny ability to watch my face in a meeting and know when I have shifted into the BS mode—and also knows when either to celebrate that shift as a moment of divine inspiration or call me on it to reinsert reality. And Susan, who can listen to the wacky spinning of ideas, join in that spinning, and always, always knows exactly how to turn the most undefined intangibles into effective and dynamic realities.

I have been gifted with a parade of dedicated and brilliant staff members—those who have been with me for years, and those who, like my director of development, Colleen McLaughlin, are newer to the quirky nature of our business, but bring with them passion, remarkable skill, and endless energy—and who challenge those of us who for so long have been *taught* to now become *teachers*.

I have been blessed with a frighteningly supportive and encouraging board of directors, led for the past twelve years by Barbara Robinson, the most patient, insightful, politic and humanly generous Chair a director could ever want—to say nothing of her zeal and graciousness as a traveling companion. And I have been supported throughout by more than 45 different SAA directors in our nine states—and of course, let me not pass over in that list Phillip Horn from Pennsylvania, both a soul mate *and* an honorary member of our region—each of these men and women has willingly entered into the delicate dance of regional partnership, a dance of investment, trust, service, and loyalty. I am grateful to all of them.

And in closing, I am grateful to all of you. For nearly thirty-one years, you have challenged and supported me, argued and laughed with me, and in the process, have become my very own family of choice. It is you who I suspect might understand more than anyone else that moment of wonderment that seizes us when, for example, we might find ourselves watching a group of high school students—students who have spent an entire year studying with a Japanese Taiko master through one of our programs—now performing at last as an ensemble before their parents and siblings and teachers and neighbors, and performing flawlessly and brilliantly and confidently, and then turn, in reverence, and bow to their *sensei*, to their teacher in gratitude—at such moments, and I’m certain you have them as well, I am struck with awe and incredulity and think to myself, “Do I really get paid to do this?” What a gift I’ve been given, what a gift each of us has been given.

And so I bow to you, my many sensei, my teachers, and I thank you all for your part in making my life so rich.