

Transcript: Franklin Leonard's acceptance speech of the Evelyn F. Burkey Award at the 2019 Writers Guild Awards

New York City, February 17, 2019

So this is not a practical joke, it turns out? I know you all think that I'm kidding about that but you can ask Beau Willimon later: I was pretty sure it was, until right now.

Thank you, James. Thank you also to Beau and to Lowell, Dana Weissman and to the entire Guild for those kind words and this honor. They make me sound pretty great.

I say that entirely in jest.

You all have bestowed on me an honor that even on my best days I can't imagine that I, individually, deserve.

Looking at the names of previous honorees like James, like Norman Lear, like Joan Didion, like Ken Saro-Wiwa, people who have been my heroes for decades – I am frankly at a loss, as this speech may prove.

Fortunately, I see that my name is on it, and rest assured that I will keep it, but I can't escape the very certain reality that this award is more accurately a celebration of many others whose work flows through me and for which I get the credit. So I'm going to thank them very quickly:

* My parents, Kathleen Leonard and Tommy Leonard. Kathleen is here. Anything you see of my work is just the embodiment of their values, so I thank them for that and for trusting me when I opted to take a path instead of ones that would have been more lucrative and frankly would have given them a lot more comfort with the likely security of my life going forward.

* My fiancée, Emma Holly Jones, who has kept me sane, and humble, and ambitious when I have found it difficult to be any of those three things.

* Rowena Arguelles, first boss in this business, who hired me despite my having no experience whatsoever, treated me well enough that I didn't run away screaming and remains a close friend and daily inspiration.

* Nina Shaw, my lawyer and mentor, who has, with endless patience, reminded me of reality when I've been untethered.

* And maybe most importantly, the rest of the Black List team: Olga Vasileva, Olivia Mascheroni, Lauren Brown, Kate Hagen, Megan Halpern, Terry Huang, and Dino Simone.

On their behalf, thank you for honoring all of our work.

It's sort of surreal and it couldn't be more appropriate that I am here in midtown Manhattan accepting this award from James Schamus, because the real notion of working in film began here in New York, eight blocks away (avenue blocks but still), with an article in May of 2002 about James Schamus. In the year that followed, Kim's Video and the film section of the Barnes and Noble in Union Square and that was really the primary source of my film education.

That film education led me to two conclusions that I assumed, rather naively, would be quite obvious to anyone who had spent any time on the subject:

The first is that movies matter, in a real substantive way.

And the second is that movies don't exist without writers. Producers don't have anything to produce. Directors don't have anything to direct. Actors have nothing to say. Like Amy [Sherman-Palladino] just said, it all starts with a script.

As a consequence of that, writers were entitled to an inordinate amount of respect and admiration. Veneration even.

I quickly discovered upon moving to Los Angeles – and I suspect most of you assembled here already know – that that worldview was not universally shared.

My work, and the work of the Black List generally, is a response to that realization.

Our north star was, is, and always will be celebrating great screenwriting and the people who do it.

You go into rooms alone and will worlds into existence. You are the creators of the myths and legends that span the globe, the mothers and fathers of our understanding of how we have lived, how we live now, and how we might live in the future.

It is incredibly surreal to be on stage tonight for bringing honor and dignity to screenwriters, when I fundamentally believe that screenwriters, uniquely in the world, have the ability to bring honor and dignity to so many others.

And you do.

But while I have this platform – and while I have any platform other than Twitter – I ask that you do more. Look around this room. Look at the stories that we have told.

I ask you to tell the stories of the people whose stories haven't yet been told. The women, the people of color, the poor, the gay, the trans, the people who are all of the above.

Find other writers who can and will do so and give them what they need so that they can be in this room nominated for the awards that you're nominated for and collecting the awards that you're receiving tonight.

It is good for business. It is good for the culture. It is good for the world, and you, you writers, are the only ones who can.

Whatever happens, I and the Black List will be here to help.

Until tonight, I always believed that helping writers was our greatest honor.

It is perhaps only exceeded by your belief that we have in some way.

Thank you so much. It has been the honor of my life.