



RWA Awards Luncheon Speech

Given by
Sherrilyn Kenyon

June 30, 2011

You know, I often joke with my hubby that one day he's going to come home and I'll have #1 NYT bestselling author tattooed across my forehead.

I'm seriously not joking. It is the most miraculous and surreal thing imaginable to me. Kind of like when they handed my sons to me after they were born and actually let me leave the hospital with them. What? Are you people nuts? I don't know what I'm doing with this. OMG, it's leaking out both ends! Help!

I wish I could say publishing was easier than parenting, but it's really not.

I spent many years attending writers conferences as both a published and unpublished writer, sitting at big round tables, wondering... well A) will I ever be published and B) what would it be like to have the honor of being a keynote speaker.

I have to say it seriously doesn't suck... but it is very scary.

And as I sat down to think of what all of you might want or need to hear, it forced me to walk back through my life and my career. Something I honestly try not to do because well... I always say there are two things you never want to ask me about. Publishing and pregnancy because I'll scare you off both.

But the theme of being a writer is stories. Everyone has one and so I wanted to share mine along with some unvarnished truths. We are all the heroes and heroines of our own lives. And as Kalil Gibran once wrote "Your daily life is your temple and your religion. When you enter into it take with you your all." Of course, he's also the man who said, "Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls; the most massive characters are seared with scars." Anyone who's been in publishing for five minutes knows the truth of this.

You can't look at anyone and tell what they've been through. Ever. The deepest scars are never the ones

that mark our skin. They are the ones that mar our souls. Unknown and unseen by everyone, but felt deeply by those of us who bear them and we can never fully escape their wrath.

Like the characters in our hearts, they whisper in our ears as a constant companion. They tell us we're not good enough. Smart enough. Talented enough. That we don't deserve our dream. That we're stupid. Fat. Ugly. Those voices are the hardest thing to let go of. Twice as hard when critics and others, especially those who claim to be well meaning, give an exterior voice to them.

Other people say that when the going gets tough, the tough get going. What they never talk about is finding the courage inside you to pursue a dream when it seems like even heaven itself has conspired to keep it from you. When obstacle after obstacle is not only thrown at you, but dropped on top of you with such force that you feel like Wile E. Coyote. But notice, Wile E. never once stopped pursuing the Road Runner. No matter how badly squashed he was, he always dusted himself off and kept going after his dream.

If you take only one thing away from this speech today, I want it to be a belief that you can achieve any and every dream you hold in your heart. That you have the power to be whatever is it you decide.

Your living isn't determined by what life brings to you as it is by the attitude you bring to your life. It is hard to make lemonade out of lemons. No one knows this better than I do.

But you have to keep fighting.

One of the family stories we have is about my great grandfather who ended up in a fight with another man who pulled a knife out and stabbed him. He ended up with an infection and was told that he only had days to live while the other man was virtually unharmed. At sixty-three years old, he snarled at the doctor, "Ain't no man gonna kill me and live to tell it." So he got up and went to the man's house to continue the brawl. This time, the man tried to shoot him and in the scuffle for the gun, my great grandfather killed him.

He went on after that to live another thirty-four years.

If that's not tough, I don't know what is.

As a girl, I was never allowed to complain about anything. You have to remember, my father was a drill sergeant who believed that no matter how hard you worked, you could always do better.

And that was my sympathetic parent.

My parents had one basic belief. The world will not take mercy on you. Your enemies will not take mercy on you and I will not be doing you any favors if *I* take mercy on you.

That was from my mother which tells you a lot about my childhood. I wish I could say it was happy, but it wasn't. It was the kind of childhood people use to justify criminal behavior.

But that which does not kill us... serves as a motivational speech for others.

Every statistic I ever heard or read growing up said that I was destined to be a teen mother. A drug addict. Drop out. Most likely end up in jail at some point after having relationships with men who abused me. Some people brag that they were the first in their family to go to college. I'm one of only two in my family who graduated high school. As I said, you can't look at anyone and know what they've been through.

One of many things no one can tell by looking at me now is that I grew up with one of the worst speech impediments imaginable and I had a thick Appalachian drawl.

I was so mocked for my accent and speech by others over the years that I learned not to talk to anyone. And my husband can verify this. In college, even when class participation counted for an entire letter grade, I refused to speak in class. So when I say I'm nervous about being up here, it's on many levels.

In addition to not being able to stand up here and speak, I shouldn't be able to read... never mind write a novel. I am severely dyslexic. So severe that it even manifests verbally, especially when I'm tired. Another thing I was relentlessly mocked for and called stupid over. The only reason I can read today is because my older brother took me aside when I was in first grade and said, "I've already got one ignorant sister, I ain't having another. You gonna sit there, girl, until you're literate." And with a crumpled up Spiderman comic book, he taught me how to read.

I became a writer as a small child because it was how I coped with the trauma of my childhood. There is no worse feeling than to be completely at the mercy of others and to have no way out. For those of you in this room, and I know some of you are here, who know what I'm talking about, I am so sorry that you do. I wish I could make that better for you. But I made a vow to myself that if I could, by some miracle, make it out alive, I would never put myself back in that situation.

Oh but Fate was never going to make that vow easy on me.

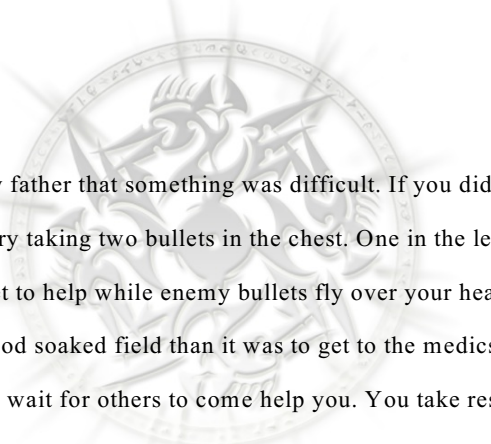
I wrote because in fiction, I could eviscerate all the evil in my world. I couldn't fight the real bullies and villains in my life, but I could slay them on paper. And I did.

I still do.

When I was five years old, before I could even read a book, and back when I was already drawing pictures to tell stories, I told my mother that when I grew up, I was going to be a New York Times bestselling author. My mother looked over at me with a mask of disbelief that I can see to this day and asked if I even knew what that was. "Nope. No idea. But it's on the front of a lot of the books you read, so I figure it must be good and since I want to be a writer when I grow up, that's the kind of writer I want to be."

She laughed, and she by far was not last one to do so.

But the one thing my childhood and family taught me was to fight for what I wanted.



You never could say to my father that something was difficult. If you did, he always countered with, “Girl, you don’t know what hard is. You try taking two bullets in the chest. One in the leg and then belly crawl over the bodies of men you call friends to get to help while enemy bullets fly over your head. It’d have been far easier for me to lie down and die that day in a blood soaked field than it was to get to the medics who were pinned down by gunfire and save my life. You don’t wait for others to come help you. You take responsibility for yourself. Life ain’t never easy. It ain’t supposed to be. But you do what you have to do to survive it. So don’t you dare tell me how hard you think it is.”

That battle my father talked about... he was one of only ten in his unit who survived it and he was only nineteen years old.

I think about that a lot whenever I want to whine about something. As my mother always said, as bad as you think you have it, trust me there’s someone out there who would change places with you in a heartbeat. My mother at sixteen gave birth to a daughter with severe cerebral palsy. The doctors told her that my sister wouldn’t live to see age fifteen and that she’d never walk. It took my mother nine long hard years, but she taught her to walk. Trisha will turn sixty-one this year and she’s walking to this day.

Sometimes impossible just means you have to try harder.

Growing up, I wrote through all the arrows outrageous fortune shot at me and by no means was I ever spared. And I was lucky, I published my first piece in a local paper when I was in third grade. And I made my first professional sale at age fourteen. I used that money to buy a subscription to Writer’s Digest magazine. I was on the school paper and yearbook staff. Anything I could do to be published, I would do. I guess the experts were right after all. I was a junkie, but my drug of choice was publishing.

Contrary to all the experts and odds, I made it to college where I was the editor for our school paper, and one of the three jobs I had to hold down to pay for it was as an editor for a small SF magazine. By then, I’d made numerous sales to national magazines. But do you want to know why I don’t have a degree in Creative Writing or Journalism?

They wouldn’t let me in the programs. I applied three times to the Creative Writing department and even though I was already published, the professor told me that I didn’t write well enough to be admitted. On the third try, she told me not to waste her time by applying anymore as the slots in her program were reserved for students who actually had futures as professional writers and that my writing... well, sucked. I couldn’t make it in Journalism because they had a typing requirement and my right hand is partially paralyzed. I can’t type on a regular typewriter so I couldn’t pass that test and they wouldn’t let me in even though I was an editor for the paper and a magazine.

While you may be able to measure a person’s aptitude or even their talent, what you can never measure is a

person's determination and their resilience. As my brother so often said it's not about the size of the dog in the fight, it's about the size of the fight in the dog.

My personal motto is: over, under, around or through. There is always a way to get to what you're trying to reach... just ask any toddler who wants a cookie from the top shelf. The only person who can stop me is me and I don't think enough of myself most days to let me be much of an obstacle.

At 20, I'd decided that I was going to finally write a novel and submit it. Don't get me wrong, I'd written dozens of novels by that point and I do mean dozens. But I was an editor so I knew they reeked. I spent what little free time I had writing the draft. During Christmas break, between my jobs, I diligently typed those pages on a typewriter that I'd borrowed from my older brother's roommate.

I will never forget when my brother, who as a teenager with a driver's license, had spent his entire summer teaching a six year old how to read, came to get the typewriter. "I know it's going to be a winner, baby. I can't wait to see it in print."

He died a few days later. Out of everything that had happened to me in my life, that was the hardest blow. He'd been my only light in many a bleak darkness. Needless to say, I tranked that book. I couldn't stand to look at it. I chucked all my writing. I crawled inside myself and to this day, a part of me died with him.

But fate wasn't through with me. My husband who had been my boyfriend before my brother died returned to my life with a vengeance. I always three people saved my life and kept me sane.

My brother who will always be my hero. My best friend Kim who gave me a copy of Kathleen Woodiwiss's *The Flame and the Flower* when we were thirteen. A book that gave me hope and showed me that a bad past didn't have to define the rest of my life. God bless romance and Kathleen Woodiwiss. I shudder to think where I'd have ended up had Kim not introduced me to a genre that finally empowered me. That showed me I didn't have to be a victim and that I could defy all odds. That even I could be loved by someone who would cherish me for who I was. Happy endings are possible even for those of us who don't really believe in them.

And the last, is my husband who showed me that heroes aren't just on paper. Real men are out there and they will stand by you and hold your hand through hell itself. And believe me, that poor man has been tested.

When I was moving in with him, he found my old notebooks with the manuscripts I'd written for years. He looked up at me and said, "I remember before we broke up that you were always writing something and plotting a new book or story. Why don't you do that anymore?"

I couldn't tell him then that after my brother's death, I didn't believe in dreams anymore and that I honestly expected him to abandon me at any moment like everyone else in my life had done or turn into a ferocious monster who abused and belittled me.

But that darn fate was still there and she wasn't through with me.

Have I mentioned that I really hate that bitch?

Anyway, like most newlyweds, we struggled hard that first year and honestly many years after. But that first year, I couldn't find a job even at McDonald's. I've never felt more worthless, which given my past is saying something.

In my darkest hour, my best friend who happened to be an editor for a magazine did the most incredible thing of all. She offered me work. "Now I know you haven't written in awhile, but if you're willing to do it..."

Oh my God, are you serious? I can get paid and not take off my clothes? I'm so there.

I hung up and went to the closet where my husband kept his old typewriter. Then I sat down on the floor—we had no furniture in our apartment at that time— and the moment my fingers touched those keys the most amazing thing happened. Every character. Every voice I'd silenced on that cold winter night when my brother had died, came back with a screaming clarity. I had no choice but to write.

When my husband came home that night, he was horrified and I don't blame him. He'd gone to work with a normal wife and come home to a stark raving lunatic. I was still sitting on the floor with tears streaming down my face and crumpled up pieces of paper all over.

"Um honey, are you okay?"

"Yes! I'm writing!"

In that moment, he saw his future and his nightmare. My husband has Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. So to keep from killing me over the paper mess on the floor, he, who has never believed in using credit for anything, took me out that night and charged a word processor, rickety card table and a ten dollar steno chair that he set up in the living room of our two room apartment. It was there I wrote my first ten novels.

Contrary to what I wanted, they didn't sell right away. But I joined RWA that year. I was finally going in the right direction again.

And I did what most of you have done. I entered contests and waited patiently by the phone, hoping some publisher somewhere would take pity on me. I wish I could say I'd finaled in the Golden Heart or Maggie or something, but I didn't. As an unpublished writer, I only finaled and won one award and that was the Mara.

Those were long hard years. I always say that it's easy to write a book when you have a contract. The hardest thing in the world is to write one when you don't know if it'll ever sell. At first, everyone's excited for you. You're writing a book— woohoo and then as time goes on and you don't become Nicolas Sparks overnight, that support dries up. In fact, one of the last things my father said to me before he died was that I should spend the money I was wasting on writing to buy lottery tickets. At least with lottery you'd win once in awhile.

But then the miracle happened. On Feb 3rd, 1992, I got the call that every writer dreams about. Well okay, even that was backward. I've never done anything the way I was supposed to. Instead of the editor calling me, I called her to interview her for another magazine I was working for. She mentioned my mss and I quickly assured her. "I'm not calling about that." I was terrified that she'd think I was harassing her.

"Oh, well I was going to call you later today about it. I want to buy it."

I was stunned. Ironically that was the same book I'd typed on that Christmas break that my brother had been so sure would sell. And in the next year, I went on to sell a total of six books. When they came out, they hit bestseller lists and at my first signing, I sold through all of my books in under 45 minutes. They went so fast that the writer sitting next to me kept gaping and asking if I was someone famous. "Who are you?"

Like most writers would, I thought I had a career.

But keep in mind that neither success nor failure is ever final. As quickly as it came to me, it left. And that was hard. Harder still was the fact that most of my writing friends abandoned me too as if they were afraid that what I had was contagious and they might catch it if they stood too close.

And when it rains, it pours. I've noticed that whenever a writer has trouble in their career, they have it in their personal life, too. I was no exception. My father died just after my first book came out. My mother was diagnosed with the same cancer that had killed him. My son was born prematurely a few weeks later. I was told twice to pick out funeral clothes for my baby. And I remember standing in the NICU telling God he could take anything from me. My career, my house, my car, just don't take my baby.

It was a bargain He accepted.

Because of the medical bills and the fact I'd lost my job due to the days I'd missed with him, we lost everything. I *was* homeless with an infant who had horrifying medical problems. While my husband was at work with our one and only car, my son and I would stay in the hospital waiting room, just in case, and because it was the one place you could stay for hours on end and no one thought anything about it.

When we were lucky enough to have a roof over our heads again, it was a roach infested apartment next door to drug dealers. I could not write this stuff, people. I wouldn't do this to my worst villain. We'd sold everything we had except my 286 DOS computer with a whopping 24 MB hard drive that used a 5.5 inch floppy- this was 1997- I had that as my computer until 1999. The only reason we still had it was that no one would give us anything for it. We didn't have cable TV. No internet. No phone. We couldn't afford it. I'd managed to hold on to my RWA membership only because my family and friends would take up collections at Christmas and buy it for me.

Nietzsche said that hope is the worst of all evils for it prolongs the torment of man. At times, he's right. And I was running out of hope. By 1998, it'd been over 4 years since I last sold a book. I'd tried every genre and every

story I could think of. If a new line opened, buddy, I was there for it.

Desperate, I sat down and wrote the most marketable book of that time. A regency set historical romance. How could I lose? My critique partners at that time were NYT bestselling Regency historical authors. It had every element that had made numerous authors famous. My critique partners loved it. My agent thought it was one of the best books she'd ever read and she eagerly sent it out.

Then one by one, the rejections rolled in again. Until the day my agent sent the worst one of all. And if any of you ever get a worse one, dinner's on me. That rejection? "No one at this publishing house will ever be interested in developing this author. Do not submit her work to us again."

Yeah. It devastated me. But you know what? I am grateful to this day for that editor and for those words. 'Cause I am Southern, y'all. The best way to fire me up is to try and kick me down. As my uncle Carlos so often said. We are Cherokee and we don't run. Sometimes we want to. Sometimes we ought to. But we don't run.

I decided right then and there that I would rather be a first-rate version of myself than a second-rate version of somebody else. If I was going to fail at this, I would do it on *my* terms and I'd do it writing the books *I* wanted to write. I have never since that day chased a marketing trend and I never will.

So after I unpacked the 286 computer I'd packed up in the box and swore I'd never touch again, I started writing the book I wanted to write for the first time in years. Now I knew that thing wasn't marketable. It was a pirate book set in 1791 and this is long before Pirates of the Caribbean. I sent it to my critique partners who read me the riot act and I don't blame them. They were right. No publisher had bought a pirate novel in years and even when they did none had been set in 1791. Was I out of my mind?

Well, of course I was. I'm a writer.

But that's never stopped me before. I sent it on to my agent who promptly reiterated everything they'd said and that I knew. More than that, she told me that we'd had a good run but that it was time to go our separate ways. I don't blame her. She was a great agent and she'd stood by me longer than most.

But without her, I had no way to submit. I couldn't afford to. Plus, my supportive hubby had become burned out after almost a decade of a fizzled career. And he had every right. I'd wasted a lot of money chasing a dream that kept eluding me at best and at worst, kicking me in my teeth. How could I take another cent from my family for this stupid dream?

I was through.

Until one fateful day when I pulled the RWR out of my mailbox. In it was a market update with a name I knew. Laura Cifelli had been added to the HarperCollins staff and was looking for submissions. My heart started pounding. I knew Laura. She'd been an editor at Dell, and for two years had tried to buy one of my books but

couldn't sell the unusual Dark-Hunter idea to marketing.

But I'd promised my hubby that I wouldn't waste anymore money. I debated and agonized and finally decided that I would give it one more shot and one more only. If Laura said no, I'd never, ever try again. So I sat down and wrote the most pathetic query letter you've ever seen. It actually started with, "You probably don't remember me." Laura had been my agent years back when I'd been selling and I was her first client. But I had no ego. I still don't.

In that query, I pitched her two novels. The pirate book everyone had told me would never sell and the one she'd held on to for so long about a Greek general who'd been cursed into a book that I'd written in 1994 as an option book for *Daemon's Angel*.

I'll be honest, I actually stole a single stamp out of my husband's wallet. I didn't dare take two because I knew with his OCD, he'd know they were missing and he'd know exactly what I'd done with them. Not to mention, if it was a rejection, I didn't want to see it. I didn't think I could take another one.

Three days later, I was changing my baby's diaper when my neighbor came running over. "There's a call for you on my phone and it's someone in New York."

I think I had a small stroke as I handed my baby to June and ran to catch it. It was Laura. Since the paranormal market was completely dead and Laura knew Julian's book was tied to a vampire series- something no one would touch back then, she passed on Julian's story. But she wanted to see the pirate book. I was too afraid to even hope. Not to mention, I didn't have the money to submit a partial.

But June was kind enough to offer to loan me the three dollars I needed. I worked on it all night long, after my hubby went to bed, and sent it off the next day with a lump in my throat.

Laura called back to offer me a three book contract. To this day, I'd throw myself under a bus for her. And that book with that pirate that I was told wouldn't sell. Is still, thirteen years later, in print. For one twenty nine cent stamp, my entire life was forever changed. Sometimes our lives are defined not by the big decisions we make, but by the small chances we take.

And for the record, my husband forgave me for raiding his stamp and I did pay June back.

Laura did so much for me. She helped me to get a great agent who did an awesome job, but who didn't want to handle the paranormal stuff. For one thing she'd never handled it before and for another, it still wasn't selling. No one, other than Anne Rice, had hit a list with a vampire novel in over twenty years. She asked me why I wanted to write the same stuff I'd been writing when my career tanked.

But I believed in those Dark-Hunter books. And I finally wore my agent down after much begging. She began submitting them and again, over and over, rejection from every corner. Until Jennifer Enderlin at St. Martins

saw it. When I heard Jen was willing to buy those first two books, I sat down and cried. There was no market for paranormal. No one was writing it then, no store wanted to carry it and everyone was convinced we wouldn't sell more than ten copies.

Against all odds and expectations, ten months before *Night Pleasures* came out, it had an overall Amazon sales ranking of #6. I was the first writer to take a paranormal novel to number one on a major list. I was the first one to take a historical paranormal novel into the top ten of the *New York Times* and thanks to my wonderful, incredible fans, I have since placed more at number one than any other paranormal author currently writing. I am the first genre author to put an SFR novel at number one since Johanna Lindsey did it in 1993 and I put two of them there last year and they were books out of the first series I'd ever sold. The same series that tanked my career on the first go round.

That being said, I am also the first author in RT history to get a one star rating- they used to only go down to three stars. As my luck would have it, they dropped all the way down to a 1 the very month my first book was published. And in spite of the successes I mentioned, and having placed over 50 novels on the NYT with twenty percent of them being number ones, I have never received an RT career achievement award.

I've never once finaled for a Rita. The closest I came was an anthology I was in where every writer in it finaled, but me.

And I'm really okay with that.

I only bring it up to show that careers aren't perfect.

I live my life by one principal. Do no harm.

Unfortunately, others don't share that and in this industry, we come across them a lot. But don't you dare let them win. Don't let them hurt you or stop you from going after your dream. The one thing I learned from my family is that there are people out there who can never be happy for someone else. They're only happy when they spread misery and attack others.

I could go on all day about writers who have tried to ruin me. I have been plagiarized, betrayed by people I thought were my friends, and very publicly ridiculed and attacked by some of the biggest writers in the business for no reason whatsoever.

Too many people think that the only way they can rise is to tear someone else down. But it doesn't work that way. No publisher ever stopped buying an author because someone new came along. No reader stops reading an author because a new one is published. They stop reading an author when that author disappoints them. One person's success has no bearing on anyone else's except to say that a rising tide will float all boats. We have a paranormal genre today because a tiny handful of us carved it out when it didn't exist. We proved it was viable and we opened the doors for many others and I am proud to be a part of that.

But unfortunately, no matter who you are or where you are in your career, someone is going to be jealous and they will attack you. They're going to say hurtful and mean things to you and about you. But don't despair. Just remember this old Japanese proverb. If you sit by the river long enough, you will see the body of your enemy float by.

My entire career has been built on the island of Long Shot. Believe me, no one is more stunned to see me standing here than I am. In fact, the first time I hit a major list, I was the one who called my editor to tell her. She actually didn't believe me. And she was stunned that I wasn't lying.

No, it's not easy for any of us at any level. But you know why we do this?

We do this... well mostly because we're insane. But we do it for those characters who live inside us. Only you can give them their voice. Only you can tell that story. Don't let them down. They're depending on you.

And we do this for all the readers out there who mean so much to us. Books saved my life. They gave me laughter when I needed it and they were my haven through many storms. And I want to pay that forward.

There is nothing more wondrous than having a reader tell you how much your story meant to them. If I could have one wish, it would be for all of you to have an easy rise straight to the top of the lists and to stay there until they engrave your name in that #1 slot. You can do it. I know you can. Remember that "Obstacles are those frightful things you see when you take your eyes off your goal."

Don't.

I hope the best seller fairy moves in and leaves you gifts constantly. But until she does, remember, it's not the hare that won the race. It was the ever diligent turtle who didn't stop for anything.

Never give up. Never surrender.

For every career that was built overnight and skyrocketed to the top, there were dozens more that took years to build and that list includes a writer named Dan Brown.

We Cherokee have a saying: There are many paths to the same place. The important thing is to make yours the happiest trail possible.

Thank you all and good luck. Now go write those books! I always need a good one to read!

