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Angells became 'guardian angels'

'Guardian angels'

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Kathy Fischer never met David Angell or his wife, Lynn, but they have touched her life in a way that the Nebraska native could never have imagined when she first decided to try writing for television.

David Angell, the Emmy-winning co-creator of "Frasier" and "Wings," and his wife of 30 years were among the nearly 3,000 victims of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. The American Airlines Flight 11 that the Angells expected to take them home to Southern California after a stay in Cape Cod became the first plane to hit the World Trade Center's North Tower shortly before 9 a.m. ET, five years ago to the day.

In June 2003, fresh out of UCLA, Fischer became the first recipient of the David and Lynn Angell Humanitas Comedy Fellowship. The \$10,000 stipend was designed to give promising student writers the chance to take the time to learn how to write for television. The annual fellowship is but one part of a significant philanthropic legacy the Angells left through the foundation the couple established in 1996 and through programs created in their memory during the past five years by their closest friends.

"I can't think of a better award to have David and Lynn's name attached to than the Humanitas fellowship," says writer-producer Dave Hackel, who was a close friend of the Angells and a member of the board of trustees that selects the winning fellowship entries. "As with any Humanitas award, there's a greater-good criteria that we're looking for in (submissions). We're always looking for a good laugh, but a good laugh that also makes you think. That's the kind of writer David was -- funny and thoughtful."

Fischer's winning script was a spec for the Fox comedy "The Bernie Mac Show" that involved the strong-willed title character having to learn more about his family members when he is pushed to decide how he will divide up his possessions -- particularly his James Brown record collection -- in his will. Of the four Angell fellowships bestowed to date, all have been based on spec scripts for existing shows: two for "Bernie Mac," one for NBC's "Scrubs" and this year for the peacock's "My Name Is Earl."

For Fischer, the attention of winning the Angell fellowship opened doors for her immediately. She landed an agent within weeks of the Humanitas awards ceremony and became a writers' assistant on the CBS comedy "Center of the Universe." Last season, she was a staff writer on the ABC comedy "George Lopez"; at present, she's busy turning out pilot and spec scripts.

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Fischer moved to Los Angeles to attend UCLA in 1999 after spending 10 years in San Francisco working as an advertising copywriter. She still marvels at the fact that when she set her sights on comedy writing, the first book she bought to help her learn the basics was a collection of "Frasier" scripts.

"It is just so bittersweet," Fischer says. "The tragic side is that the award I won was created in the memory of a man and his wife who died on Sept. 11 and all of what that means. And it ended up completely launching my career. ... For a while, I really felt as if they were my guardian angels."

The creation of the Humanitas fellowship was spearheaded by Garry Hart and Kerry McCluggage, who were then the top executives at Paramount Television and had worked closely with Angell and his partners, Peter Casey and David Lee, at Grub Street Prods. on the Paramount-produced "Frasier" and other shows. Angell's ties to Paramount stretched back to the early 1980s, when he, Casey and Lee met while working on the staff of NBC's "Cheers."

Paramount made a sizable donation to endow the Humanitas fellowship. So did Casey and Lee and Angell's longtime agents, Mitch Kaplan and Elliot Stahler. The Kaplan-Stahler-Gumer-Braun Agency also underwrites an annual tennis tournament that is a fundraiser for the Alliance for Children's Rights, a nonprofit group that aids underprivileged and abused children in Los Angeles County. The tournament preceded the Angells' death but has been rechristened the David and Lynn Angell Memorial Tennis for Tots Tournament.

"It was our way of helping to keep David and Lynn's spirit alive -- that great part of them that was very much concerned with children," Stahler says. "They had no children of their own, but they helped so many children through their philanthropy."

Indeed, the Angells were very active with several charities, particularly the Hillside treatment center for children and teenagers near the Angells' home in Pasadena; Lynn Angell, who had a master's degree in library science, volunteered regularly at the home and established its first library. Friends of the Angells say that if a child needed dental work or clothes or even help getting set up in their first apartment, the couple would quietly arrange with Hillside staffers to pay for it.

The Angell Foundation has continued to operate in the under-the-radar style favored by its founders. The Angells' estate, including all of David Angell's considerable continuing earnings from his backend participation in "Frasier" and "Wings" and other royalties, was transferred to the foundation, which at present has an endowment of about \$55 million and is expected to grow to \$100 million in time. The Angell Foundation is now run by a professional staff, including people who had handled the couple's business matters for nearly 20 years before their deaths. The foundation makes donations to other charitable groups and causes, with an emphasis on helping needy children, promoting education, social justice, the arts and spirituality. The foundation also makes an effort to seek out worthy causes in David's native New England and Lynn's hometown of Birmingham, Ala.

The Humanitas fellowship program would have been particularly gratifying to the Angells, given its emphasis on helping budding talents succeed in David's chosen profession, friends say. It's also helped some of the Angells' closest friends honor his memory in a constructive way. In addition to Hackel, trustees of the fellowship including Casey, Stahler, writers Tom Reeder and Jennifer Crittenden and Humanitas Prize president Frank Desiderio.

"Those of us who knew David laughed with him every day," Hackel says. "When we get together (for fellowship judging), we laugh. We remember the undercurrent of why David isn't here, but it's still about being funny, which is what he did for a living. It's not a time for tears."



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