

# Media Access Awards

## 2013

by Deborah Calla

The 2013 edition of the annual Media Access Awards — Hollywood's sole nod to outstanding TV/film portrayals of characters with disabilities — was stupendous.

Following on the footsteps of his predecessor — Media Access Awards 2012 host Jimmy Kimmel — Fred Willard entertained the 200 guests with off-the-cuff remarks about the awards and disability in the media.

The Media Access Awards were created in 1979 by Norman Lear, Fern Fields and Norman Brooks to raise the banner for the inclusion of disabled characters and storylines in movies and TV shows.

These awards, resurrected from the dead four years ago by the PGA, WGA, SAG-AFTRA, CSA and the Reeve Foundation, have regained their footing as the principal media showcase for disability in Hollywood.

Since 2010, the PGA has honored producers who develop and produce works supporting the accurate portrayal of people with disabilities with the Producers Guild of America George Sunga Award.

The first producer to receive the award was Mike Tollin for *Radio* — the touching portrayal of friendship between a mentally disabled teen and a high school football coach as well as for his documentary *Let Me Be Brave* about the struggle and success of 12 mentally disabled athletes overcoming tremendous obstacles while climbing Mount Kilimanjaro.

In 2011, the Producers Guild of America George Sunga Award was presented to Paul Stupin for his producing work on *Switched at Birth* — a groundbreaking ABC Family show about a girl who lost her hearing as a child. This year *Switched at Birth* produced an entire episode in sign language.

Shonda Rhimes was the recipient of the 2012 George Sunga Award for her body of her work. Shonda, together with her partner Betsy Beers, makes a point of creating a world of inclusion in every show she produces. Ms. Rhimes summed up her philosophy, saying: "People want to see people that look like them."

This year, it was Bruce Cohen, producer of Academy Award class films like *Milk* and *American Beauty*, the recipient of the 2013 Producers Guild of America George Sunga Award for *Silver Linings Playbook* — a movie about a man with bipolar disorder trying to get his life back on track. The film is in every way



Mike Tollin, Producers Guild of America George Sunga Award honoree, 2010.

an extraordinary film about a disability affecting nearly 6 million adult Americans.

*Silver Linings Playbook* struck a chord and was nominated for eight Oscars, with Jennifer Lawrence winning Best Actress, and was a certified box-office blockbuster.

The Producers Guild of America George Sunga Award, was presented to Cohen by an equally imminent producer and longtime friend and mentor, Frank Marshall (*Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *The Bourne Identity* series). Mr. Cohen, in receiving his award, spoke of the enormous response *Silver Linings* received from the mental health community, both those with bipolar disorder and their families.

RJ Mitte received the SAG-AFTRA Harold Russell Award for his work on *Breaking Bad*. Presenting him with the award was his show's mom, 2013 Emmy winner Anna Gunn.

The parade of entertainment luminaries continued on with Norman Lear himself receiving the Media Access Lifetime Achievement Award followed by David Shore, creator of *House*, and George R.R. Martin, creator of the source literature and one of the writer-producers for *Game of Thrones*. There were other distinguished awardees like Deedee Bradley, casting agent for the deaf-centric drama, *Switched at Birth*, and Jenni Gold, writer-director-producer of the new full-length documentary about the disabled in Hollywood, titled *Cinemability*. The Reeve Foundation, the most consistent supporter of these



Shonda Rhimes, Producers Guild of America George Sunga Award honoree, 2012.



From left, Frank Marshall, Deborah Calla, Norman Lear and 2013 Producers Guild of America George Sunga Award honoree Bruce Cohen.

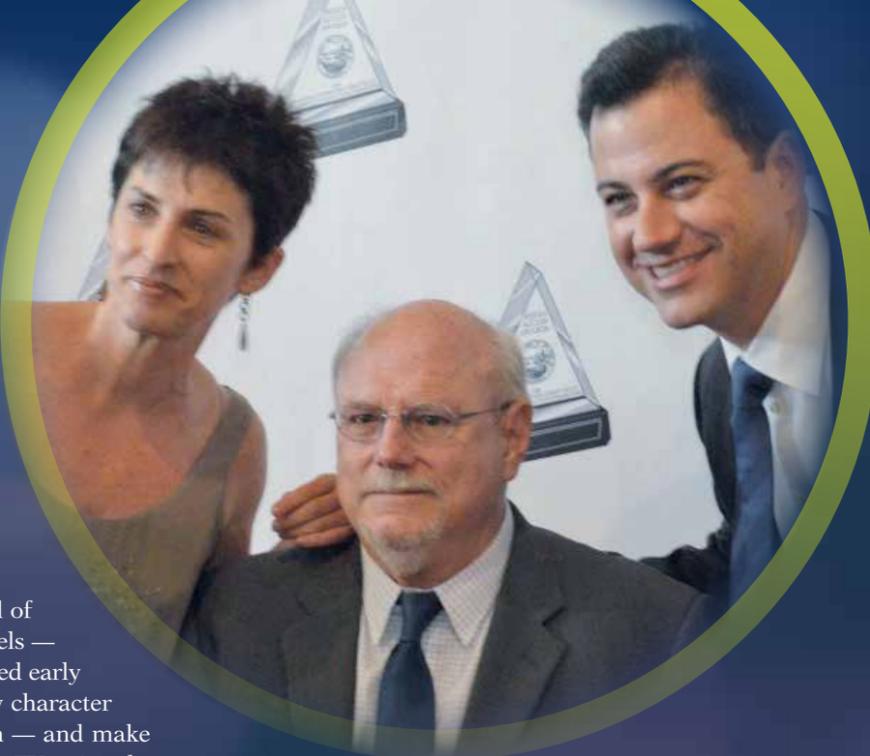
awards, gave their annual acting scholarship to a bright young actor, Santina Muha.

David Shore, the man who brought the world the dyspeptic doctor with a debilitating leg injury, Gregory House, summed up his contribution to the cause of disability like this: "It is strange," he said, "that I am being honored for showing the world that a person with a disability could be an asshole."

He went on: "That's what we as writers do when we do it well... we show that we are all the same."

It was the two much-honored veterans in the room, George R.R. Martin and Mr. Lear, who spoke with the wisdom of elders.

Mr. Martin, who wrote the source material of *Game of Thrones*, his epic series of fantasy novels — "A Song of Ice and Fire" — 22 years ago, realized early that in his fictional world, he could create any character of any type — paralyzed, blind, a little person — and make them an integral part of the drama. As a veteran TV writer, he discovered that supporting characters in a script were almost never described and almost always played by white men. So he began to describe them as "lawyer in wheelchair" or "female cop" and peppered his shows with genuine diversity. It's a small gesture that can make a big difference. As he said,



Media Access Awards 2012, from left, producer/chair Deborah Calla, writer/chair Allen Rucker and host Jimmy Kimmel.

"When you write about a man in wheelchair, you write about the man, not the wheelchair."

It was gratifying to see how moved these successful writers, producers, casting directors and actors were to receive this humble award, and none more so than Norman Lear, the man most responsible for changing the face and depth of American television in the last 50 years. Case in point: Norman Lear presented the first regular character with a disability into an American sitcom, Geri Jewel in *The Facts of Life*, in 1980, decades before anyone else made so bold a move. As Geri said in presenting the award, she owed her entire career to Norman Lear.

Mr. Lear talked about a friend's 17-year-old son with severe cerebral palsy. "His arms moving spastically, his face in a perpetual yawn... (he) made these guttural sounds" to mean words few could understand. But as Mr. Lear watched this young man light up when a friend entered the room, his thought was that "I was looking at the soul of the universe."

This kid, he said, is "the physical manifestation of our struggle, everyone's struggle. It's hard to be a human being. It's harder to be a human being with a disability. I'm not offering that as a negative. This is what life is. If you could sketch our

struggle, it would be that boy fighting so hard to connect to everyone walking and talking, whose lives are going. He likes to go, too, and the fact is, he is. We're all going." ♻️

*The Media Access Awards are chaired and produced by PGA member Deborah Calla and chaired and written by WGA member Allen Rucker.*



2011 George Suga Award honoree Paul Stupin (center) flanked by Marlee Matlin (left) and Katie Leclerk.

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