



Remembering Denis McGrath

The Writers Guild of Canada, the Canadian television industry, and Toronto Blue Jays fans lost a giant when longstanding Guild councillor Denis McGrath passed away in March. His wife, fellow writer Kim Coghill, and family and friends were joined in mourning by a community he fostered.

There aren't many TV writers who have been Wikileaks'd (when his episode of *The Border* about extraordinary rendition was mentioned in a diplomatic memo) and called out by the chairman of the CRTC (for being a staunch advocate for his profession), but McGrath made an exceptional impact.

His career began as a producer for TVOntario, Citytv and Space. In 2002 he wrote the script and lyrics to *Top Gun! The Musical*, one of the most successful shows in the history of the Toronto Fringe Festival.

Some of his notable television credits included *X Company*, *Less Than Kind*, and *Continuum*. He was nominated for a Gemini and won a WGC Screenwriting Award for his 2007 miniseries *Across the River to Motor City*, and in 2015 he was awarded the Writers Block Award for exceptional service to the Guild and for strengthening the Canadian screenwriting community.

His influential blog, *Dead Things on Sticks*, helped connect a community of screenwriters across the country and at times it served as an extension of his mentorship to upcoming writers, which also included teaching at his alma maters Ryerson University and the Canadian Film Centre.

Canadian Screenwriter asked some of his friends and colleagues to share their thoughts on Denis's legacy. →

The social media

“Write yourself into something better”



WGC President Jill Golick and Executive Director Maureen Parker with Denis McGrath, following his Writers Block Award win in 2015.

Maureen Parker
Executive Director
Writers Guild of Canada

Denis was prepared to use his voice at Canadian heritage and the CRTC to ensure Canadian writers have a place in our industry. And they noticed — Denis used social media effectively and had a large following. Because he was smart and articulate. Even the chair of the CRTC followed Denis on Twitter, although he was not a fan. In fact he was so moved by Denis's Tweets that he publicly mentioned Denis during a CRTC licence hearing, drawing Denis's comments to the Guild's attention. At a hearing! Unbelievable. Unprecedented. That's our Denis.

Greg O'Brien
Publisher/Editor
cartt.ca

I was always impressed at his courage. You encounter a lot of people in this industry who are afraid to speak their mind because they fear losing job prospects. That didn't seem to afflict him. He was quite willing to speak no matter what it was, and take on whoever he thought needed taking on. He had a way of expressing himself that coalesced what a lot of people were thinking but didn't know how to say.

Wil Zmak
Screenwriter, *Bitten*,
and *CFC contemporary*

It's almost like there was before Denis's blog and after Denis's blog in Canadian television. Before Denis's blog there wasn't a lot of socializing and being together with other writers. There were the writers you worked with on shows. You knew them, and you sort of loosely knew other writers. But after Denis started his blog across the country all of a sudden there was a community of writers getting built up. The blog was the centre of it in a lot of ways.

The work

“The best idea wins”

Hugh Dillon
Musician/Actor/Writer

I like that he called bullshit on everything. He's very much a punk rocker. I like his willingness to challenge because in the challenge you make things better, and you make people think. One of my favourite things he'd say when I would accept a point he had, but I had a counterpoint that I thought was better, he would say: “Well you're not wrong.” He wouldn't say “you're right.” I loved the semantic game. I'd mount some giant argument just to have it be “you're not wrong.”

Daegan Fryklind
Creator, *Bitten*

He had pretty much taken up Friday night residency at The Paddock, so I knew if I was up for it, and needed to blow off steam, there was always a giant hug and a place to vent. And writers love to vent. But he would also spin the vent towards action. It wasn't enough to sit and stew, there had to be momentum towards change. If you didn't love where you were or what you were doing, write yourself out of the trench. There was always that marching drum he'd bang: “write yourself into something better.”

Tom Hastings,
Director, *Independent Production*,
Bell Media

For me, it always meant so much to have his stamp of approval on shows I worked on as I had and will always have the highest regard for his honest critical tastes. Sometimes I would share early material with him to get his take and thoughts on how it was or wasn't shaping up. I'd always feel invigorated as we discussed the messy industry we both work in — albeit from different sides — and how we just wanted to do our best. I have heard many writers over the years talk about how they are better writers because of Denis. I am a better network exec because of Denis.

WGC Executive Director Maureen Parker and Denis McGrath.



PHOTO (PREVIOUS SPREAD): HELEN TANSEY; PHOTO (OPPOSITE): CHRISTINA GAPIC; PHOTO (THIS PAGE): TERRY MARK

The advocate

“You can always try shooting a blank page”

Virginia Thompson,
Executive Producer at Sphere Media Plus, Ryerson Classmate

The Canadian TV biz is cliquy. It's stuck in old structures and deeply resistant to meaningful change. And that's a problem. We must embrace Canadian stories and value them domestically and internationally. We must create new structures and funding models, evolve our institutions, embrace change, and recognize that Canada's voice is our biggest asset as a culture, as a creative industry, and as a nation or we'll be left behind. Denis saw this and called it. He was a change-maker. He made things better for all of us and raised the bar very high to meet his expectations.



Mike Kiss
Screenwriter, Ryerson Contemporary

He started talking about the Canadian television industry in a different way: as though he loved it. I wasn't used to that. Among critics. Among viewers. Among my classmates. Even some of my colleagues seemed to have two noses — the one they'd turn up at the product, and the one they'd try to shove through any crack to get inside. Denis was part of that change. The industry feels more respectful of itself than it did when I was in school. And I think the close attention he paid to the industry made the industry pay more attention to us.

Rob Sheridan
Screenwriter, CFC Contemporary

When he would still host the so-called “Writer's Mafia” party at the Paddock Tavern during the Toronto International Film Festival, Denis had three different buttons made up, which in retrospect form the holy trinity of the entire McGrath perspective. One said “Best Idea Wins,” which perfectly illustrates his generosity. The second button said “Showrunners are writers,” a button I found confusing until my first truly unhappy experience with a non-writing producer. The last one was the perfect distillation of every exhausted writer's thought at the end of a

long day, having re-broken the same story for the fifth time because someone outside the room demanded it. “You can always try shooting a blank page.” I always liked that button best. Passive and aggressive. Just what you'd expect from an American in Canada.



Opposite: Dennis Heaton and Denis McGrath;
Top: WGC Council, 2016. From left to right: Mark Ellis, Denis McGrath, Jill Golick, Dennis Heaton, Andrew Wreggitt, Michael Amo, and Anne-Marie Perrotta;
Left: Denis McGrath and Mark Ellis;
Above: Denis McGrath and his lovely wife, screenwriter Kim Coghill

The mentor

“Eventually ... you’re going to need to hire me”

Martin Gero
Screenwriter, Ryerson Student

We all loved Denis. There was a whole generation of Ryerson students who came out of that program. He was also a great supporter of anyone who had ever been under his wing. He would always go to Fringe shows, he would always go to plays, you would see him at screening nights. He was a real active participant in all of our burgeoning careers. He loved it all. He loved theatre, he loved film, he loved music, and he wasn’t someone who did that from afar.

Shelley Eriksen
Screenwriter, Republic of Doyle/
Continuum

I had the experience of him being my boss. I’m one of the few. Denis had energy, which you need, and a great ability to listen, to get engaged and sit back sometimes and let other people run with the ball. And the laugh. You could score the laugh and you’d be on to something. There are a lot of people who don’t understand the difference between being a leader and being a boss and he did. He guided. That’s all Denis ever wanted to do in all of his work, was to help you realize all of your potential.



Above: Denis McGrath supporting fellow screenwriters during the 2007-08 WGA strike;
Opposite: Peter Mohan, Denis McGrath, and Stephanie Morgenstern, at a 2008 rally in support of Canadian culture.

Rachel Langer
Screenwriter

The year I was in Toronto for the CFC he asked, “You’re going to the Writers Guild Christmas party, right?” And I said “No, I’m not a member.” He said “You’re on the list now.” Every time he’d put in a word for me or make a recommendation or phone call or get me into some Guild event I’d say “Thank you, you’re so generous” and he would laugh and say “Well, you know, eventually you’re going to get a show and you’re going to need to hire me because no one else will.” That was his answer every time — he would pretend it was self-serving.

The call to action

“There is nobody else. There’s just you”



Mark Ellis
Co-creator and Childhood Friend,
X Company

He put his career on the line over and over again by saying out loud what few dared to do. And he wasn’t just defending writers, he was defending an industry, he was defending the right of all Canadians to have a national culture. I think Denis McGrath never broke out as a showrunner because he stuck out his neck before his career had fully matured. There are a lot of showrunners and senior writers who owe a debt to Denis for the championing he did on their behalf. It’s time for us all to step up and fill the void he’s left behind. Yes, it’s risky to negotiate with producers, to spar with governments and commissioners and networks. But what careers will we have if we don’t? I think Denis put it best when he said: “I encourage each and every one of you to punch through your fear and to speak up for what you believe. ... Today is the day not to sit back and let someone do your fighting for you. There is nobody else. There’s just you. Be the change.” ■

To contribute to The Writers Guild of Canada’s Denis McGrath Memorial Fund dedicated to Canadian screenwriters, visit wgc.ca/denismcgrathfund

Dennis Heaton,
Screenwriter and Showrunner, Motive

There’s always going to be advocates — that’s why we have the WGC Council. There’s eight people already acting as advocates for the writing industry. I think we’re all inspired by Denis to continue on. But I honestly don’t know if we’ll see somebody who is so eloquent and so passionate and so fierce in his commitment for a while. Unless we clone him. Which I am seriously considering.

Simon Barry,
Creator, Continuum

I know he inspired me to be more Denis-like in ways which are good for me and for other people, and I think others will honour Denis by not holding their tongue in times when they might have in the past, in not turning away when they see something that they disagree with or see hypocrisy or injustice happening in front of them, professionally or in life.