

Working for a Cause With Your Writing

A Keycon Presentation Speech by David Lightfoot

My name is David Lightfoot, and I'm here to speak about writing fiction for the purpose of fundraising. I hope you'll find this hour to be inspirational.

How many of you here work as a professional fundraiser for a non-profit organization? What's the cause you're trying to promote, or what cause would you be interested in promoting? Breast cancer or diabetes awareness? Stopping domestic and family violence? Empowering women and girls? World peace? Or is it just to make your community or the world a better place for people and families?

Now, here's another question for you: have you ever thought of writing a novel themed around that cause as a fundraising project? I have, and I'm here to tell you about that, along with the sports celebrity whom I admire, and who inspired me as a writer myself, to take this plunge.

First, let me tell you about the writing project. For almost a decade now, I've noticed that fantasy-romance-action book sagas for teen readers are a big literary trend. You have *Twilight*, *The Hunger Games*, *The Mortal Instruments* and *Divergent*; these books are major best-sellers. Soon, you see other wannabe Stephenie Meyers and Cassandra Clares coming up with their own story serials where teenage girl and supernatural teenage boy team up to save mankind, fall in love, but mostly do both. They tell these stories in the form of four or five books, and these books are lining the shelves in the Teen Fiction section of bookstores such as Chapters and Coles. In the entertainment realm, superhero movies and television shows are super hot. This led me to decide that the cartoon and comic book heroes needed their own saga, and create a new martial arts team called the Super-Human Martial Brothers.

In *The Glory of Love* saga, the Super-Human Martial Brothers live in a metropolis that is found on a tropical island, called Crystal Isle. Each brother has a special weapon or special power that is fundamental for him to help fight crime against an organized crime family called the Kensingtons. However, like most superheroes, each brother has his own weakness; and one of the brothers, Nightvisor, has the weakness of loneliness. He has to have the love of a special, beautiful girl, a girl who would deeply love him as he would love her, to give him the strength to help fight. Without that love, he is weak and cannot fight. Who wouldn't want to read a book like that? However, over time, the books will be less Nightvisor-centric, and I'll focus on another brother as he is inspired by Nightvisor to give love a chance. By the end of the series, I hope to have all the brothers with girlfriends all their own.

Now, to the one who inspired me to go the philanthropic route. His name, ladies and gentlemen, is Norman Julius Esiason, aka: Boomer Esiason, an ex-quarterback for the National Football League, who spent much of his football career with the Cincinnati Bengals and the New York Jets; and a celebrated radio and television personality in the field of sports. He does a morning show on WFAN in New York City, a station I don't get on my radio; but I do get CBS, where he does television currently, and Boomer Esiason is the **only** reason why I watch *The NFL Today* from September to January. I admire the way he gets to the heart of the matter on issues on and off the sports fields, and the way he's so professional and straight-forward. And besides, he looks like a movie star! I remember watching him on television without his football helmet, blond hair and all – and this was when I was in my late teens going into my twenties, and he was in his 30s and 40s, and I'm thinking, "God, I would kill to have his looks."

All joking like that aside, another major reason why I admire him so much is the way Boomer is with his family, and what he has done for children and charities.

It all started when I was in high school, and I was in the library, and I read an advertisement article about him in *Sports Illustrated* when he was named the Walter Payton Man of the Year, and this happened following the 1995 NFL Season. Boomer has a son named Gunnar, and when the boy was only two years old, he was diagnosed with Cystic Fibrosis. Cystic Fibrosis, a genetic disease which causes mucus and other weird stuff to show up in your lungs, pancreas, intestines, kidneys, and affects the child's breathing; affecting more than 30,000 people in the United States, and 70,000 people worldwide. Today, people living with CF can expect to live to age 40, as opposed to just four years old fifty years ago, but there's still no cure.

Reading about how this diagnosis devastated him as a father just caused my heart to break. However, the love he had for his son drove him to start the Boomer Esiason Foundation for Cystic Fibrosis Research. From the moment I learned about this, I developed a deep admiration for him. I really did admire the close relationship that he had with Gunnar when he was growing up. Not joking here: I was constantly comparing the two of them to Spike and Tyke from the *Tom and Jerry* cartoons.

Another ad article I read in the same magazine about a couple of years later talked more about Gunnar's diagnosis, which led to the creation of the foundation, and how Boomer would do anything to raise money for research and awareness, "from writing a children's book to selling barbeque sauce."

"*Writing a children's book.*" In the first place, I'd wanted to be a writer for about five years then, and anyone who knew me then and now knew that I had superb writing and storytelling talent. Those four words inspired me to choose this very foundation to target my talents to, and I decided that Boomer Esiason was the very man that I wanted to work for, even though he lived in the United States and I lived in Canada. And yes, he *did* write a children's book, a nonfiction book that chronicled a year in his childhood. Its title is *A Boy Named Boomer*, and he also expanded his writing career by producing a

football-themed novel for adults about corruption in the sport, *Toss*, which I believe was also a fundraising project. (Both books are out of print now, but you can still find them on major bookselling sites such as Amazon and Barnes and Noble.) Later, he wrote a column for the National Football League website, which I followed religiously; some columns I would read multiple times. Combine that with his media experience, and I became obsessed with him without becoming a celebrity stalker.

Yet what has Boomer written for teenage readers, some of whom also have Cystic Fibrosis? Nothing, that's what. That's why I decided to help this foundation out.

But there was one problem: I was still living with my father in Portage la Prairie during my post-secondary education years (including studying creative writing at home through correspondence.) I had no money of my own, no way of paying for things, and my father wouldn't let me move out because not only would he be lonely, but he was *so sure* that I wouldn't survive on my own in a city like Winnipeg. I had no resources to bring my writing career to fruition, and I was wondering if this dream would ever be realized. That's why I was so happy when I finally moved here in 2008, at the age of 29.

I joined the Society of Manitobans with Disabilities in the spring of 2009. (I've lived with Cerebral Palsy since birth.) At first, this was for vocational rehabilitation to help me find employment, but shortly after I started, I joined Adult Leisure and Recreation, and shortly after that, I began work at the Helping Hands Resource Centre for Immigrants, a not-for-profit centre which used to be at Knox United Church on Edmonton Street. I was learning how to budget my money, and I figured that if I couldn't give money to a charity, I might as well go work for one. This organization caters to newcomers to Canada, as well as Canadian-born citizens, and is run by Rachel Alao, a woman Christian evangelist who lives to reach out to others, and encourages them to educate themselves to become successful citizens and "maximize their potentials." I was working as an administrative assistant, writing up her correspondence and helping her plan programs catering to immigrant men, women, youth and families. I liked my work and was very good at it, but it wasn't going to be my career. So, in the spring of 2014, after five years of dedication, I told Rachel it was time to move on. She always encouraged people to develop their talents and put them to best use, and I told her that I was inspired to use my writing talents for good.

My original intent was to get my writing into the high schools as part of their English curriculums. But in September 2013, I self-published my first novel, *Broken Family Portrait*, and launched it McNally Robinson the following January. Not only am I trying to get it into universities in multiple courses, but this has attracted the attention of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, which has led me to become a partial advocate in disability rights for dignity, fairness and respect. Best of all, because SMD was a big supporter in my launch, I decided to give back to them by donating a portion of the sales from each book.

About the same time I left Helping Hands, I also decided to put my plan into motion. So I called the Boomer Esiason Foundation and told them I was interested in donating my unpublished writings to them. I even sent a four-page letter detailing my interest to them, and why I wanted to work for and with Boomer, and I even sent the foundation a copy of *Broken Family Portrait*. In early June of 2014, a volunteer at the foundation by the name of Mike Hill called, so when I talked to him and explained my intent to volunteer my talent, he took an interest in me.

So, you're probably wondering: how does this process work? I send them the novels by e-mail (MS Word or PDF), and if I impress them well enough to agree, they will take that novel and represent me to a publisher. When the novel is published, a portion of the book sales will go to Cystic Fibrosis research, in this case. I had some unpublished works that I thought the foundation would love and agree to take.

- *Hollie Springwood*, a young adult novel about a young Canadian woman who journeys to the United States for love and independent living, in hopes of seeing these two countries end their rivalry
- *Saving Kieran Camp*, another young adult novel about a teenager who is forced into a hardcore criminal gang in Winnipeg and is desperate to escape, and turns to a kind-hearted police officer to help see him out – despite the fact that this gang despises the cops, and the cops have a doubtful sense about criminal youth
- *Keelson's Mistake*, a short children's story (intended with illustrations) about a young warlock who uses magic powers to bring sick animals back to health
- *Real Adventures in a Comic Book*, a short children's novel about a ten-year-old boy who travels to the world of his favourite comic book heroes and participates in their adventures to help save their city from evil – pretty similar to what I'm doing.

I sent all these works to the foundation, but when I told Mike about them, and about the *Glory of Love* saga, this whole action, adventure, romance thing, he told me they were chiefly interested in novels with a Cystic Fibrosis or sports theme. I would have a total CF theme in my novel, but there are two things: I don't have any kids of my own, and I don't think anybody in my family has been affected by Cystic Fibrosis directly. But I wasn't going to let this stop me. So I told Mike that I would put a Cystic Fibrosis or sports connection into the *Glory of Love* books.

In my first novel, *The Glory of Love*, I created a major character named Jordan Butler, a socialite from another metropolis mentioned in the book called Liberty City (with a couple of brief scenes set there.) She comes to Crystal Isle with reputation where, when you think of her, you think of Kim Kardashian. I had this concept with the mindset that if ol' Kimmy would actually find a cure for CF, as well as diabetes, HIV/AIDS and various cancers, I'd be halfway impressed. I will read selected excerpts later if we have time, but the reader is not introduced to Jordan until the dinner party scene in Chapter 2.

Jordan was married to a singer named Peter Stevens, who makes a very rare appearance in the book, if ever. Now, imagine that Boomer Esiason had an older child – son or daughter – before Gunnar. This child would not have Cystic Fibrosis, but would go on to be a successful pop star. Imagine the money the Boomer Esiason Foundation would get if this were actually true. Imagine a pottrion of concert ticket sales, album sales, money earned from promotion endorsements, being used to fund Cystic Fibrosis research and awareness. If he and his wife, Cheryl, *did* have another son who didn't have CF and could sing; or if their daughter, Sydney, had any singing talent, it would've meant major publicity for *American Idol*. Anyway, so Peter Stevens is the pop star son of a very famous athlete named Matthew Stevens, who also got into sports media when he retired, and is also a known advocate in the fight against CF. I even modelled the father after Boomer in terms of his looks. But I wanted to distance Matthew Stevens from Boomer Esiason just a little bit, so I made him a baseball player.

So back to Jordan Butler. Jordan was exiled from Liberty City because her numerous cheating trysts made her that unbeloved in the city. She even tried to pull a hot one on her own father-in-law, and basically, much of North America sees her as a bad role model the same way they do Kim Kardashian. Supposedly, Jordan was throwing money at the Matthew Stevens Foundation the whole time she was married to Peter, but had no involvement in the planning and execution processes, and this made her a “philanthropist.” Jordan is attracted to Nightvisor, but these facts about her turn him off. In hopes to win his love, Jordan goes to work at a Cystic Fibrosis non-profit called the Just Breathe Foundation, planning social events, including a “Manitoba social” in Chapters 11 and 12, and the foundation's fundraising gala in Chapter 28.

Jordan does great work for Just Breathe, but at this time, Nightvisor is already dating Jennifer Maitland, who works for the same non-profit. In Chapter 17, during a Just Breathe fundraiser, an event called the “Summer in Winter” bash, the restaurant and nightclub where it's held catches fire, and Jennifer is killed, and during Nightvisor's mourning period, Jordan makes her first move, thinking her love for him can help him get past Jennifer.

Nightvisor's relationship with Jordan is about as stormy as Rhett Butler's relationship is with Scarlett O'Hara from *Gone With the Wind*. Without giving away too much, Jordan becomes more and more involved with Cystic Fibrosis charity work, and doesn't pay very much attention to her boyfriend. She's already proved herself to him, so now he feels he can't fight and save the city without Jordan's love. But, just like with Natalie Macdonnell earlier in the book and throughout, this love is unrequited, and although Nightvisor works hard to save Crystal Isle from an impending threat, he still feels insecure in this relationship. Unfortunately, this is one of many things that causes the breakdown of the relationship in the falling action.

In my second book, *Lovers in a Dangerous Time*, I put a pro football connection into the plot. In the first place, this book is inspired by and loosely based upon Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet*. The main plotline here is that King Vidor and the Kensingtons want to

rid Crystal Isle of the Super-Human Martial Brothers, so they gather up all the youth gangs in the city, group them up properly, disguise and train them as the brothers, and have them wreak havoc on the city. Not to mention the fact that there's a crime show host who is blaming the brothers for all the crimes that make the news. Everyone outside their closest allies believes this host, the new mayor of the city wants them brought to justice, and the brothers soon lose their reputation as good guys. Meanwhile, Nightvisor, in his quest to find true love to make him secure enough to fight, falls passionately in love with the mayor's daughter, Shaylene Goldsmith.

Now, to the football connection. As you may know, in *Romeo and Juliet*, Paris was the man whom Juliet was originally supposed to be married to, fixed up by her father as was custom in Shakespeare's time. Here, I created two football teams in Crystal Isle, the Warriors and the Tsunami, and two Paris characters, one playing for each team as quarterback. These quarterbacks, Neil and Scott Jameston, are the son and nephew of the aforementioned TV host who is also friends with Shaylene's father. So it's pretty fitting that they would set her up with Neil and Scott and have her choose between the two. There's just one small problem: Shaylene doesn't follow football or sports in general, and she's not very keen on being the wife of a pro football player. However, Shaylene's family lets her know of their disapproval of her and Nightvisor together, and they push the cousins – both of whom are interested in her – onto Shaylene to keep her and Nightvisor apart. The ironic thing is, Shaylene's experiences with Neil and Scott, and their respective teams, make her want Nightvisor even more. And unlike Neil and Shaylene, and Scott and Shaylene, the romance and passion between Nightvisor and Shaylene just oozes in the novel.

It's still a work in progress, but the connection begins in Chapter 2, where the future mayor, Lawrence Goldsmith gets together with Neil's parents to plan matches between her and their son and nephew. Another example of this connection occurs in Chapter 18, where Shaylene is in a private suite in the football stadium with the owner of the Tsunami, who is Scott's father, and she's watching a Tsunami game.

I am also planning another Cystic Fibrosis connection in my third book, as well as a general sports connection in my fourth book. This will leave only the fifth and last book without either connection. Nevertheless, I am hoping the Boomer Esiason Foundation will take all five books in the saga. I also wish to write a sports-themed novel for teen readers as well, and I have a couple of ideas.

Now, here's the question of the hour, I'm sure – how can *you* write a novel for fundraising purposes? It can be easy if you believe you can pull it off, but it takes major steps.

- **Know some things about the non-profit organization you've picked.** Pick a cause you care about most. Maybe it's a cause that is close to your heart, or somebody you love is affected by it, and you think they need a cure. Again, is it

some sort of cancer, or is it diabetes, or AIDS and HIV. Is it to empower girls and women and give them strength and hope? Would you like to improve the livelihoods of people in war-torn countries? Would you like to see cures for childhood diseases like Cystic Fibrosis because you care a lot about families and want to see them happier? Again, it has to be a cause you care about. Go to the website, read the founder's story, maybe read some testimonies about how people's lives were changed due to their work. Does it move you to get involved in this cause?

And what else has attracted you to the charity you want to target. Maybe there are celebrities known for their humanitarianism, whom you admire, and you want to support the same cause they support? An example closer to home, local chanteuse Chantal Kreviazuk and her husband, Our Lady Peace frontman Raine Maida, both lend their support to War Child Canada, so people who are huge fans of their music and their giving back skills may wish to flock their own talents there.

- **Take a look at how they are raising money.** How many social events do they do each year, including a fundraising gala? How many sporting events do they do each year? I remember the Boomer Esiason Foundation also held golf tournaments in other parts of the United States, and fishing tournaments in Costa Rica, as well as a football game featuring high school players, if I remember correctly. What are they selling in their online store? These are just mere examples.

There have been books that were published as charitable projects. As a recent example, Samantha Nutt of War Child Canada published a book called *Damned Nations: Greed, Guns, Armies and Aid*, where all of the proceeds go to support War Child's programming. But they're mostly coffee table books and nonfiction on social commentary, no doubt. For works of fiction, you should maybe pitch this idea in writing. Tell them what attracted you to their cause, and why you want to support them, then about the book you're planning to write. If they like your idea, send them your résumé along with a book outline. *Do not* make an impromptu appearance at the organization and just tell them that you want to get involved in their fundraising by writing a novel for them. If they've never heard of such an idea, you won't be taken seriously (as in, "And who are you again?") or you run a bigger risk of being laughed out the door, which is ten times more embarrassing. If you work for this organization, that's even better. You can sit down with your executive director, pitch your idea to write a novel as a fundraising project, and you can set up a meeting to pitch your novel and present your outline.

- **Have some writing and publishing experience under your belt.** You'll be taken more seriously if they see this on your résumé. It can be as little as a few short stories and poems in a magazine, or a couple of previous novels or children's books, or even if you self-published. You might want to include a few copies of previous works in your package. If they like your writing and think you're really talented, and think, "Yes, I really think this writer can contribute his talents

to our cause,” I’m sure they’ll be more than happy to jump on board and give you an invitation.

- **Ask if they’re willing to publish books with unrelated themes.** You may not wish to be a total advocate for your chosen cause, and you may have other things you’ve written about that are still unpublished. But chances are, they might not agree to anything outside their cause. With children’s charities and female empowerment, anything may go as far as children’s books and women’s fiction are concerned – well, so long as you have a strong female protagonist. With me, I’m a Canadian writer trying to establish successfully good terms with a group of Americans, which is the basis of *Hollie Springwood*, so I’m hoping the Boomer Esiason Foundation will at least go for that. (Maybe if the connections are successful?) As well, this is a charity that deals with children as well as adults, so I’m hoping they’ll also say yes to *Keelson’s Mistake* and *Real Adventures in a Comic Book*.
- **Theme your novel ideas around the cause.** The best thing, though, is it could be for any genre. Maybe you can write a novel for adults about a mother who was left single after her child was diagnosed with a severe disability, and she struggles to find love with someone who’ll understand the child’s limitations. SMD or other disability charities will love that. To target a diabetes foundation, make sure the protagonist is living with the condition, or the main family is affected by the disease outright. If you want to target breast cancer, maybe you can write a novel for women readers about a group of women who rally around a friend as she fights breast cancer. A romance novel can have a group of “tough guys” testing their compassion as their wives and girlfriends battle this disease. Revisiting War Child Canada, they’ll definitely be interested in stories themed around war, even if many of the scenes take place on the homefront, but especially if it’s set in a war-torn country. Again, these are examples. If you don’t know enough about the cause to produce a whole novel, see if you can make a connection. Maybe you’re writing about a group of girls on vacation, and one of the women is constantly worrying about her mother and sister who are battling cancer, constantly talking about them and checking up on them. Targeting your writing to a specific cause takes more than just mentioning it here and there. You need to have some scenes that *show* the cause to help garner more interest from them.
- **See how much money given to the foundation goes directly to the cause.** Some charities use their money wisely for research and awareness purposes, and that’s a great thing. But there are others in which only a small percentage goes to the cause, and a large quantity of the money goes to administrative costs, or is used as a big pay cut to the executive director. It’s best to avoid the charities in the latter categories to make sure your efforts aren’t being taken in vain. Research the organization on directory sites such as guidestar.org and nonprofitlist.org. Read the organizational reports to see how much of the money

is being used for the cause. Fortunately, when I read their organization report on guidestar.com, I learned that the Boomer Esiason Foundation gives back a little over 90% of donations received, as well as raised more than \$100 million. This giving back amount impressed me very much, and cemented the assurance that I was doing the right thing by choosing the Boomer Esiason Foundation.

- **Let your publisher know that your book is for fundraising purposes.** When you've completed your novel and book proposal, and it's ready to go to the publisher, be sure to mention in your cover letter that this is a fundraising project, so X amount of book sales should go to the charity you're representing. This can be either in dollar amounts or sales percentages. This is only if the charity is not representing you to the publisher. Keep in mind that editors and publishers read thousands of pages of manuscripts per week, so this may slip their minds. If the book is accepted and they want to see more, you may give them a friendly reminder when you send the remainder of the book. You may also wish to send the contact information of the non-profit organization to the publisher. This includes the person who is representing you, the mailing address of the organization, their phone number and the individual's extension, even their e-mail. This will allow the publisher to speak to the organization on your behalf if they wish. You should keep all this information in your possession, so you'll be ready to give to them if they request it – and so you can keep in touch with the organization whenever you need to.

If you follow these steps, you'll be guaranteed that if and when your book is published, you'll be on great terms working for the cause, and this and other organizations will want to see more from you. And when your book is published, and that portion of your book sales is going to a good cause, I know for sure that you'll feel satisfied, and have a feeling of virtuous pride knowing that your project is resulting in a positive outcome, that affected persons and families are enjoying your writing, and that you're truly giving back to the community and society by using your talent.

SELECTED READINGS

The Glory of Love

- Chapter 2 – Introducing Jordan Butler
- Chapter 9 – Jordan goes to work for the Just Breathe Foundation
- Chapter 11 (two places) – Describing social event; introducing Matthew and Diane Stevens
- Chapter 17 (time permitting) – Tragedy at Just Breathe fundraiser

Lovers in a Dangerous Time

- Chapter 2 – Introducing Neil and Scott Jameston, setting them up with Shaylene Goldsmith
- Chapter 18 – Shaylene watches Tsunami football game from owner's suite.