

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You are listening to Work in Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim. Editor-in-Chief of WorkingNation. Work in Progress explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators, and decision makers, people with solutions to today's workforce challenges. Thanks for joining me today on the Work in Progress Podcast. David Gittins, Executive Director of Age Inclusion in Media, Ron Friedman, President of Age Inclusion in Media and a veteran comedy writer. I guess we could say we're comedy writers too, right, David?

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media:

Yeah, people have laughed at my writing.

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

Not just comedy, anything. Ransom notes' a specialty.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I get a lot of requests for that, but it doesn't pay as much. Yeah, I'm writing the wrong amount, I think, down on the ransom notes. Yeah, I wanted to have you both on, because we sit on a board together. I do sit on the AIM, Age Inclusion in Media, Board, and it's very important to talk about ageism, not just in Hollywood, but in general. So I wanted to start out, and maybe David, let's start with you a little bit about how age is portrayed in the media and why that affects us all throughout society and the workforce.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media:

Sure. The way age is portrayed in the media, it's still in a very regressive way of dealing with it. It's still a very stereotypical way, way, and that's down to the fact that we don't have proper representation behind the screen and we don't have proper representation in the writers' room. So when we don't have older writers writing for older characters, we get stereotypical portrayals of what an older character is, which means we get tropes, we get cranky old characters, we get forgetful old characters, and we get sidekicks, as opposed to central characters in their own lives. That's at the thin end of that wedge.

When we get to the thick end, we get into the realms of advertising and how poorly advertising deals with age, given that most people who are working in advertising are in their thirties maximum. And where there has an impact is because what we call the cycle of ageism, it starts with writing, which is then it shows what we show. And from what we show on screen, the representation, that teaches how to believe, and that then teaches us how to act. So if we see older characters being portrayed as passive morons, who are just leeching on society, then we start to treat older people like that in real life, which then circles back in and saying, "We're not going to hire an older person, because we know they're idiots, we know they're useless, because we've seen it on TV and we believe it."

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And Ron, we talked about this many times. We've all talked about this, that ageism is that last -ism that's acceptable in our society now.

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

Well, not only is it acceptable, but of all the protected classes, where you have to be on guard not to use the offensive terms or reproduce the memes that are offensive, ageism is still not even considered. It's funny to be old. I found that out. I knew I was hilarious when I was writing for comedians, but I didn't know I became hilarious the older I became. And yet, it's true. Example, home for the aged, old woman says to an old man, "A hundred dollars, I'll guess your age." She says, "Put your hundred down with mine. If I'm wrong, you take \$200." "Okay, what do I do?" She says, "Take off your pants and bend over." \$200 at stake, takes off his pants, he bends over and she says, "94, 6 months, three weeks." He says, "That's amazing. How did you do it?" She said, "You told me yesterday." Hilarious.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

We laughed, right?

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

You're supposed to. An old couple in their nineties get married. They spend the honeymoon getting out of the car. As Burt Reynolds was famously said on a Tonight Show, "I'm so old I fart dust." Okay, that's a joke on yourself. You're allowed to do that. But the idea is that you become hilarious, if not offensive, when you are old, nothing in between. And if you're hiring, what do you look for? I don't want offensive and I don't want hilarious. I want somebody that can lift that barge, tote that bale, and if they go to jail, they don't call my lawyer. That is not us. But I think those of you who might be looking at this will say, "He may still have a few of his marbles." I hope I have a lot of them. I know I'm more than two and a half times older than Taylor Swift.

This means I am ready for early removal. I've been here too long. I had a marvelous career, until ageism destroyed me. Then I became a principal, a lead named plaintiff in 29 lawsuits about ageism. After almost 11 years, we received a \$70 million mediated settlement. It made nobody well, and it hasn't changed a thing. I'm old, I'm hilarious, also unnecessary. I'll just say this one more thing about age. When I was a young writer, and I was, I wasn't always old, I looked upon older writers who had written the radio shows I loved with awe, and they were terrific. Some of my greatest friends were Jack Benny radio writers from the thirties and forties. They were damn good. That's why I laughed and loved Jack Benny when I was a kid. And I was thrilled to be in their presence. There was always an older writer or two on any half hour or hour show.

Why? To ensure that nobody had to eat the script, because it didn't work. And then, suddenly, Brandon Tartikoff became the president of NBC and made a pronouncement, "Hire no writers older than 30. If you have any, get rid of them." He later said that he was misquoted, but everybody listened. I figured that out the hard way. My wife and I were at a friend's daughter's wedding in upstate New York. I had two pilots going at NBC. One of them was supposed to shoot. It was cast. The sets were built. The other one had been approved. The sets were being built. I received a call. "We decided to go another way." I said, "What does that mean?" "We decided to go another way." I said, "You mean another way without me?" They said, "Yes." I said, "I have pay or play. It's going to cost you a lot of money."

"Well, we're prepared, because we want to go another way." They did. They hired teams of younger writers. Neither of those pilots ever got made. Well, wait, one got made later on and never got picked up. I said, "Would they have worked had my script been used?" I think so. There'd been a better chance. But that began the diminution of earnings, which ended up with a lot of financial tragedy at a time when I was supporting four separate households, my mother in Pittsburgh, my in-laws in Palm Springs, my ex-wife who had had an aneurysm and disabled, my wife and three kids. I was doing it. And then, suddenly, I'm persona non grata. The worst thing is, when a lot of younger writers whom I helped knew my situation, they couldn't hire me. They said, "You're too old." They said those words, "You're too old."

Anybody watching now, I'm willing to do yard work, if you don't think I'm too old to rake leaves. I will now cede the floor and slumber.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I'll wake you up in a minute.

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

Thank you.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Okay, David, so what is the age breakdown of the writers' room, the writers' industry right now?

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media:

According to the Writers Guild of America's latest figures, 44% of working writers are under the age of 40, in the roughly 24 to 39 age, which is a 15 year period, and there's 44% working there. So that means 56% are actually over the age of 40, which means 56% of writers are in the age protected class. So the Writers Guild doesn't see a problem. However, if we dig deeper into those figures, we see there is a serious problem. The first problem is that this deals with writers who are employed and that the Guild figures deal with people who are called current. And when you've lost your job because of ageism, you lose your status from current to post-current.

And when you become post-current, you don't get counted in Writers Guild statistics. So you become invisible, and you're not allowed to run in Writers Guild elections and you're not allowed to be on Writers Guild committees. So you become invisible. The ageism becomes totally ignored. So we have still have 56% of working writers in the protected class, and the majority of those are in their early forties. They've started work in their twenties and thirties. By the time they get to their fifties, it changes. The first 15 years, you're overrepresented. The next 15 years, you're doing okay. And then, from about 55 onwards, 1% of working writers are over 55, that's who aren't at the [inaudible 00:09:36].

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I was going to say, I think most of those people are people with a lot of experience probably who have track records where they're not the ones who are being invited into the writers' room as a staff writer.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media:

No, that's the thing. It's the upper echelons, the people making very high six figures, seven figure salaries. They're the ones who are still employed. The middle class writers over the age of 55, they look at the plague of unicorns. There's more of those. So that's the problem. We have overrepresentation at the younger ages and poor representation to zero representation at the older ages. But the Guild isn't interested in hearing about this at the moment, because writers on the first few years of their career aren't having a good time anyway. So it's still better than the people who are unemployed.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And Ron, you're 91?

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

91. I'm going to tell you something ironic to show whoever's watching that I'm hip, I'm with it. You can't do irony unless you're on Saturday Night Live, and they're aging too. Have you noticed? Pretty soon, they'll be put out to pasture. But this is this. I mentioned Brandon Tartikoff. On more than one occasion, he called me in to punch up a pilot, because it wasn't funny enough. And here's what he said, "You know, I need somebody that can write shtarkers. Shtarker is a Yiddish word for strong. And this is what the vernacular of being a stand-up comedian or comedian through many, many years, you could deliver shtarkers, jokes that made everybody laugh." He said, "The group I have now, they don't know how to do that." No kidding. So I'd be called in and get a lot of money to come in for two or three days and sometimes longer without meeting the original writers usually and just punch it up and bring in a bunch of jokes.

I did that, and this is the guy that made it impossible. And yet, he recognized, when he needed help, he came to the old man. It's insane. Example, how many symphony conductors are shot because they're too old? They have to be dragged away when they're in their hundreds. Nobody says, "He's too old to conduct." Picasso, nobody says, "What the hell is he still painting for? The guy's over 40." No. And I'm going to say this, which is problematic, but I believe true, writers are artists. We are artists. We create what we envision. If we do it well as writers, we enable whoever reads the script or whoever watches what we've written to see and hear exactly what we've envisioned. What a creation, an indelible one, and I'll tell you why. Out of the many, many, many shows that I wrote and I wrote over 700 hours of mostly primetime top 10 television in all genres, a lot of them have been running continuously since I wrote them.

I still get residuals. I still get fan mail. Somebody, I forget where it was, Jamaica or maybe an unlisted country, wrote to tell me that they loved my Odd Couple. How nice. I wrote that, I don't know, in the seventies, but they're still playing. I must have known something valuable to contribute what I contributed, to give something that life expectancy, where it does what? It entertains, it amuses, it engages human beings. And with AI coming, of course, human beings may be expendable, so I maybe shall just resort to my robot voice and tell you everything, everything, everything will be okay. Okay, okay.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I just saw somebody posted on Facebook. Oh, I'm old, I'm on Facebook. I saw something...

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

Wrinkled Facebook, please, it's a separate category.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And they posted, "I'd rather AI make it easier for me to do my laundry or my dishes than write, so then I have more time to write, instead of it taking over my writing." But think about this. This is what I always talk about about AI is, where are they getting that material from? They're getting it from people like you, people like you, people like me.

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

They are stealing it.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Something that's already there that come out of your mind.

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

You may not know this. I'm a member of the Dramatist Guild, because I'm also a playwright. They had a special symposium and a magazine issue about protecting your work from AI. And there are certain pronouncements and contracts that codicils you have to add to your theatrical agreements so that AI cannot immediately drag it up and use it and reuse it without paying you. So I have to check and see if there's one that might correspond for the Writers Guild for television and film. I haven't done that yet, because being old is time consuming.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media:

The technology companies don't give the impression they'll play nicely on this, because they never have in the past.

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

Never.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media:

If you look at our Spotify and how they treated musicians, there's a huge generation of musicians now who can't make a living.

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

Yes, composers particularly.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media:

Yeah, but Spotify makes billionaires out of Spotify shareholders. So AI will go the same way. We can push it and push it and push it, until it's irrelevant to us.

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

Yes, it costs nothing.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media:

In 30, 40, 50 years time, it's going to be very difficult to make a living in...

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Well, Ron'll sue then. Well, yeah, 30, 40, 50 years from now, Ron'll sue.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media:

More lawsuits. More lawsuits.

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

I don't know many ministers who want to do a generic A-1 funeral oration. They want to write it, so they can pretend they knew the deceased. But I don't want a generic anything. I didn't want a generic marriage. I don't want generic breakfast. I don't want generic clothes. I want to be me. There are songs with that title, and there's a reason for it. It's the indelibility of the individual that creates society and that feeds society everything it needs. And artists are the conscience of and the reminders of these

questions that rise in society about, "Is this good? Is this bad? Is this elicited or illicit? Will it make you feel better?"

I don't agree with Hemingway's philosophy about what's good is whatever you feel good after doing, because there are a lot of monsters that feel good after burning a city down. But writers remind us of our humanity, and if we do it well, we create an emotional event for those that witness or read what we've created. Without that emotional input, what is life? Without the music and the mood that presents and the feeling that it generates, how short and long or endless would life seem, without the ability to remember a moment in a book you've read or something you seen on a screen or something an actor did on stage?

Those are moments by which life becomes livable and beautiful, and life is made up of moments. That's what we remember. It doesn't matter what you had for breakfast on Tuesday, it's whether how you felt when you heard something at your kid's graduation from college or what you felt when your child said his first sentence. And I remember one of my daughter's first sentences when I gave her Coca-Cola, and I said, "How does it taste?" And she said, "It tastes like your foot's asleep." Is that brilliant? And at the same time, my son's sort of first sentence was, we were in the park, beautiful day in Central Park. And I said, "Boy, the view from here is great." He said, "Yes. And when I'm older, I'll see more." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Well, right now, my eyes are tiny, but as I grow, my eyes will become larger and I'll see more." No AI is going to generate that, but it will be happy to steal it and then, see what it can build upon.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media:

But you see, there's a tie in here where it shows the value of the older you get, the more life experience you have and the more unique life experience you have. So a newborn baby has a newborn baby's experience, but if you're in your nineties, you've got a very, very unique path to be there and very, very unique set of experiences. That means, if Ron writes something, it comes from a set of experiences that only Ron has ever had. And so, AI can't replicate that. So in a way, perhaps the defense against AI creativity is older writers, because you've got more unique experiences.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And that goes to the idea that, going back to what we started talking about at the beginning, is, how do you write for a 50-year-old, if you are a 20-year-old? You can be a brilliant 20-year-old writer, but you don't have that lived experience. And wouldn't we want to see a 90-year-old writing for a 90-year-old, a 50-year-old writing for a 50-year-old? I feel that's where the representation gets lost, where you say we laugh at the old jokes, you can laugh at yourself, that's fine, but if everything about an old person is a joke, I think you lose that humanity.

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

Exactly.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media:

I was writing for TV in my twenties, so I can't remember thinking I wanted to write older characters. I was writing on one show where there were older characters, but we had other things in common. It was part of the world we were from, like the sports, so many things, but the actor, we had had connections. So I found those characters easy to write to. But if you said to me, "Write a guy in his seventies," when I

was 20, but if you say, "Write a guy from the north of England, who's lived a [inaudible 00:19:30] life," okay, I can do that. So we've got to look for those commonalities, but I think we're losing that.

And if we go back to Ron's earlier point and the name drop about Tartikoff, when it was the era of must-see TV, of course that brought out Friends. And Friends was the most successful show on the planet, probably still is. And the showrunners, show creators, made a big point of why they were successful. And they said they were successful because they didn't hire any writer over the age of 30. And so, everyone else in the industry said, "Ah, we'll follow suit."

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

And that's the answer.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media:

Yeah. So every writer who is in their thirties and beyond was made redundant. And so, we went from having a very age-inclusive industry to one which wasn't, and we've not recovered from that since.

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

No, there's additional truth to that. And that's this, anytime a show is a hit, and television is a voracious user of everything, everybody wants to duplicate that success. How do you duplicate that success? You get the people who made it successful.

So it was Cheers, and everybody on that show became enormously hot. And when Cheers went off the air, even before, the craft services guy was offered like five times what he had made before, because who knew if that wasn't the magic potion? The hairdresser on another show, I forget which, suddenly, was offered four times as much. He was the hairdresser. Who knows that wasn't the magic ingredient? Also, many of the writers who were staff on these shows didn't actually write the finished product. Whoever was running the show fixed it or made it work or actually wrote the episode. But because they had the credit, they suddenly were hired by studios and by networks and given contracts that did not pay Writers Guild minimum. They paid them enormous amounts beyond that and guaranteed they'd have so many of those, and if they didn't have those shows to write, they'd have to write the shows for shows on the air. So suddenly, shows that were being written for scale, no way, you now needed one of these anointed writers who had these enormous paychecks.

So that immediately took people out of the running, who had ability, and anointed those who had the good fortune to be there when the bus went by and the gold dollars were tossed out. Anyway, do I sound bitter? I'm not. I am pissed off, but there is a difference. Bitterness is sit there and take it. Pissed off is, "Listen to me. Do I make sense? Does it make sense to say that you don't have to have a doctor who is from your hometown to understand when you have an illness?" It's like this. Shakespeare wrote a beautiful, brilliant lady Macbeth and a beautiful, brilliant Beatrice in Much Ado About Nothing. Shakespeare was not a woman, but he was an artist. And an artist, if he, she, they are really good, they feel that.

They see the human quality which transcends insignificant stuff, like gender, place of birth, color, all the good stuff that really matters has nothing to do with any of that. Nothing. Zero. You don't judge people by their wardrobe, where they come from, what their color is, what their sex, that's meaningless. Are they a good guy? Are they an idiot? Are they dangerous? Are they safe? That's it. Artists are required to recognize that, be sensitive to it, and when they feel they can get the advantage of finding somebody else who has life experience they don't have, they call them up. They call them in. If Picasso was painting an old woman, which he never did, he'd have called it an old woman, but not if he wasn't interested in

her sexually. Because artists, that's how we are. But it's called, if you don't know, find out. And you don't find out by excluding those who might give you the information you need. I rest my case, but not for a while.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So what do you do about it, David?

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

That's the question.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Yeah, solve the problem. This is what I always say on my podcast, "Okay, that's the problem. Now solve it." How do we solve it?

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media:

Well, through age inclusion, we've focused on the supply side, because a lot of our writers were, I've been up in the business 15, 20 years, so we focused on getting writers back up to speed in today's business. And we do have success. We did have success and we do have success, but because of our confidentiality requirements, we can never tell the world about any of them. But that's only the supply side. We really need to fix the demand side, and there just isn't enough demand for older writers and for older characters and positive portrayals of older characters. And I think that comes down to advertisers. It's a really messed up industry.

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

I think so too.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media:

Until we deal with how advertising deals with age, we're not going to deal with how networks deal with age, because their aim is to make the advertisers happy. We had a little bit of respite when streaming first came on the scene, because subscribers, they didn't care where your subscribers came from, they didn't care what age they were, they just took your money. But now, they're all moving towards back to the advertising model again, so we're coming right back into the same problem. We need to fix the advertising industry, and we need to fix the portrayal of how older characters are portrayed in advertising. Any older character could be introduced with moderate to severe, because you've always got some ailment. You're about to die. According to advertisers, older people are just obsessed with health, their main interest in life is just not dying today.

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

I agree that that's where the pressure point should be, where the money is generated, because that is the only responsive cord that can be struck. If it's going to cost you money, you have to listen, and that is the advertising is a place to put that pressure. Because the streaming services were free, and now, there are commercials on. You can pay not to have commercials, but then, you're paying for what you were getting free. Once again, we're back there, you have to pay for what you like and you have to like it enough to want to pay for it. And the advertisers are always looking for the eyeballs and the ear balls or

whatever the balls come from, and that's where pressure has to be applied. But it can't be just by fiat or by declaration. It has to be in a way that attracts sufficient attention, so it can't be ignored.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media:

Well, direct action gets results, so we can talk about it and talk about it and give everybody the information to act with it. But until we say, "This advertiser has betrayed these characters badly, let's boycott this advertiser."

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

Okay, there's one problem with that is most of the advertisers traditionally now on television are drug manufacturers.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And targeting the older adult.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media:

Yeah, "You need that drug."

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

I don't know about you, but I'm not picketing the places making me my medicine. And they know that.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Forget that idea, David.

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

No, no, wait a minute.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media:

It's a good point though.

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

It is a good point, to show up in front of Pfizer.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

But I've always thought that a lot of, and I say, "older," and we talk about it at WorkingNation, that an older person now is in 40 plus, right? Your mid-career or later part of your career, but people are living longer, working longer, they're watching TV.

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

Absolutely.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

The advertisers are targeting them with a lot of those drug ads.

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

You bet.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So I find there's like a circular question I have, if older people are watching TV and the advertising is portraying older people in a bad light, how do you get out of that cycle?

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media:

But again, back down to what Ron just said, they're advertising products that are life of death. So yeah, they're aimed at a very specific audience.

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

I just thought of something I haven't thought of in years. When I was a kid, the number one bestseller was a book called *Life Begins at Forty*, and in those days, I think the life expectancy of the average American man was something like 64, 62. *Life Begins at Forty*, so I thought of writing *91 is the New 55*. Because that's how I feel about it. But the fact is everything has changed and many of the things that have changed have not been acknowledged and never will be until you're run down by them and there's no way to turn away. So I feel I'm more viable and better at what I've been doing than ever, than ever, but I can't get anybody who can actually put anything to work to even read or talk to me. It's a joke. They know how old I am, and if I'm old, I'm no longer gold.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So I would be remiss if I didn't ask you about some of the things that you have done, including *I Killed Optimus Prime*.

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

I Killed Optimus Prime?

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Yes. Tell me, why did you kill Optimus Prime?

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

I killed him, because they paid me to do it, but also, because if you know the system, if you know that particular show and the toy connected to it, I came to Hasbro's attention with *GI Joe*. They wanted to do a *GI Joe* pilot for an animated series, and they did not believe that the writers in Hollywood writing animation could do it. They wanted a real writer. And they had a kind of talent competition, and I won. One of the reasons I won is I said, "I don't want to do a 22 minute pilot to introduce your 800 products, because by the time you've introduced all of these toys, the kids are asleep or they've left the room. So I want to do it in a five part mini series." I did that. It was successful. I did three of them, and Hasbro said, "We have this show called *Transformers*."

They showed me, they sent me toys and so on. And they did 60 episodes in Japan. They had American writers redo them, and they said, "We want you to rewrite these 60 episodes to give character to the characters, senses of humor and do what you did in *GI Joe*, which is you created nobility for the good guys. You created a good family, a bad family." Because it's always family. That is the story of mythology.

That is what we've been running on ever since we came down out of the trees or out of the caves. And I think it was a longer ago than 6,000 years at least, but it doesn't matter. I did that, and they said to me, "We want to do the feature film, first animated feature, that wasn't a Walt Disney product." And they said, "How do you feel about killing some characters?"

I said, "Great." Because Walt Disney recognized it's yin and yang, it's dark and light, it's life and death, which kids really understand. Snow White didn't go to Florida. She was going to be a living corpse. So they recognized that, and they said, "What about killing Optimus Prime?" I said, "Great." I said, "But you'll have to resurrect him in 90 days." Never. Well, they had him back up and running like in two weeks, because you can't kill Odin in Norse mythology. You can't kill Zeus in Greek mythology. Anyway, I was invited to Comic-Cons and Transformer-Cons repeatedly, but I didn't want to go. Because I still felt, "I'm a real writer." By the way, a real writer gets a Writers Guild deal. I got a Writers Guild deal on all of that stuff, and they haven't been paying me my residuals for many years. But let me get beyond that, because it sounds like I'm not dealing with fact.

The fact is, I was invited, so I wrote that book so I'd have something to sell. And I was a senile rock star, because those first 60 episodes that I rewrote and the movie, *The Transformers: The Movie*, has become what they call G1 in other words, that's the preferred, the best, the most interesting, the most fun in Japan. There've been several toy companies manufacturing Transformers as they were in that year, 1986. It's an enormous success, and I'm an enormous success when I go there. And I'm glad I wrote that book.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You're kind of like the Jerry Lewis in France. He was really big in France. Huge in France,

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

[foreign language 00:32:13] of course. When somebody said, "But Jerry Lewis is beloved in France." Yeah, but they liked that stinky cheese. But Jerry Lewis was brilliant. Jerry treated me well, so I have nothing bad to say about him. But Jerry Lewis invented contemporary filmmaking up to a point by thinking, "Let's put a television camera next to a movie camera, so we don't have to wait till tomorrow to look at the dailies." Brilliant. You also designed some sound equipment. I'm talking about a dead guy. You may not know of him, but look him up. You can probably check him out on Google.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media:

In terms of history of television, you also knew Lucille Ball who created the multi-cam sitcom.

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

Oh, yes, I did, Lucy Ball, *I Love Lucy*, with my former partner, Pat McCormick, who could embarrass a toilet seat. We wrote an hour special for CBS called *Lucy in London*, and it was great fun to do. Steve Binder was the director, who pioneered a lot of remote broadcasting. It was great fun. Why am I talking about fun? I'm not supposed to have fun anymore. I'm supposed to take my enema and shut up.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media:

None of us can be fun.

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

I'm not that kind of guy. Anyway, where were we going?

Work in Progress Episode 321: Ron Friedman and David Gittins

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Oh, I just wanted to, look, you just mentioned Jerry Lewis and Pat McCormick. I love Pat McCormick and Lucille Ball, and these are people that are still comedy icons, right? Lucy is still on everywhere.

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

Constantly.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Constantly. So there's this idea that that creativity lives on.

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

Has run its course and no longer applies?

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

No, it lives on. It has not run its course. People still love it.

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

One of the most frequent letters I get are from people who've seen Gilligan's Island for the first time. Now, I won't say that that is my Nobel Prize, but I always enjoyed writing anything because I needed the money and also because I always said, "I'm going to make this the best episode of even a show that I don't hold in esteem." But I held them all in esteem, because anything that commands an enormous audience for more than one episode has got to have something magical about it. So the Gilligan's Islands always worked. And in fact, I was interviewed for three hours for the archives of the Television Academy, and one of the questions I was asked was one of the episodes of Gilligan's Island called The Second Ginger Grant. And I thought, "Do I remember that one vividly?" And I didn't, but I remembered all the others.

But let me just run through the litany of some of these shows I did, and the Writers Guild cited me for having written for five of the 101 best written series, All in the Family, The Andy Griffith Show, Barney Miller, Get Smart, and The Odd Couple. I also wrote for Bewitched, I Dream of Jeannie, Chico and the Man, Starsky and Hutch, Fantasy Island, Gilligan's Island, Vegas, That's My Mama. I have to think hard. There were so many of them.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

700 episodes, you can't remember them all.

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

700 hours, because some of them were half hours, some of them were hours, and some of the other stuff were movies of the week.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media:

See this how, when I first met Ron, I knew him already, because he was my babysitter as a kid.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Yes, part of your family already.

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

Oh God, how about that?

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Well, I think one of the things that I love about being a writer, being a writer, myself, and David, you could talk to this too, is you are pulling stuff out of your brain.

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

You use it all.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You use it all, your experiences, your imagination.

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

It really is particularly when you see it makes a difference in their life as a difference was made in mine by Superman comics. My brother and I, we were there when Superman comics came out, when Batman came out. In fact, I met Bob Kane who created Batman, who did nothing but Batman until he died at 142. And in his last years, he was making oil paintings of the Joker and Batman and Robin for hundreds of thousands of dollars. Somehow, he did not age, nor did the icon he created. Stan Lee was a close personal friend, a frequent writing partner with me. For Stan, I did the first live action movie for the Fantastic Four, I wrote that script, for the Mighty Thor, for Luke Cage, and for Iron Man.

But Stan and I would share the story credit, I would write the script. When we went into the meetings and we always went in to the top people, because it was Stan Lee, they all, every one of them said the same thing, "Boy, this is a great script, Ron, but it's comic book time. It's kiddie time. It's animation. Our audience, we do real movies for real people. They're not interested in this. They're not interested."

And I said to Stan, "But they're interested." Nope, not until Spider-Man with Tobey Maguire was done and done just as Stan had intended the original episode to be done. This is a conflicted teenager in love with the girl next door, and he doesn't have enough money to take her to the movies. And his aunt May is desperate and his uncle is dead. And what does a kid do? And he gets these superpowers. Everybody identifies with this.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

It's a story.

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

It is.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

It's a story.

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

It's a human story that you all get, because it's family related. And here's the deal with a family. Is there anybody here who needs explanation for the 82-year-old aunt who is a hot number at 20 and still dresses that way? Is there anybody who doesn't have an uncle that moons the school bus? Of course

not. Do you have to explain a relative that is totally nuts, but everybody loves him or her because they're generous? Does anybody not know somebody or feel that? It's you've never had a family, you will create a surrogate family. I'll give you a personal story that has done me a lot of good. My father died when I was 12. My brother and I were staying at an aunt's house, while my father was in the hospital. My uncle woke me at four in the morning, and he says, "Your daddy died. Don't cry. You're the man in the family now." I didn't cry, and for years, I tried to be the man in the family. I got to tell you, it's tough to get a very good job at 12. There are not many with job security.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media:

You weren't trying hard enough.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

At least not those that support a family.

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

They don't go anywhere. Anyway, I needed a dad, and somebody said to me, "You look like Doc Blanchard." Doc Blanchard was an army football player, who played fullback. And I looked at his pictures, and I thought, "If they say so, yeah." I cut out his picture and put it in my wallet. And when I had trouble, I'd think, "What would Doc Blanchard do?"

It didn't help, because I wasn't playing football. But I did it anyway. I created a surrogate family or part of it. So everyone understands that. And if you can deliver that, it's amazing. Let me tell you this, whether you use it or not, because you may not know. I was invited to what best can be called a convocation of brain scientists at the Skirball Center here several years ago. And one of the doctors sent me a note without signing it, "I think you'll be particularly interested in this panel." And the panel was basically about communication, human communication, in terms of brain science, neurology. I went to that panel, and the prestigious guy who was from England stood up and he said, "All of our interrelated studies," and there were neurosurgeons and neurologists and psychologists and psychiatrists, every branch of study of the human brain, he said, "All of our studies have led us to this conclusion. There are three dominant factors in dealing with human communication in the brain, and they are story, story, story."

He said, "In an effort to validate this, we decided to do an experiment, and we got volunteers who were clinically depressed." Clinical depression is not like, gee, it was a bummer. Clinical depression is near suicide. And they volunteered because they thought anything that might help them, they would try. And that was a little bit of goodness in them still left to have the courage to do that. And here was the test. Each of these subjects were in a sealed room with a one-way glass. They were given virtual reality gear, and speaker went through the speakers and said to them, "This is your assignment. A teenage girl is dying in a diabetic coma in a hospital. She needs insulin to live. It is your job to find the insulin and get it to her, so it can be administered within this next," I think it was, "nine minutes, and then, begin."

And the virtual reality showed the subject in a maze, and they were given visual, verbal clues to get out of it. And when they got out, they were in the top of a tall building. What next? And the voice said, "You can fly." And so, using this digital reality, they flew until they were directed to or found the building that had the pharmacy that had the insulin. They then got the insulin and were directed to find the room in the hospital. They did. They delivered it. She was given the injection, and she came out of the coma. And the voice said, "You have saved her life." Their brains were being monitored as this was happening. And when, "You have saved her life," the brain lit up as if they'd been given the Nobel Prize and cocaine.

Unbelievable happiness. And they were interviewed after that, and every one of them had become an altruist.

They were only interested in being able to duplicate this for others who were unable to. I had one question, "How do you turn it off?" And they say, "Why did you ask? Because we are asking that question as well." I said, "Because in a Roman triumph, which was a victory parade, the Roman general and his chariot would ride through the streets of Rome, while his lackeys would throw gold dollars to the public, and he'd be lavish, sprayed with rose petals and praise. But by Roman law, behind him on that chariot, a man clad in black in a black veil had to stand there and repeat, "Remember thou art not a God. Remember thou art not a God." Because in the elation of that moment, it would be easy to forget your human roots."

This is the power of story. This is what we have done for a living, and this is what I have done that I'm proud of, that's brought happiness and continued involvement and a lift out of the boredom and drudgery of life to provide some moments of hilarity, of adventure, of imagination. That is a noble calling, and to be prevented from plying my proved worth in this craft, I find that insulting. Maybe I'm too sensitive.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media:

There's a point Ron was making there, which is an interesting one, because I think it's applicable not just to entertainment, but to wider industry. And that's about the complicated paths we sometimes take to get to a career we want to do. TV writing wasn't my first career, Ron was an architect. I was actually homeless when I started writing, because there was an open access program across the street and I needed to fill my day with warmth. But within 18 months, I was writing for TV, but I had something to write about. I had a very complicated upbringing. And so, when I came to write, I had stories, I had emotional nuances.

Now, to get into TV, the path to go to TV, to be a TV writer, is to be an assistant, to be an assistant in your early twenties. To be an assistant in your early twenties, you need to first be an intern, and to be an intern, you also need to, A, have money and, B, at a college, a film school. And that means you need to have money as well. And that also means you need to have a really, really stable upbringing to be in a position to get into a film school, 18, 18 and 19, which means you also need to be in a stable position at 16, 15, 14, to decide you want to go to film school, to get those grades to get you into a film school. So the film industry and television industries are recruiting people who've had very lucky childhoods.

I think a lot of other careers having that as well. So when it comes to saying, "Okay, you took your time to get here," there's a lot of side eye saying, "You're not quite as good as the other people, and so, we're not going to hire you." If you have a choice of two similarly qualified candidates, one's 50 years of age and one's 23 years of age, people are going to hire the 23-year-old. And I think that that's not just film television. I think your experience at WorkingNation may indicate that it's a lot more difficult for people who have had those paths to get to the point where they're employable.

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

Yeah, yeah. There's something I've meant to mention, which is the COVID pandemic did more to isolate these kids who hope to be writers, hope to be artists, so that their actual experience of interaction with fellow human beings of any age has been curtailed severely. And they have been able to, in effect, build the universe that they find the most comfortable in the confines of their house, where they have, in fact, been confined and prevented from being in the larger world. So I saw this teaching class at Chapman University. I taught 18 years at USC Film School, and I'm in my 19th year teaching at Chapman. I found

those kids were isolated. They did not know how to behave in the company of their peers. They had no face-to-face experience. And when they saw someone older, someone different, they didn't immediately accept. It was like, "Do I run or do I fight?"

It was literally the fight or flight evaluation, which is really primitive, primordial. And yet, that's what they were going through, because they had been denied that growth stimulating experience of interacting with people who are not like you. And they, with that non-experience in life, were required to write life, which is what writers do. And I had a hell of a time with my class, because they didn't know what a writer did. They didn't read much. Why read when you can just get online or you could be on Facebook or TikTok or Eat This or whatever the latest get at it immediately was? So they have been deprived of a growing experience within the human community, and they are the definition of unreal. So when they wrote about anybody older, I would say, "Make it your grandpa. Make it somebody old you know. Make it somebody that betrayed you. Who betrayed you? Was it mom? That's what you're writing about. Who loves you, even though you don't love them? That's what you write about, so that somebody can feel what you felt and could not act on when you were stuck in your room."

It helped, but they still didn't realize the value of what they got. Because they didn't value the human interchange. It wasn't coined of their realm for a couple of years. How do you put a face on that, which is what you do when you write for any visual media? How do you put a voice on that, when you don't recognize when you see it or don't recognize it when you hear it, because you've never interacted with it in any meaningful way?

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I hate to say this, but we're out of time.

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

Do I have time to make a pitch for my aluminum siding? Hey, I'm unemployed, you know I got to do something. It was really great being able to vent in company that is understanding. Because if you don't understand any of this, it's easy to say, "Eh, you're just bitching all the time. And what the hell? Your day has passed, get over it." I don't believe that. And I know, I'll give you an example. It doesn't have to be recorded, but I don't know if you know this. Several years ago, I was called into Fox. Somebody said, "We've been watching some of your shows and they're great. Come in and pitch something." So I go into pitch at Fox thinking, "How on earth did this happen?" And there's a young guy in shorts and flip flops with his feet on the desk and he's on two cell phones. And there are two young girls wearing as little as possible taking notes on his every utterance.

And I said, "[inaudible 00:49:05], come on." And he's on the phone. So I start pitching and he's not listening and they're not writing. I said, "This is wrong for you, but I have a reality show you might like." He says, "What's that?" I said, "A sealed bus with blacked out windows, picks up 50 old people, drives them to the Mojave Desert, and lets them off. And as the bus pulls out, the driver says, "You are fucked." And the bus comes back every week to see who's alive." There's dead silence. And then, the guy said, "They can't be old people. Flesh it out and come back." My chance just flew away.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media:

Therefore, there's no ageism in Hollywood.

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

"They can't be old people."

Work in Progress Episode 321: Ron Friedman and David Gittins

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And on that note, I am thanking you both. David, thank you. Ron, thank you.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media:

Thank you, Ramona.

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

Thanks a lot. Thanks. It was great. David, Ramona, always good to see you.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Always good to see you too. And you too, David. And I'm going to hug you later. And I know how much you like that. No? Not going to happen?

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media:

I'm going to go touch that dog. That's my protection now. Now that I know Kryptonite is dog.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Dogs are Kryptonite.

Ron Friedman, writer-producer:

Dog dander atomizer.

David Gittins, Age Inclusion in Media:

Yes.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Thank you guys. Really mean it, from the bottom of my heart. My pleasure.