What a Superstars Scholarship Meant to Me
Barbara Nickless

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It’s not exactly a news flash that life doesn’t always work out. That sometimes it’s not even close. Where things get interesting is in how we get back up after life knocks us down.

In 2012, the Waldo Canyon Fire broke out in Colorado Springs. Our neighborhood was put on mandatory evacuation. We were told to pack enough clothes for three days, to bring indispensable medicines, and to find a temporary place to stay. Temporary, because we’d be back home again before we knew it.

If only.

Three days later, and in a matter of minutes, the wildfire destroyed our home and wiped out our family history. And just when we needed it most, our close network of neighbors—our tribe—was gone.

The fire was only the capstone to a series of losses for my family, and in the grief-stricken months that followed, I experienced a loss even more devastating: the faith that things would ultimately work out. That my family would—in the long run—be okay.

I became anxious, hyper-vigilant, unable to sleep, afraid to put my faith in anything. I was lost.

Looking for a way to heal, I created a deeply haunted character and spent two years working through her journey by writing a novel (catharsis!). When Blood on the Tracks sold, I experienced the same joy a weary traveler must when it’s finally time to rest; writing this book had brought me home again.

I quickly realized, though, that I knew nothing about the business of writing. Faced with decisions that would affect my career for years to come, I needed assistance navigating this new world. I also wanted help with the process and craft of writing. Because even though I’d sold a book, the actual writing wasn’t any easier. In some ways, it was harder. I now had a legally-binding deadline and expectations to meet.

A friend recommended the Superstars Conference. She said that the faculty and workshops were invaluable for any author, no matter whether that author was pre-published or had fifty books to her name. I’d heard about Kevin J. Anderson and Rebecca Moesta. I knew they were successful authors who were also knowledgeable, compassionate, and willing to help fledgling authors.

But with the fire, I’d lost my livelihood. I’d been teaching piano for years, but now my music, my pedagogy notes, my lesson plans and, of course, my beautiful baby grand, were
ash. And despite help from the community, my husband and I were struggling to fill in the gaps around what insurance had paid for the house and furnishings.

My friend suggested I apply for a scholarship. Imagine my joy when I was offered the chance to attend Superstars free of charge!

And what an experience! The very first day, I attended Chris Mandeville’s class on writing jacket copy. And—in something that could only happen at Superstars—over lunch, she and editor Lisa Mangum helped me revise the back cover copy my publisher had just sent.

Those three days were like drinking from the proverbial fire hose, and every drop was important. Here’s just a sampling of what I learned.

- What questions I should be asking my agent, editor and publisher.
- General information about the business such as what’s going on with mass market paperbacks, eye-opening industry stats, time management techniques, what to do if you’re going to miss a deadline, and why the fourth novel is the hardest to write (and *dang*, I was hoping the second was the hardest).
- How to handle promotion, publicity, blogs and newsletters.
- Techniques of the craft.
- How to keep the faith no matter what.

The single most important aspect of Superstars was the people—the instructors and the attendees. Everyone I met at Superstars was—to a person—friendly, helpful, curious, and kind. They listened, they shared, they commiserated.

After the wildfire, I’d lost not only my neighborhood, but my neighbors. With Superstars, I found another tribe.

My deep thanks to the scholarship committee, to Kevin and Rebecca, to the instructors, and to all of my fellow attendees. Superstars is a game changer. I am forever grateful for those three incredible days.