



# Minnesota Writing Project

Fall 2004

Vol. 14 No. 1

## Summer Institute a Smash Hit!

By Ann Mershon

Take thirteen incredible minds, two talented facilitators, three weeks of time dedicated to improving teaching, and stir. What do you get? Stimulating ideas, intriguing discussions, increased trust, mutual respect, and a plethora of good laughs. A hit! This summer's Selective Institute was a well-choreographed production, from initial connections during the two-day retreat at Mount Olivet to the final readings and awards at the Minnesota Humanities Center.



*ACT I: The Retreat* - Setting the scene for a Summer Institute is never easy, but this year, facilitators/directors Muriel Thompson and Marsha Besch outdid themselves. They set the scene with cool, sunny days (and splendiferous birds), then directed their cast of thirteen (Shelly Bertrand, JeanMarie Burtness, Bub Cudahy, Scott Hall, Elizabeth Hygrell, Kirsten Jamsen, Jane Kepple Johnson, Jill McKenna, Ann Mershon, Susan Miles, Alex Mueller, Ann Steffen, and Deb Waage) through a number of interesting scenes: a teaching demonstration by me, a re-enactment of a successful writing group (stars from last year's performance: Jessica Breed, Rita Jolly, Joanne Toft, and Christine Velure-Roholt), a smorgasbord of reading strategy books to devour during the institute, and a grand finale presentation by writer Susan Allen Toth, who captivated the entire group with her charm, humor, and skillfully crafted writing.

*ACT II: The Institute* - A few weeks later, the entire cast met again in the Carlson School of Management on the West Bank of the University for three weeks of day-long sessions. Directors Thompson and Besch kept the camera rolling as each participant presented to the group on reading and writing activities, all with hands-on components for

*(Institute, continued on page 2)*

## Preparing Hmong Refugees/Students for Resettlement in U.S.

By Bev Alsleben

*Last spring I received a Fund for Teachers Grant through the St. Paul Schools and the St. Paul Foundation to travel to a Hmong refugee camp in Thailand to teach and help prepare for the refugees' resettlement in the U.S. I taught four classes a day - two classes to children and young adults and two in the community to men who had never had a chance to learn English. The rewards were great, even though the conditions (95-100 degree temps and humidity) made teaching exhausting. Home visits I made in the camp were eye opening and very touching.*

The pictures of Wat Tham Krabok continue to run through my mind one and a half months after my visit to the Hmong refugee camp near Lopburi, Thailand. I think of:

-The trailers and containers of the IOM (International Office of Migration) used for fingerprinting, cultural orientation (complete with an American kitchen), chest X-rays, and counseling for the Hmong coming to the U.S. -The whitewashed 3-story open-air school with its worn wooden tables and benches, outdated books, and simple tools of chalk and a chalkboard. -The market that sold live chickens (\$2) or freshly dressed ones, vegetables, longans, bananas, corn, baby watermelons for 5c, Hmong crafts, trinkets, clothes, or a freshly cooked meal. -The beautiful Wat (Buddhist monastery), known for its drug rehab programs, that sits next to the camp and the monks who have embraced

*(Hmong, continued on page 2)*



Thai military and Hmong women dress up for a visiting dignitary.

(Hmong, continued from page 1)

the Hmong people. -The mazes of tin, block, stone, plywood, and bamboo houses that have no electricity, dirt floors, and no furniture.

However, it is the Hmong people of Wat Tham Krabok that left the biggest impression: -Children and young people everywhere, caring for and helping one another (40% of the camp is under the age of fifteen.) -Children without toys running freely and playing happily with rocks, seeds, trees - whatever is available to them (making their own games by throwing their flip-flops to knock over objects.) -Kids smiling and having fun. -Students who rise at the end of class saying, "Thank you, teacher!" -Kids (whose parents can't afford school) listening through the open windows and doors, wanting to learn English. -Young men running up after class asking question after question with "Teacher, teacher, excuse me. . . " -Men who eagerly took notes in class and said, "We want you to stay and teach until all the Hmong go to the U.S." - People who responded so positively to our question, "How are you?" with "I'm good," despite the fact that daily routines are a struggle, they have little income, no medical treatment for common chronic illnesses, and have the stress of resettlement, often apart from family or friends.

The Hmong are a people that have endured much – loss of their home, country, family members, friends, and sometimes health. They have lived in arduous conditions, many for over twenty years. Yet they remain positive and optimistic. From my experience at Wat Tham Krabok I believe this group of refugees is very resourceful and motivated. I am anxious to begin teaching these new arrivals here this fall because I know they will contribute much to our communities. What a learning opportunity we are in store for!

(Institute, continued from page 1)

participants. Writing groups held separate rehearsals, performing their pieces for one another, sharing reactions, and building the requisite trust needed in every effective writing group.

Command Performances were woven throughout the three weeks: Tech Time with Jim and Steve in Lind Hall (the down-and-dirty Blogging presentation), Web World with Sandy Hayes (check out her incredible teacher resources on the MWP webpage), Writing in the Weisman with Margaret Hasse and Joanne Toft, Reading with Teens (Eric Hansen and Jess Goff from Crosswinds Middle School), and finally, an afternoon with the Kerlan Collection of Children's Literature's artifacts, and a presentation by author Juanita Havill. Talk about a busy three weeks!

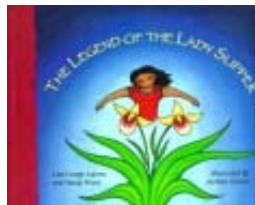
ACT III: *The Celebration* - The grand finale for the entire project was a celebration brunch at the Minnesota Humanities Center in St. Paul. After working diligently together for more than three weeks, the thirteen nervous participants gathered to share a meal and present their chosen writings to the group. It was clear that the writing groups had served everyone well. A fascinating and varied collection of readings were punctuated with laughter, tears, and everything in between, with the appreciative audience duly impressed with each piece. Perhaps it makes a difference

to know the actors; perhaps quality writing is intrinsic to gifted teachers. Who knows? The writing was good, though. Incredibly good. Check out the results on the MWP web page.

The reviews are in, and the critics are pleased. The Minnesota Writing Project has done it again: the 2004 Summer Institute was a smash hit. Surprise (not).

## Book Week Special Event

This year's Book Week, hosted by the Kerlan Collection of Children's Literature, will feature a lecture by author Lise Lunge-Larsen. Born and raised in Norway, she grew up "knowing where the trolls lived and where the wood elves played their music." She speaks on Tuesday, October 19 at 6:30pm in Willey Hall. Book week also features book displays and reviews. See <http://special.lib.umn.edu/clrc/kerlan.html> for details.

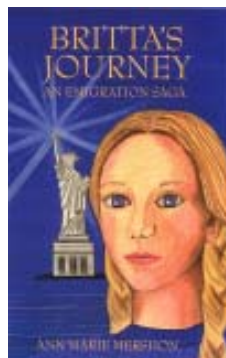


## Congratulations to Larry Gavin!

Larry Gavin, MWP Leadership Institute 2001, recently published *Necessities*, a collection of seventeen poems. Copies are available for \$15 at Red Dragonfly Press. See [www.logjambooks.com](http://www.logjambooks.com).

## Congratulations to Ann Mershon!

Ann Mershon, 1999 fellow, published her book *Britta's Journey* with Singing River Publications. The book is based on a true tale of a Finnish family's emigration to America in 1904. Mershon is a high school English teacher at Cook County High School and columnist for *The Cook County News Herald* in Grand Marais. See <http://mershonwriting.com>.





Students discuss their writing in a South African classroom.

# An Invitation to South Africa

By Melissa Borgmann

When I met Maureen Dabula in Indianapolis in June 2003, I had no idea how this 64-year-old retired nurse from East London, South Africa would get under my skin, inspire me through her “God is great!” attitude and stories of literacy work in the Transkei, and ultimately invite me to come spend some time in her part of the world. Going to Indiana for two weeks for the Writing Project was one thing, to South Africa for a month, an entirely different notion.

But here I am. Almost a month AFTER my trip to South Africa, sorting, processing, reflecting on the experiences, and wondering what impact this trip will, is, having next on my life. The most immediate and obvious rests on the questions of, “What next? Will I go back? What happens when I do? Who will go with me? What role does the Writing Project play? How does the collaborative literacy and arts work that I have been involved with the past ten years fit into this? Will other teachers go there? Will South African educators come *here*? What is possible?”

But it was phenomenal. Life changing. To see. Study. Live. Breathe. Sing. Pray. Write with. For. Educators, hosts, families, students, administrators, journalists, politicians. Facilitating writing workshops for students at a Community College who are studying to be teachers of adult learners. Traveling to a township outside of East London and facilitating a day long workshop - first with educators, then with their primary school learners. Or doing the same thing again, only after traveling 20 kilometers down a long muddy road, through a cow pasture, and up a hill to a high school in Hamburgs. All of this resulting in lots of contact information, over 4,000 photographs, a snappy slide show, some great stories, and the beginnings of long-term, educational partnerships.

I share all of this to inspire you to ask yourself the questions: “Where am I as an MWP teaching consultant? Would I ever build a partnership with a school as far away as one in South Africa? What would my class look like writing letters to students there? What would they say? Is it my dream to ever travel, teach, write, and learn in such a country?” Please feel free to contact me if you’d like to discuss any of this. I have lots of teacher contact information, student names, wish lists, as well as desire to return. It’s no small initiative. Email me at: [queenmab31@yahoo.com](mailto:queenmab31@yahoo.com).

## NWP Urban Sites Network Conference Reflection

By Melissa Borgmann

I think I liked the Mural Tour the best. Or wait! Visiting WP educators' classrooms at Northwest High School. That session on writing about violence in the schools was pretty hot. And I'll never forget the workshop featuring the collaboration between the Athens, Georgia ESL students and middle-schoolers in Santa Barbara, CA. And dining with the Teach for America teachers. Ohmygosh! And the “I am from” spoken word performance at the Friday night banquet. Yes. That, that I will never forget! Students performing their writing for urban educators from all over the country? It doesn't get any more real, authentic, engaging than that!

I had an amazing time in Philadelphia this past May attending the Urban Sites Writing Project Network. As an inner-city teacher at North High in Minneapolis, I have often felt a little out of the loop at larger conferences like MWP, NCTE, and MCTE. They have been engaging, providing a great network of educators, as well as lessons and research that have impacted my work, but attending the Urban Sites conference was like coming home. It specifically connects urban educators on issues of school reform, standardized/high stakes testing, teacher burnout, and continual renewal. I look forward to next year, and invite others to consider this important conference...



One of Philadelphia's more than 2,300 murals, painted as a part of the Mural Arts Program ([www.muralarts.org](http://www.muralarts.org)).



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