



Minnesota Writing Project

Spring 2004

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MWP goes to Capitol Hill

Kirsten Jamsen, Co-Director, Minnesota Writing Project

"At its finest, writing is an art... whose beauty, power, and strength has changed the course of history. Thank you for teaching the art of writing."

—Senator Robert Byrd, West Virginia

Hearing the oldest member of the U.S. Senate thank us for teaching writing and quote lines of poetry from memory was just one of the highlights of the National Writing Project Spring Meeting in Washington D.C. this April.

Although most of the cherry blossoms we saw were falling in the cold rain, MWP Director Muriel Thompson and I were warmed by our experience on Capitol Hill, where we learned more about the tremendous impact NWP has had on the lives of teachers and students across the country. We were also there to educate our legislators about the importance of NWP's programs and to ask them to sign "Dear Colleague" letters circulating in the House and Senate advocating continued federal funding for NWP.

We came with our stories of Minnesota's classrooms, teachers, and students to inspire the politicians, but the enthusiasm of senators and representatives on both sides of the aisle inspired us! During our first morning's meeting, we were joined by Republican Senator Thad Cochran (Mississippi), who with Democratic Representative George Miller (California) authored the original legislation to fund the NWP in 1991; Democratic Rep. Dale Kildee, who taught high school in Flint, Michigan before running for Congress; aides to both Rep. Miller and Sen. Hillary Clinton; and West Virginia Sens. Robert Byrd and Jay Rockefeller. They all spoke passionately about the importance of reading and writing in their own lives and reminded us we have many friends in both parties who understand how our democracy depends on literacy and critical thinking.



Inspired by the national perspective, Muriel and I set out to create that enthusiasm locally by visiting Minnesota's eight Representatives and two Senators. Ten visits in six hours was a tight schedule, and we quickly began to look like characters in *The West Wing*, hustling through the halls strategizing about the next visit

(occasionally joined by Kim Donehower, Director of the Red River Writing Project in North Dakota). I quickly learned that our audience would not be the legislators themselves, but rather their twenty-something congressional aides, who would listen to our stories and collect our materials to report back. Our game plan was simple: I rattled off impressive national statistics, while Muriel asked where they went to high school and got them talking about their favorite teachers. Her method was tremendously successful, and quickly the young aides were transformed back into respectful students: "Yes, Mrs. Thompson, I'll be sure to tell the Senator."

After nine such visits with aides, our feet were sore and our voices worn out. But, we had one last stop: Sen. Mark Dayton's office. Although he had signed the "Dear Colleague" letter earlier that day, his aides were terribly apologetic: Sen. Dayton was so upset about what he had learned from a group of school administrators about recent cuts to Minnesota's Title I funding that he had gone down to the floor of the Senate to make a speech.

They didn't know if he would be back, but we were welcome to wait and watch his speech on CSPAN in the office.

Not only did Sen. Dayton give an impassioned speech about education and the problems of "No Child Left Behind" legislation on the Senate floor, he came back eager to meet with us and learn more about MWP. In our 20-minute private conversation, he

(continued on page 2)



Young Writers Find their Voices

In April 2004, the Minnesota Writing Project hosted the Young Writers' Conference at the University of Minnesota. Sixty energetic junior high students from Crosswinds Middle School, Parkview Center, Highland Junior High and Washington Technology Middle School, came on three days to view, write about, and create their own art.

They arrived at the Weisman Art Museum on April 7th to view an exhibit titled "Gene(sis): Contemporary Art Explores Human Genomics." Interweaving humorous commentary, documentary images and pseudo- (or actual) scientific laboratory situations, the artwork in the exhibition reveals technical advances and probes ethical issues raised by genomic research.

Students were given a chance to respond to the ideas and questions the exhibit raised by toying with nature themselves; on their next visit, they created their own wild beasts of genetics in a University computer lab and toured the Molecular and Cellular Biology Building. Finally, on the third day, students expressed their ideas in writing and shared their work with each other. Instructors from each of the schools, joined by graduate students from the Student Writing Center, assisted these students with their writing.



On April 19 all 8th grade students from St. Paul were invited to attend a very inspirational event at Williams Area. Paul Kagame, the president of Rwanda, spoke, along with Mawi Asgedom, who won acclaim for his memoir *Of Beetles and Angels: A Boy's Remarkable Journey from a Refugee Camp to Harvard*. Asgedom is a motivational speaker for youth, and during his presentation, *Triumphs of the Human Spirit: Life as a Refugee*, he shared a code that he encouraged all students to create for themselves. To see some sample codes, visit <http://www.mawispeaks.com/students/others.html>.

(continued from page 1)

revealed that more and more he feels late Sen. Paul Wellstone "kicking him" to speak out for Minnesota's schoolchildren, who need an advocate now more than ever. Muriel also issued Sen. Dayton a challenge, which he heartily accepted: to visit the MWP summer institute. So, if you are looking for another reason to join us this summer, this may be it.

Although it never stopped raining, the rest of our visit was a flurry of useful discussions with our NWP colleagues as well as a look back at *Brown Vs. Board of Education* with journalist Samuel Yette and local students from Sousa Junior High School. I'm pleased to report that our visit was largely successful: both Sens. Dayton (D) and Coleman (R) signed on to support NWP, as did Reps. Betty McCollum (D), James Oberstar (D), Collin Peterson (D), and Jim Ramstad (R). Rep. Martin Sabo (D), who has signed on in the past, abstained because he is on the House budget committee this year.

At a time when so much of the news out of Washington frustrates and disturbs me, it was a real joy to be reminded that there are thoughtful men and women representing us who care about our students and our classrooms. I encourage you to keep your representatives aware of both the positive and negative consequences of federal education legislation (see www.senate.gov and www.house.gov for their email addresses).



Writing & Technology: from Inspiration to Publication



Tuesday, July 20 & Thursday, July 22
Carlson School, room 1132, U of M
12:00 - 3:00 p.m.

We heard your requests and are providing two afternoons of technology assistance. After a quick tutorial on how to use PowerPoint, slide shows from laptops, digital photography, digital movies, and web publishing, participants will have time to work hands-on in whichever medium they are most interested. If you have any raw material in progress (e.g., digital photos, movies, poetry, or student work) or ideas for student projects for the coming school year, please bring your material the first day. If this is a whole new experience for you, don't worry; there will be practice projects and a variety of equipment you can work with. The first session will be instructional, the second session more application. Come for both sessions - it's free! The only expense is the cost of parking. To register, or if you have any questions, email Muriel at murielt@umn.edu by June 1, 2004. Indicate if you will be bringing your own computer and what software you have.

See inserts for upcoming MWP events:

- Open Institute: "Middle School Mosaic: Reading & Writing in Middle School" July 19 - 30
- Workshop: "Writing & the Visual Arts" July 21
- Workshop: "Adolescent Reading" July 27

Congratulations!

Bev Alsleben published her article "Thirty Minutes with Mikal" in the Spring 2004 edition of NWP's *The Quarterly*. Read it on the NWP website.

Mary Ann Saurino has an article in this issue of *Voices from the Middle*, entitled "We Could Do That! Improving Literacy Skills through Arts-Based Interdisciplinary Teaching."



A small, but enthusiastic group of 2003 Summer Selective Institute Participants gathered on Saturday, March 13 to renew acquaintances and to share experiences.



Micki St. Sauver takes time out from the NWP research meeting in Berkeley to enjoy the January blooms.

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