



# Minnesota Writing Project

Spring 2005

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## Inspiration Inside the Beltway

by Mary Cathryn Ricker

When Mississippi Congressman Roger Wicker quoted William Faulkner in saying, "I only write when I'm inspired; fortunately I'm inspired at 9 o'clock every morning" I immediately text-messaged my husband, knowing he would appreciate the convergence of Faulkner, writing, and perseverance. I should have known, too, that by trip's end I would adapt William to suit my needs. By then I realized that it is the convergence of education, government, and political involvement that the Minnesota Writing Project helps make possible, that leads me to say, "I only advocate for teaching when I'm inspired; fortunately, I'm inspired every day."

My trip to Washington, DC this April for the NWP Spring Conference served as high-octane fuel for inspiration to talk about the great work that is done by MWP fellows throughout our state. A blissful confluence of peak cherry blossoms and their festival, Spring Break, ten meetings with Minnesota's congressional delegation, and an intense, day-long shot in the arm of educational energy through NWP meetings awaited me—and all lived up to the hype. Like ripping the shrink-wrap from a stack of standardized tests moments before saying "You may begin," NWP wastes no time in putting the group of us, representing 40 states, to work. Thursday morning we were greeted by NWP's lobbyist, sympathetic congressional leaders, promising statistics, and given a charge: Visit the office of every person who represents every corner of your state and get them to deliver continued funding for the National Writing Project, which had been zeroed out of the President's budget for the 2<sup>nd</sup> year in a row.

By the end of the day, as Muriel, Kirsten, and I took in the view of the Capitol on our way back to the hotel, I was asked if I'd do this again. Do this again?! By the 6<sup>th</sup> meeting I was ready to do this for a living! I realized that our meetings were just a series of mini-lessons,

each tailored to the particular learner's prior knowledge, interest, and always focused on the standard message: Fund the National Writing Project. "Your boss has been supportive before." "This has strong bi-partisan support." "Did you know the Senator's daughter was taught by an MWP fellow?" Whatever it took to get their attention and get them to sign on.

In some cases we were greeted warmly, like when Congressman Oberstar went on about the death of the proper use of that/which. Collin

Peterson's office challenged us to do more for teachers in his district; we demonstrated our commitment to the 7<sup>th</sup> district by meeting alongside a representative from the Red River Valley Writing Project, and he became one of the first representatives to sign on. We cornered Congressman Ramstad in the hallway and got a very warm response. In short, each visit felt like a conquest. We were able to speak to someone in every office, and we were able to share stories of MWP's hard work in the classroom.

Through the efforts of every NWP representative there, our advocacy resulted in 104 signatures of support in the House of Representatives and 38 signatures in the Senate. It is invigo-

rating work to promote teaching, and as the weekend wrapped up, we were already brimming with ideas for how to make our voices heard louder and sooner throughout the year.

If you would like to write a letter of support, make a follow-up phone call, invite a senator or representative to your classroom to see these dollars in action, or send stories with the MWP representatives next April, please contact MWP. Ultimately, it is the good work you do every day that allows us to maintain the broad support we have among the Minnesota delegation in Washington. Now you know why I am inspired every day.



*MWP Associate Director Kirsten Jansen and Fellow Mary Cathryn Ricker in D.C.*

# Meeting Individual Challenges of Unique Settings

## Urban Sites by Melissa Borgmann

What do you think needs to happen to really change the focus of public schools? Yeah, just that little question! But it was that question that arrived in an email last week that spun me around and made me re-examine what I was up to as a teacher. As a writer. As an inner-city high school English teacher concerned with literacy — and passionate about the ways it is demonstrated and measured in all learners.

Coming off a whirlwind couple of months doing poetry slam work with a diverse group of Twin Cities youth; traveling with them to San Francisco for a five day International Festival; and then sharing the fruits of this kind of performance literacy curriculum with fellow educators, I felt poised and ready to be still and reflect on the larger questions looming in the work.

What is literacy? What does it look and sound like? How is measured? What engages young people in the classroom, is powerful pedagogy, and can be used as an instrument (to be shared), to change the public's perception of our public schools?

The driving question was posed by Kristin O'Connell, a former student of mine, after she came across the City Pages article on my poetry slam work. In the throes of a class at Carleton College, she was swimming in large questions regarding education reform and successful social movements, all sparked by the current "No Child Left Behind" climate.

She wrote to me, "We know that getting away from standardized tests and focusing on programs like your poetry program would vastly improve schools; seeing both the teachers and the students as learners that work together to make it to graduation and life thereafter. But, do you see a way to move towards that on a larger scale than one teacher at a time? Is there any way to organize other teachers and parents and students to get involved and demand more emphasis on programs like yours, rather than starting from scratch every time? Do you think it's possible in the current state of the American public to create a movement, to reform education from the ground up, instead of the top down? Do parents and kids that you know see the school as THEIR school, a public institution, that they have the right and ability to influence?"

Again, what delightful questions! What timing! It arrived in the midst of what was a successful run of a course: the work of these urban poets had been met positively, energetically.

My response to Ms. O'Connell is, first and foremost, to keep asking questions in her passionate, hopeful way. Engage educators and the community, and invite the powers-that-be into the dialogue. I turn to you, Writing Project colleagues, and invite you into this work, these questions, and the responses.

## Rural Sites by Jane Johnson

Thanks to my involvement in the Minnesota Writing Project's invitational institute last summer, I was able to experience NWP's Rural Sites Network Retreat, "Teaching Writing in Rural Contexts," held March 11-13 in Folsom, California. This seminar introduced me to NWP's Rural Sites Network (RSN) and greatly impacted me, a teacher from rural, southern Minnesota.

The conference's agenda showcased rural student voices and addressed the strengths, advantages, and challenges of teaching in a rural area. Teacher consultants from rural sites across the U.S. shared projects, ideas, and hopes. MWP's Bev Alsleben co-presented a session titled, "Rural English Learners: From Newcomers to Authors."

A highlight of the conference was the keynote address by Dr. Rachel Tompkins, President of the Rural School and Community Trust in Washington, D.C. Her presentation "Differences that Matter on Roads Less Traveled," addressed the issues of equity in funding, the increase in poverty and diversity in rural schools, and teacher recruitment away from rural districts.

Dr. Tompkins also shared examples of high-achieving rural schools and suggested ways in which rural sites and networks can partner to encourage kids in their rural communities: through visibility, through recognizing the advantages of rural education, and through civic education.

Dr. Tompkins stressed that even though teaching in rural areas *is* the road less taken, rural matters. The Rural Trust's publication *Why Rural Matters 2005*, will be published this month.

I've taught for nearly 30 years in rural schools, but only when I realized the differences between rural and urban student voices, did I better understand the unique challenges that confront teachers in each area. We teach in dramatically different settings—and our students naturally possess voices unique to that setting.

I'm grateful to MWP for the opportunity to attend this conference; I left with a confident understanding of teaching in a rural school and with a sense of pride in teaching in rural America. Whether rural or urban, it is essential that educators strive to recognize and respect our students' unique voices, and the land, history, and culture that define them.

# Education Administrators Discuss Policy, Ideas, Motivation

According to the National Commission on Writing's report *The Neglected "R"* (April 2003), "American education will never realize its potential as an engine of opportunity and economic growth until a writing revolution puts language and communication in their proper place in the classroom . . . The nation's leaders must place writing squarely in the center of the school agenda, and policymakers at the state and local levels must provide the resources required to improve writing." A recent article in *US News and World Report* (Feb. 28, 2005) reported that "close to 70 percent of eighth graders read below the "proficient" level, . . . so do nearly two-thirds of 12<sup>th</sup> graders."

With these concerns in mind, MWP offered an administrators' workshop on May 12<sup>th</sup> at the Minnesota Humanities Conference Center to explore ways in which we might work together to improve the teaching of writing and reading. To guide us in this discussion, we were joined by the following presenters:

Margaret (Micki) St. Sauver, St. Paul Junior High Literacy Coach, shared information on the Junior High Literacy Initiative, part of the Project for Academic Excellence, which is designed to bring the district's reform efforts together with a standards-based program.

Anne Andersen, Principal of Crosswinds Arts and Science Middle School, overviewed the planning of a Young Writers' Conference: Using a Museum Setting and Integrated Writing Groups to Encourage Excellent Writing in the Middle Grades.

Professor Deborah Dillon, Chair of the department of Curriculum and Instruction, University of Minnesota, talked about The Role of Motivation in Engaged Reading.

Participants were pleased with the day and evaluations echoed the following: "All of the presentations gave me some new ideas to use with our 6-12 literacy curriculum review; the promotional materials will be helpful as we go back to the district and plan ways to get more of our teachers involved in MWP activities and institutes."

## MWP READING INITIATIVE STUDY GROUP



Members of the MWP Reading Initiative Study Group recently met to share strategies for improving students' reading comprehension and to discuss ways to share their findings with other colleagues. Shown in this picture (from left to right) are Laurie Miller, Victoria Wilson, Mary Cathryn Ricker, and Anne Lowe. Also in attendance, but not shown in the picture, were Steve Smarjesse, Kim Colburn Lindell, Joanne Toft, and Michael Thompson.

## CONGRATULATIONS TO MARY CATHRYN RICKER

Mary Cathryn Ricker has been selected to represent Minnesota as a finalist for the NEA Foundation for Teaching Excellence Award. After earning National Board Certification, teachers automatically become eligible for nomination.



Ricker was also recently elected President of the St. Paul Federation of Teachers, the union that represents the teachers in St. Paul Public Schools. While it is a fulltime position that will take her out of the classroom, she still plans to be involved in teaching and remain active in the Minnesota Writing Project.

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