



Minnesota Writing Project

Spring 2006

Vol. 15 No. 3

Springtime in Washington: Reflections on the National Writing Project's Spring Meeting

by Jane Johnson

Not even Washington, D.C.'s beckoning spring tulips and daffodils could keep us thawing Minnesotans from losing our focus. Eyes straight ahead, we trekked down New Jersey Avenue toward the Congressional Office Buildings on the morning of April 6. Minnesota Writing Project's co-directors, Muriel Thompson and Kirsten Jamsen, and I were eager to share with members of Congress our passion for MWP and request funding that would support the 195 writing projects around the nation. Muriel and Kirsten had attended National Writing Project spring meetings before, but I was new at the strategy game of asking for support, and I was eager to learn how things worked on "The Hill."

At a kickoff meeting earlier that morning, 350-plus NWP attendees had learned the particulars: we should expect a tight budget year, all legislative assistants and interns would appear young (just past their adolescence), and Friday—the next day—was the beginning of recess, so our business would need to be brief and to the point. Armed with these facts, we set out.

From 11 a.m. to nearly 6 p.m., the three of us visited the offices of each Minnesota senator and legislator (James Oberstar met us in person). Our message? MWP, funded through the NWP, is a vital force in schools across Minnesota today. Supporting the funding of the NWP will allow MWP to continue.

In an unrehearsed litany, Muriel, Kirsten, and I tag-teamed the presentation of information, and highlighted successes and additions to MWP's programs. We discussed the newly developed Gopher Writing Camp, an all-expense paid weeklong summer writing camp for low-income middle school students and their teachers. We shared information on new opportunities for teachers this year, including a certificate in Teaching Writing and Critical Literacy, as well as two scholarships to defray costs of attending the summer institute for underserved rural and urban teachers.



*Kirsten Jamsen and Jane Johnson
prepare to lobby Congress.*

Small talk was minimal, with most legislative assistants listening politely. I became aware that these people were the gatekeepers to our members of Congress. When I pulled out copies of student work—my "evidence" of MWP's influence in the classroom—I saw eyes spark with interest. I handed each assistant copies of "Rebel Voices," a column featuring student writing published in our local rural newspaper, which I asked the assistants to share with their Congresspeople. Through my involvement in the Rural Sites Project, I'd become aware of the importance of building pride in rural communities by sharing the voices of rural students; consequently, our district has partnered with *The Courier-Sentinel* to publish student work.

Before returning to the hotel late that afternoon, we slipped into the quiet oasis of the National Japanese American Memorial and read inscriptions that spoke of

*When I pulled out copies of
student work—my
"evidence" of MWP's influ-
ence in the classroom—I saw
eyes spark with interest..*

struggle, injustice, and dignity of the human spirit. It struck me how this prose revealed lessons for all to acknowledge, remember, and learn—lessons revealed through literacy.

"The Hill" I experienced that day was no Edgar Lee Master's "Hill." This one was vibrant and pulsing. I, like others in the group, had experienced one of the privileges of life in a democracy—I'd advocated for students, literacy, and the future of a vital organization.

Teaching Ideas Bloom at Urban Sites Conference

by Ann Lindsey

Vibrant orange nasturtiums bordered the roadsides, separating rugged, cut canyons from the complexity and cultural richness of San Diego. A premature June Gloom – an ocean haze that blankets the city – colored the sky grey, but as I sped along the twists of “The 5” highway, I eagerly anticipated joining over 300 educators from across the country at the National Writing Projects Urban Sites Conference, Writing across Borders. The conference goal, to collectively dialogue about ways to cross urban borders - national, racial, language, and socioeconomic - while building communities which celebrate student differences and meet individual needs, promised not only to expand my concept of “urban” but to engage me in a wide variety of thoughtful new approaches for my classroom.

San Diego is uniquely suited for such a border breaching conference. Its schools reach:

- to the U.S.-Mexican border, serving predominantly immigrant, native Spanish speakers
- to the dense inland area of City Heights, where new African, Asian, Middle Eastern, and Eastern European immigrants arrive and settle
- to the affluent North County, where schools serve small but growing populations of migrant children
- to the rural mountain and desert communities to the east that are home to many Native American Indian tribes
- along the coast, with a large concentration of active-duty military personnel.

Fifth grade Latino dancers, girls in bright ruffled skirts hand in hand with boys in pressed black pants and matching bandanas tied around their hat brims, followed by K-8th grade African American step dancers welcomed us on Friday evening, followed by powerful, tearful poetry by three local high school/college students. Saturday’s sessions within the conference were as diverse, including discussions on topics of new teacher mentorship, confronting gender and cultural bias, bridging language barriers, and tapping into the resources of reflective, authentic writing.

Linda Christensen, the keynote speaker and author of *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up: Teaching About Social Justice and the Power of the Written Word*, was riveting. Her inspirational transformation from English teacher to reformer, reaching out to non-English speakers and diverse Urban students by creating programs to validate their native language gifts while exploring the strengths and weaknesses of Standard English, moved us to spontaneous applause throughout her speech. She passionately

detailed the daily vocation of “de-colonizing” her students minds, allowing them to embrace their language after perhaps years of being taught to disregard, or even worse, untrain their natural thinking and writing to be more “white.” Characteristics of a classroom that embraces equity and social justice were clearly defined. It should be:

- grounded in the lives of our students
- critical
- multicultural, anti-racist and pro-justice
- participatory/experiential
- politically active
- academically rigorous
- culturally sensitive
- hopeful, joyful, kind and visionary

Her devotion to the reality her students face, and actions she has taken throughout her thirty year educational career to help them, enabled us each not only to gain valuable skills to use with all our students, but also to hold an elevated regard for the power of “teachers teaching teachers” and teachers connecting with their students.

Enabling or allowing children who walk over our classroom threshold to reach their greatest potential is not always easily remembered amidst the daily demands of teaching. As I rode back along the twisting “5” on Sunday morning, the primary colored flowers spattered one after another reminded me that the power of writing in the hands of an ardent educator can make any child bloom.



2005 Summer Institute participants enjoy a March follow-up writing retreat at the Minnesota Humanities Center.

Art Inspires Young Writers



MWP Graduate Assistant Alex Mueller assists Saint Paul students in making books designed to contain their writings in response to the Home House Project at Weisman Art Museum. Sixty middle school students from Battle Creek, Ramsey and Washington Tech participated in this Young Writers' Conference held at the University this spring.

Area Administrators Share District Needs

On May 17th, administrators from institutional member districts gathered to tour our new facilities, gain innovative ideas for using our services, and learn about trends in literacy education. Professor Cynthia Lewis from the University of Minnesota Department of Curriculum and Instruction shared enlightening research regarding digital literacy and its effects on instruction. They also heard about our newly approved certificate program in Teaching Writing and Critical Literacy.

*Please share the 2006
Summer Workshops insert
with interested colleagues!*

Good News!

Recently approved by the University of Minnesota Regents, our Certificate in Teaching Writing and Critical Literacy program is set to accept its first students this fall! A full description of the coursework and application information is now available on the College of Education's Student and Professional Services website:

<http://education.umn.edu/SPS/programs/certificates/default.html>.

Congratulations to MWP Teaching Consultants John Albright and Melissa Borgmann! Both have been selected to participate in selective summer writing retreats. John will be a participant in NWP's Professional Writing Retreat A, Writing Your Draft, to be held at Sleeping Lady Retreat Center in Leavenworth, Washington. This retreat is designed for writers who have decided on topics and seek the time and support to write intermediate drafts. Melissa will be a participant in Writing the High Country: A Fiction Workshop Intensive on a Western Cattle Ranch. Held on the Granite Creek Ranch near the Snake River in the Idaho Tetons, the retreat will intersperse writing activities with ranching chores to inspire participants to write pieces of short fiction.



We are delighted to have Julie Schumacher, an associate professor of English at the University of Minnesota, as our guest presenter for our 2006 Summer Institute Retreat. Her recent novels are *The Book of One Hundred Truths*, *The Chain Letter*, *The Body is Water*, and *Grass Angel*. Her short fiction has appeared in *The Best American Short Stories* and in *Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards* anthologies. If you are interested in attending, please contact MWP (612-625-6323).

**MINNESOTA WRITING PROJECT
POLICY BOARD MEMBERS
2005-2006**

Anne Andersen
Marsha Besch
Gin Besser
Melissa Borgmann
Jen Budenski
Lisa Christen
Bob Cudahy
Dawn Harrison Butler
Kirsten Jamsen
Jane Johnson
Alex Mueller
Sandra Nesvig
Mary Cathryn Ricker
Shelley Snell
Micki St. Sauver
Muriel Thompson
Micheal Thompson
Joanne Toft
Terri Wallace
Nora Wise

**THE
MINNESOTA WRITING PROJECT NEWSLETTER**

Published quarterly by the Center for Writing
University of Minnesota
10 Nicholson Hall - 216 Pillsbury Dr. SE
Minneapolis, MN 55455

An Official Site of the National Writing Project
also funded by
the Center for Writing
and the College of Liberal Arts
at the University of Minnesota

Minnesota Writing Project Director:
Muriel Thompson

Minnesota Writing Project Co-Director:
Kirsten Jamsen

Minnesota Writing Project Outreach Coordinator:
Marsha Besch

Teaching Assistant: Alex Mueller

Editing & Layout: Sarah Lemagie

The University of Minnesota is an equal
opportunity educator and employer.

<http://mwp.cla.umn.edu>

Minnesota Writing Project
University of Minnesota
10 Nicholson Hall
216 Pillsbury Drive SE
Minneapolis, MN 55455