

# Minnesota Writing Project

Spring 2009

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## Muriel goes to Washington

by Muriel Thompson

Cherry blossoms, a blooming array of tulips and hyacinths, and 60 plus temperatures welcomed us to DC for the 2009 Annual NWP Spring Meeting. After leaving snow showers in the Twin Cities, Kirsten and I looked forward to enjoying our stay – even though Michelle and Barack had decided to travel to Europe! Here are some highlights of our experience:



This year our day on “The Hill” began in the historic Cannon Caucus Room ([http://clerk.house.gov/art\\_history/art\\_artifacts/Cannon\\_Centennial/caucus.html](http://clerk.house.gov/art_history/art_artifacts/Cannon_Centennial/caucus.html)) where more than 400 educators gathered. Here we were greeted by Sharon Washington, the new NWP Executive Director. Although Kirsten and I could only stay for a short time, it was a thrill to hear both Representatives Thad Cochran (D-MS) (who is responsible for introducing the original NWP legislation) and George Miller (R-CA) praise the work of

the National Writing Project. According to Representative Cochran, “This country is a better place because of the Writing Project.” Representative Miller spoke about empowering teachers and optimism with the new administration.

Kirsten and I slipped out of the opening meeting to attend Senator

Klobuchar’s Minnesota Morning. This event occurs monthly when the Senate is in session. Check out the event on her website (<http://klobuchar.senate.gov/mnmornings.cfm>) – complete with pictures of guests!



*The Cannon Caucus Room*

Currently, with only one Senator from Minnesota, she is besieged with requests. Fortunately, we had an appointment with Simone Hardeman, her educational aide, who guided us smoothly through the picture-taking reception.

This year, with only one Senator to visit, Kirsten and I had some spare time before our remaining congressional visits, so we headed for the Library of Congress. This magnificent building – from its architecture to the exhibits– never ceases to amaze me. We spent time in two fascinating areas: With Malice Toward None: The Abraham Lincoln



*The Great Hall of the Library of Congress*

Bicentennial Exhibition and Thomas Jefferson’s Library. I strongly encourage you to take advantage of MyLOC.gov. It is an “online museum with exhibitions and interactive features that bring rare historical books and objects to life.”

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# TCs connect in Texas

*This year, Teacher Consultants Joyce Malwitz (SI '06) and Debra Hartley (SI '08) attended their first Annual Meeting of the National Writing Project in San Antonio, TX. The days in sunny Texas were filled with leadership workshops, networking with other writing project TCs and of course seeing the sights and taking in some of the local cuisine. Below Joyce and Debra share their reflections on their experience at this national event.*

## San Antonio Memories

*by Debra Hartley*

To be honest, when I found out that I would be going to San Antonio in November for the National Writing Project Annual Meeting, the prospect of leaving Minnesota for a tourist town in the South consumed my imagination. What I found on the internet spurred my travel planning. Tex-Mex food, a river walk to stroll, and historic missions to explore, all in warmer than 30-degree weather—these filled my daydreams prior to the trip. Muriel, Joyce, and I flew to San Antonio a few days early to sightsee; the sky was sunny and the temperatures warm, so my dreams were fulfilled. I have the photos (and weight gain) to prove it.

My trip would have been lovely if it had ended there, but attending the NWP Annual Meeting enhanced my enjoyment and enlightenment. As the new MWP technology liaison, I had wondered what exactly this position entailed. In the sessions, I began to see the range of activities that TCs conduct—website construction, updating, and revising; sharing information about using technologies like wikis, blogs, and media galleries; and researching even newer media that might assist the teaching of writing.

I also learned that the technique of encouraging thought and reflection through writing is used not just at the local level, but at the national level as well. It was not uncommon to have time to write in a session about the topic under discussion. In that way, I saw the

## The National Writing Project Made Real

*by Joyce Malwitz*

Minnesota Writing Project workshops and meetings

always begin with a writing prompt (We are all writers!) as a way break the ice and set a positive and productive tone. While I love this part of our workshops and am amazed by the human capacity to express ourselves in prose, I also take enough time at the beginning of any workshop to explain the relationship between the MWP and the NWP—our shared philosophy, goals, and history. But did I really understand what I was saying? Maybe not so

much. To me the NWP was an amorphous entity with offices somewhere “out East,” led by mysterious literary gurus who sometimes approved grants to support our Minnesota outreach activities. That all changed, however, when I accompanied Muriel Thompson and Debra Hartley to the annual NWP conference in San Antonio, Texas, last November.

At the conference the NWP became as real to me as the intrepid crew at our Minnesota office. I was privileged to witness the induction of Sharon Washington as Executive Director; her acceptance speech at the annual meeting was riveting and inspiring. Ms. Washington eloquently expressed the goals of the NWP—writing is a complex, challenging, and rewarding skill essential to the success of every student and that talented writing teachers absolutely make a difference in the literacy lives of their students. She was fantastic.

The sessions I attended at the conference were also



*Debra Hartley, Joyce Malwitz, Muriel Thompson, and Candance Doerr-Stevens at NWP Annual Meeting*

# 2009 Young Writers' Conference

Over a period of three days, students and teachers from the St. Paul School District viewed, learned, and wrote about the exhibit *Changing Identity: Recent Works by Women Artists from Vietnam*. To further explore the theme of identity for this year's event, we

invited photographer Wing Young Huie, and writer Kao Kalia Yang, who talked about the power of memory, community, and identity in their work. The students worked in writing groups led by graduate students in education and other university

staff volunteers. In addition to writing about identity, students also had the opportunity to share images and artifacts that they felt represented their identity in certain ways that words could not.

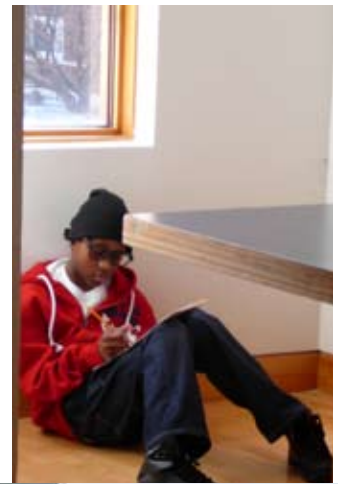
## Hope as a balloon

by Kendra Cisse

Highland Park Junior High

A bright balloon soars in the sky  
just like my hopes, it goes so high  
among the clouds and problems of life  
our hope holds strong through pain and  
strife

*Hope as a balloon Author's Statement:  
I wrote this piece because even though I  
feel down sometimes there is always hope.  
I often feel like this so I wrote this to express myself.*



Kao Kalia Yang speaking at YWC '09

# Pay it Forward

Teacher Consultant Ann Thompson (SI 07) shares below her experiences with trying to implement MWP writing philosophies into her own school district. What started as a teacher book study has led to a school wide writing assessment. For more information on her experience contact Ann at [thomp401@umn.edu](mailto:thomp401@umn.edu).

## St. Croix School-wide Writing Assessment Project

by Ann Thompson

It's amazing how the MWP Summer Institute experience can just snowball! I was so fired up about writing and teaching writing that I wanted to share my excitement with fellow staff members at St. Croix Catholic School in Stillwater. So in the spring of 2008, I facilitated a book study with ten of our teachers. We all read a great book recommended by MWP, *Writing Essentials* by Regie Routman.

From the book and our discussions, we discovered many wonderful ideas, but the one I really wanted to pursue was a school-wide writing assessment project. In her book, Regie talks about a school where "Together the principal and teachers decided to take a sample of writing from all students at the beginning of every school year and at the end, a quickwrite to the same prompt."

I came up with the idea of connecting our school-wide writing assessment project to the changing of the clocks in the fall and spring. I called it the "Fall Back and Spring Ahead Writing Extravaganza." We had a fall school-wide writing day where the students all wrote to the same prompt, "If you could travel in a time machine to the past, what time period would you visit and why?" Regie mentions that the quickwrites should not be graded or have any teacher intervention as the students write to create their "very best work." To make the day a bit more



Ann Thompson

exciting, students were served hot chocolate as they worked hard on their drafts.

The spring writing prompt was "If you could travel into the future, what would it be like and how would you want the world to be better?" After compiling results of a survey I sent to the teachers regarding the fall writing day, we made some adjustments to improve the process for the spring writing day. In addition, each teacher is keeping a literacy folder for each student that will be passed onto the next year's teacher.

On April 3, a portion of our staff development day was devoted to beginning the assessment process. Teachers shared samples of the students' fall/spring writings and discussed the school's writing expectations at each grade level. Some excellent suggestions came out of our cross-grade level meetings!

This is just the beginning of what we hope to accomplish with a yearly school-wide writing assessment project developed to help our students become better writers and our teachers better writing instructors.

*Hartley, continued from page 2*

continuity between the national and local writing projects. The commitment of the attendees to supporting the teaching of writing formed another connection: MWP is part of a vast network of groups doing much the same work that we are doing.

The day before we returned to MSP, I spent some time shopping at the beautiful historic arts village of La Villita, where I bought some jewelry, a locally-painted picture, and a few other souvenirs. I came back home with many good memories of companionship, the delights of San Antonio, and a deeper understanding of the mission of MWP and NWP.



*Candance and Debra take in some of the local culture.*

*Malwitz, continued from page 2*

rewarding. I learned more about best practices in writing, reading, and research. I listened to teachers from all over the U.S. share their wisdom. I reflected upon my own skills and knowledge. I laughed a lot.

Finally, the city of San Antonio was a great destination. The Riverwalk, Alamo, historical missions, and great restaurants made my time with Muriel and Debra a memorable break from our blustery Minnesota weather.

Our afternoon visits were informative and interesting. At each of the offices, we were able to share information about the importance of continued funding for the National Writing Project and the work our site does here in Minnesota. At Representative Collin Peterson's office we were joined by the delegation from the Red River Valley Writing Project. Both Kirsten and I were pleased with the responses we received; however, we were reminded of the significance of your involvement at the local level. Please keep your congressional representatives informed about the work you are doing – invite them to visit your classroom, send them examples of student writings, visit their local offices.



*Jacqueline Jones Royster*

Friday morning provided an opportunity for participants to share briefly about their experiences visiting members of Congress. Minnesota was very proud that both Representative Ellison and Representative Oberstar had already signed the House Dear Colleague letter (a process to build support in Congress) in support of a \$30 million appropriation for the National Writing Project.

The featured speaker for the morning, Jacqueline Jones Royster, professor of English at Ohio State University, spoke on "Responsible Citizenship in a Global Environment." She gave a very strong endorsement to the National Writing Project and spoke of teachers as agents of change. Eventually, you should be able to download her speech from the NWP website. Here are a few very powerful thoughts:

"Language is NOT just subject matter. It is currency."

"The work of teachers – help our students to use language to preserve democratic society"

"We know how to teach, BUT do we know what it means to teach in context?"

"Make certain that the head, heart, backbone, and stomach are all in motion."

Two breakout sessions were offered. Both of my sessions centered on teacher leadership – how the Project began and flourished and what makes teacher leadership in the NWP long-lasting. You can read a very interesting study recently completed by Inverness Research at [http://www.inverness-research.org/abstracts/ab2009-03\\_Rpt\\_NWP-TeacherLeadershipEssay.html](http://www.inverness-research.org/abstracts/ab2009-03_Rpt_NWP-TeacherLeadershipEssay.html) According to the essay, "Nowhere in our long careers as educational researchers and consultants have we at Inverness Research seen the potential of teacher leadership realized more fully than in the National Writing Project." The study identifies how the core values of the NWP as community, egalitarianism, and inquiry, and the key generative structures of the invitational institute as teacher demonstrations, writing and writing groups influence this development of teacher leadership. With our site approaching its 20th year, I felt extremely honored that MWP is one of the earlier NWP sites.

I always leave the Spring Meeting with a renewed commitment to the work we are doing here in Minnesota. Soon it will be time to welcome our 2009 Annual Invitational Summer Institute participants. An interesting fact from NWP: "The NWP Legacy Study shows that 98 percent of NWP summer institute participants remain in education until they retire, with 70 percent staying in the classroom throughout their careers."



*Kirsten and Muriel meet Senator Amy Klobuchar in DC at the "Minnesota Morning" event.*

# Upcoming Events

**Lauren Stringer to talk at Retreat – Thursday, June 25th, 2009** Author and illustrator Lauren Stringer will talk with teachers at this year's retreat for the 19th Invitational Summer Institute on Thursday, June 25th, 2009. For more information about this event and registration, visit the MWP News Blog at <http://mwp.umn.edu/news/index.php>

**Save the Date!! Reunion Workshop – Wednesday, October 7th, 2009** Come celebrate the start of 20 years for MWP. Guest presenter Mary Ann Smith, NWP Director of Government Relations and Public Affairs, will share her experiences advocating for teachers in Washington D.C.

**National Day on Writing – October 20, 2009** NCTE is sponsoring a variety of writing related events to ring in this first time celebration of the annual event. Check out the site below for more information. Or submit a piece of writing to the "Gallery of Writing": <http://galleryofwriting.org/>

NCTE official site: <http://www.ncte.org/action/dayonwriting>



## *In memory of Elaine Marie Johnson*

January 21st, 1957 – April 17th, 2009

**Elaine Johnson** (SI '05) recently passed away due to complications related to cancer. We thank her for her contributions to the writing project and literacy in general.

*From the 4/19/2009 Pioneer Press*

"Elaine was an artist, whose paintings and drawings have been displayed in many venues through the years, and she was most recently active in the organization, Project Art for Nature. For many years, she taught art and book making to school children and teachers. After earning her Master of Education degree in 2004, Elaine worked for the last five years as a teacher of English to immigrant children and adults. Most of all, Elaine was a wise, beautiful, thoughtful, and gracious woman who appreciated all kinds of people and delighted in new experiences and ideas."

## Minnesota Writing Project Policy Board Members 2008-2009

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