It Can’t Be Taught, But It Can Be Lost

BY TERRY MOBLEY

"Have I mentioned how excited I am to be here?" She's young, in her early 20s. This is her first National Writing Project Annual Meeting and her first National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Annual Convention. Her name is Jennifer Goulston, and she's here in Atlanta because the Maryland Writing Project, with which she is a teacher-consultant, presented her with a gift: an all-expense-paid trip to the two annual events. In truth, the trip came about because the Maryland Writing Project received a grant from NWP's New-Teacher Initiative and used part of it to send Jennifer Goulston, who has volunteered to help her younger colleagues over the mountain she so recently climbed, to this third-year teacher's version of Disney World.

Jen's chomping at the bit. She's chosen before-, during-, and after-convention strategies, and she's poised to put them into practice. She has devoured hundreds of pages of convention guides, created a spreadsheet for all four days of meetings, and penciled in the codes, titles, and room locations for each session she plans to attend. Every space of her spreadsheet is filled. Every session has been carefully chosen.

I, on the other hand, am older, counting the years to retirement. I, too, have come to Atlanta on a free ride. Each year the director and co-director of the Maryland Writing Project set aside a small portion of the NWP grant in order to take a teacher-leader to the NWP Annual Meeting. Their goal is to integrate one more person each year into the culture of the National Writing Project, and this year I'm the lottery winner. While Jen is gurgling about the sessions she can't wait to attend, I'm looking forward to socializing with writing project friends. I join her as she walks toward the NCTE registration desk, but I'm fantasizing about the time I will get to write this weekend. I picture myself exploring the sights of Atlanta. I have preregistered for Thursday's National Writing Project sessions, and I plan to catch an NCTE session here and there, but I have some ideas of my own. While Jen Goulston is rushing to be first in line to get her name tag, turning every few minutes to the bald man behind her to repeat her mantra, "Have I told you how excited I am to be here?" I am secretly plotting ways to avoid as many presentations, roundtables, and panel discussions as possible.

My plan is to immerse myself in the guilty pleasure of playing hooky while my colleagues at Woodlawn Middle School back in Baltimore are covering my lunch duties and admonishing sixth-graders for running in the halls. Jen's to ride every roller coaster in this English-teachers' think-tank park until she either drops from exhaustion or the management turns off all the lights. Jen is focused, on a mission. I am just chillin'.

But the bubbles of enthusiasm that fill the air around Jen keep floating in my direction, and I can't help but catch some of her energy. "Have you read Seeking Diversity? Did you know that Linda Reif is going to be here? I just have to get to her session, even if I have to camp outside the door to get a seat. Linda Reif is my hero."

I smile and remember the spring of 1992. That was the year I attended my first NCTE and NWP annual gatherings. I was a new teacher-consultant with the Maryland Writing Project, and I had just been accepted as a co-coordinator for the upcoming summer institute. I had been teaching for at least 15 years by then, but I had been "born-again" (in the writing project sense of that term) thanks to my experiences the previous summer. Everything was new, wonderful, exciting, and scary. I don't believe I was ever, even then, as eager to soak it all in as Jen Goulston is as she waits for her first session to begin. Still, I remember how excited I was to be in the same room with Nancie Atwell, even if I had to share her with the 500 other English teachers who filled the auditorium.

Jen mentions how difficult it was for her to select from so many delicious choices. If she could, she would split herself like so many coaxial cables branching off in every direction, attending every session that's offered. I take the bait. I had planned to just see what sessions were offered, maybe walk through the book exhibits. Instead, we decide to each attend different sessions and then meet to share packets.

"What a great idea!" Jen says excitedly. "I noticed on the way in that there's a copy center right in the hotel. We'll meet there, and I'll pay for all the copies. Have I told you how excited I am to be here?"

Sometimes during my first session, as I think about whether I want to see Atlanta on foot or ask the concierge at the hotel if there are any good tours available, I hear an idea about which I know Jennifer Goulston would be excited. I sit up and begin to listen, not for me, but for a young teacher whose enthusiasm is so infectious that suddenly I'm on a mission. I feel a little like the young Americans of the 1940s must have felt when they first saw the finger in the posters pointing at them saying, "Uncle Sam Needs You!" Her mission? My mission? Who cares? What I assumed would be drudgery is beginning to feel like fun.

By my second session, I am listening for Jen, but I've begun listening for myself also. The schools we teach in are more similar than different. I am a resource teacher in the first reconstitution-eligible middle school in Baltimore County. In other words, the school is struggling, and if we don't raise our high-stakes test scores in the next three years, the state of Maryland may take over the school. Jen teaches sixth grade language arts in an inner-city middle school. I help teachers infuse reading and writing into their various content and work with small groups of students to prepare them for tests. If I can discover ideas that are new and exciting to Jen, maybe I can also discover new ways to invigorate and revitalize the teachers I work with at Woodlawn Middle School.

I attend session after session that day and walk away with at least one "new" idea from each one that I can take back. Jen and I meet at the copy center, thumb through packets, and talk about the ideas we know we will try back in Baltimore. As Jen pays for the copies, I break into a weak impression of a middle school girl, emoting, "Have I told you how excited I am to be here?"

We both laugh as I head back toward the hotel and Jen, still going strong, strides off to the final session listed on her spreadsheet for today.

I did not attend as many sessions as Jen did. I broke away to shop a little, visit the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Museum and walk the streets of Atlanta. But thanks to Jen Goulston and her insatiable hunger for ideas that she could carry back to Booker T. Washington Middle School in Baltimore City, I was transformed from apathetic conventioneer to the reflective educator I used to be.

Three years ago a teacher who was about to retire informed me that I had played a part in his decision to leave the profession. He said that seeing me teach, he realized that he had lost something that I still possessed. Attending the NWP and NCTE meetings in the company of the young, enthusiastic Jen Goulston reminded me...
It Can't Be Taught

continued from page 6

that there is a very real danger that I will face as I pass through the final five or six years of my career. I may lose the one thing that made me a teacher in the first place, the one thing that matters more than expertise, knowledge, or pedagogy. That one thing is the joy of teaching. It can't be taught in preservice college classes, but it can be lost as teachers get older. That joy is the

one thing I hope my grandchildren are exposed to as they travel through whatever school system they are forced to negotiate. Jennifer Goulston's students are blessed because Jen has a tremendous amount of that joy, and I thank her for reminding me that I still have some of it, too.

Writing projects bring together elementary and secondary educators, public and private school teachers, teachers from urban schools and their colleagues from rural settings—and that's a good thing. But I was reminded this past year at the National Writing Project Annual Meeting that writing project sites also bring together enthusiastic young teachers and at-risk older teachers—and that's a good thing, too.

Terry Morley is an associate director of the Maryland Writing Project (MWP). For the past five years he has directed the MWP Student Writers' Workshop at Towson University. Before that he co-coordinated the summer institute for five years.