

# San Diego Team Pegged for Moffett Award

BY ART PETERSON

"To tell you the truth, I didn't know much about James Moffett." That's the confession of Kim Douillard who, along with her colleagues Jan Hamilton and Danan McNamara at Cardiff School near San Diego, is a recipient of the 2002 James Moffett Memorial Award. All three are teacher-consultants with the San Diego Area Writing Project. *The Voice* had the opportunity to speak with Kim Douillard about the group award and how the principles advanced by these three teachers connect to Moffett's thinking.

The Moffett Award, sponsored by the National Council of Teachers of English Conference on English Education and the National Writing Project, was first presented in 2000. The idea for the award was initiated by National Writing Project founder James Gray who felt it was important to honor the remarkable contribution of Moffett to the way educators think about the teaching of writing. Applicants for the award submit a proposal describing a project they want to carry out that reflects the letter and spirit of Moffett's work.

"One purpose of the award," said Janet Swenson, site director of the Red Cedar Writing Project in Michigan and former chair of NCTE's Conference on English Education, "is to bring Moffett's seminal contributions onto the radar screen of younger teachers." In the case of the 2002 award recipients, this is exactly what happened.

Noticing the announcement of the Moffett Award on the NWP website, Douillard went to her bookcase and pulled out Moffett's *Coming on Center: English Education in Evolution*, a volume that had fallen into her hands when San Diego Area Writing Project Director Marcia Venegas-Garcia was distributing books as she tidied up her office. Like the college freshman amazed to find that she had been speaking prose all along, Douillard, who also serves as co-director of the San Diego area project, was delighted to find out that Moffett's ideas were very much in sync with the work that she and her colleagues had been doing.

"Moffett sees social justice issues as integral to the work we do as teachers. Here, we're teaching in a small suburban district, but social concerns need to be important for us. These kids are likely to be in positions of leadership in the

future. The attitudes they develop at a young age will have a big effect on the way they think as adults," said Douillard.

Douillard has, in fact, made a career of initiating changes of the sort James Moffett would approve. Nine years ago, Douillard and her colleague Jan Hamilton designed a multi-age

program for their first- through third-graders that allows the teachers to be with students for three years. "We're achieving what we're after," Douillard said, "Children don't have to be confined by a top and bottom."

colleagues hope they are establishing early on a habit that will allow students to reach out into the world with a watchful and understanding eye.

Using a video camera, Douillard applied the same "look at it, then think about it" strategy in an observation of her classroom. After students filmed their class at work, their almost universal observation was that "students in the multi-age program ask a lot of questions," an insight that could only have cheered the teacher-researchers. On the agenda soon: a video of another classroom that will give her students some basis for comparison and more questions.

So even before the granting of the award, these teachers were doing work that Moffett would have blessed. "These are teachers," said Janet Swenson, "who are going to push forward with their good work, award or no award."

But it was the award of \$1,000 that allowed these teachers to get to the next step: their effort to move beyond the school and into the community. Their application included a request for disposable cameras so that students would be able to take pictures of those people, places, and things in their neighborhoods that made them proud, on the one hand, and that concerned them, on the other. Most students were proud of their families and their pets. They took appropriate photographs. But their concerns covered a lot of territory. They were concerned about SUVs, about homeless people, about crowded and ugly freeways, about fallen trees, and mean dogs.

At this writing, Douillard's students are only now being pushed to the next question. "What do you think about this?" But that won't be the end of it. The Moffett winners are holding on to the most important question of all: "If we are concerned about this, what can we do about it?" Granted, at seven years old, these children will probably not have all the answers, but Douillard and her team are teaching these kids to ask the right questions.

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In an action-research project very much in the spirit of Moffett, Douillard decided to experiment with the idea that young students are capable of reflection. She began devoting one day a week to this type of introspection. [See Douillard's "Reflective Friday," *The Quarterly of the National Writing Project*, 22(4).] "One of the effects of having students pay more attention to their learning," Douillard said, "is that they now seem to engage in more self-initiative. They recognize what needs to be done."

In her present work, Douillard applies Moffett's idea that the classroom should be the world, that learning should not be confined to the school room. Influenced by ideas found in Carolyn Frank's book, *Ethnographic Eyes*, Douillard and her colleagues had been working with this concept well before they applied for the Moffett grant. Modifying Frank's work to make it appropriate for the young children she teaches, Douillard used the playground as a laboratory, asking the children to observe and record what they saw and then return to the classroom to think about it. A student reported, "I saw boys playing soccer." But thinking about this observation, the student might be made to wonder, "Why is it that no girls play soccer?" Or, "I saw lots of girls wearing pink. No boy wears pink? Why not?"

By encouraging children to observe and think about what they see, Douillard and her

Apply for the 2003 James Moffett Memorial Award by May 1, 2003. Go to [www.ncte.org/cee/moffett.shtml](http://www.ncte.org/cee/moffett.shtml).