NWP Annual Meeting Celebrates Teacher-Writers

BY ART PETERSON

There was much about the general session at the National Writing Project 25th Annual Meeting in Atlanta that was a lot like—well—a meeting.

The more than 800 site leaders and teacher-consultants gathered at the Atlanta Hyatt Regency's International Ball Room on November 22 heard warm greetings from Gwen Williams, director of the Peachtree Writing Project (Georgia), and David Bloome, president of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE).

NWP Executive Director Richard Sterling spoke of the writing project's increasingly visible profile as exemplified by the publication of Ann Lieberman and Diane R. Wood's book, Inside the National Writing Project: Connecting Network Learning and Classroom Teaching.

Executive Director Richard Sterling (second from left) enjoys the teacher-writer presentations that were the centerpiece of the National Writing Project Annual Meeting general session. From left, the teacher-writers included Kathleen O'Shaughnessy, Diane Waff, Marcus Mason, Lynn Jacobs, and Paul Allison.

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O'Shaughnessy spoke first, cultivating an analogy that began with an anecdote about a recent day when a hurricane loomed and her school had been dismissed after half a day. In the parking lot, as students waited for buses and teachers headed for their cars, the groups shared apprehension translated into the repeated phrase “be safe.”

For O'Shaughnessy, the writing project has provided a place for her to be safe as a writer, a place where, as a writer, one can “either dive in the water or be pushed.”

She recounted her writing project writer's journey from her first summer institute, to the NWP Professional Writing Retreat at Santa Fe, to publication in the NWP journal, The Quarterly, all the while feeling safe. O'Shaughnessy went on to publish several pieces in The Quarterly. The last of these was an eyes-wide-open look at the irrationality of imposed-from-on-high curriculum and assessment. This particular article has appeared in other venues and has received much attention. “People from all over the place want to swap stories with me,” she said, adding “Now, the water never worries me.” She advised her writing project colleagues, “Dive in. See what happens. Be safe.”

Lynn Jacobs described her writing habits as “obsessive,” adding, “I'm my favorite writer.” She detailed her obsession: there were scrawlings on the margins of newspapers, a journal full of pictures and places, and an effort to start a novel that ended abruptly.

“I lose interest as soon as I have to describe something,” she admitted.

As a participant in a writing retreat sponsored by the Northern Arizona Writing Project, however, she realized she had made a great leap forward as a writer when she took special pride in a story she had written from the perspective of her daughter. With growing confidence, she tried her hand at professional writing, eventually publishing a piece in the English Journal. This published piece, she said “gave me permission to call myself a writer where all of my journal entries didn’t.”

Still, the satisfaction Jacobs derives from writing isn't altogether, or even primarily, about seeing her name in print. “Life informs my writing,” she said, “but writing also informs my life.”

Paul Allison, a teacher-consultant and technology liaison for the New York City Writing Project, spoke about a type of writing that is quite different from the private journal jottings that a high percentage of his Atlanta listeners might hope to do something with someday. Allison's concern is writing for the very public forum of the World Wide Web. He took listeners into a world where fonts make a difference and,
using a Power Point demonstration, demonstrated how web design and writing could be “intuitively intertwined”; how they can exist in a “dialectical” relationship. Our challenge, he concluded, “is to design web pages with strong writing content.”

Diane Waff is the winner of the 2002 Fred Hechinger Award, an award given to a teacher who has significantly demonstrated in her work the connection between research and practice. Waff has taken an admonition from the poet Adrienne Rich as her text: “Write as if your life depended on it.”

Waff sees her writing as taking her on a journey of “life liberation and self-determination,” of providing her with “a map, an inventory of my experience in life.” Her writing has led her to bear witness to the workings of “punitive schools” and “bankrupt” school programs.

Waff spoke specifically of a piece of research that became a published article. In doing the research and the writing for the article, she said, “I saw how I was shutting down communication in my classroom. I was able to see my teaching through the eyes of my students. Writing, for me, had become a way to reflect and learn.”

Marcus Mason’s journey as a writer seems a rockier one than that of his colleagues on the Atlanta stage. He spoke of his experience as a student accepting as a matter of course the F grade on his papers; “the scarlet letter,” he called it. He spoke of how as a community college student he was reluctant to turn in a paper anticipating the inevitable note at the bottom of his returned essay: “See me after class.”

At the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, working with teachers who had writing project affiliation, Mason began to take control of his writing, but alas this growth was not immediately recognized by the powers-that-be in Nevada. He initially failed the professional test that would have allowed him to become a teacher.

Speaking movingly of the way he believed he had let down his wife and daughter who had placed so much faith in him, Mason turned for help to the source that had saved him before. A deeply religious man, he prayed: “I was raised to believe that Moses parted the Red Sea,” he said. “All I wanted to do was pass that test.”

Be it with the Lord’s help or by virtue of his own pluck, the next time around Mason passed the test. Since that time, he has traveled miles as a writer and now speaks confidently of a time that he—and his wife also—will have successfully completed their doctoral dissertations.

Mason began his talk with an avowal that was interjected as a kind of mantra as he spoke and served as his concluding statement. “I write the conclusion before I tell the story. I’m here, and I’m still writing.”

“I’m here, and I’m still writing.” Is there a more appropriate maxim to celebrate the 30th year of the National Writing Project?