

# ELL Network Writing Retreat an NWP First

BY OLGA FRECHON

On July 4, 2002, a number of teachers from mainland United States and Puerto Rico gathered in Santa Fe, New Mexico, to celebrate the birthday of the United States. Unlike other holiday celebrations, however, this celebration didn't include fireworks and barbecues; rather, it was a celebration of voices, the voices of the English Language Learners (ELL) Network of the National Writing Project. This was the first time in the history of NWP that a group of teachers gathered to write exclusively about ELL issues that impact learning and teaching in classrooms across America.

The history of how this event came about is worth recounting. In 1999, the ELL Network was created within NWP to fulfill an urgent need to provide services to a growing number of English language learners. The ELL Network's mission statement delineates the group's vision: to put English language learners in the forefront of NWP's agenda. And that's just what happened. In a time when services to bilingual and English language learners are being reduced, NWP responded by creating a professional network of ELL teachers.

For the last three years, the ELL Network has been meeting twice a year to discuss ELL issues and strategies. Members have mined writing project sites for ELL-relevant ideas, collected data, developed a bibliography for ELL teachers, and presented sessions at the NWP Annual Meeting. Finally, last year, the group decided to have a writing retreat devoted entirely to the issues of ELL students.

And so it was that teachers and site directors from sites as far flung as Puerto Rico, Oklahoma, California, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Minnesota, Georgia, and Texas spent three days writing and sharing in Santa Fe. Some teachers wrote about their practice and their lives as teachers; others wrote about their personal experiences growing up in America. One writer worked on an introduction to an anthology—in which all of the pieces tell stories of how teachers learned a second language.

Kathleen O'Shaughnessy, co-director of the National Writing Project of Acadiana (Louisiana) and Joseph Check, director of the Boston Writing Project, co-facilitated the event. Kathleen, who has facilitated the NWP Writing Retreat, saw something special in this ELL

*See ELL Writing Retreat, page 21*

## ELL Writing Retreat

*continued from page 17*

Network gathering. “The passion these teachers bring to their work is remarkable,” she said. “I sincerely hope they’ll continue the writing they’ve begun at the retreat, and not only for their own network. We ‘mainstream’ teachers can learn much from them about valuing the individual learner over curriculum, and about being a voice for your students when decisions are made that adversely affect their learning.”

The only complaint heard about the retreat was that it ended too soon. Lynn Jacobs, a participant from the Northern California Writing Project, wanted to stay a few more days to polish her piece, saying, “The writing groups are brave—willing to respond honestly to one piece of writing that has been haunting me for months, and I’m exhausted! But there are compensations: the food is delicious, and the site is beautiful.”

From here, the ELL Network hopes to publish these pieces for broader dissemination within and beyond the writing project network and present its products at the NWP Annual Meeting in Atlanta this November. But regardless of what the group does from here, one goal has already been achieved: the writing retreat itself. On July 4, after an intense year of preparation, the ELL Network saw teachers toiling to articulate ideas about which, up to now, they had remained silent. The sense of accomplishment was palpable.