

# Reflections on a Savannah Conference

BY TINA HUMPHREY

As I drove around Denver today running the usual “just-home-from-a-trip” errands, I was disappointed in my city. The sweet smell of jasmine wasn’t filling my nose, and there wasn’t any mysterious Spanish moss dripping from the trees. Worst of all, Flannery O’Connor wasn’t walking beside me. In other words, Denver is no Savannah, Georgia.

I was able to attend this year’s National Writing Project Urban Sites Conference in Savannah in April, and, I admit, I was a bit uneasy about my trip before I left. Perhaps it was because this was my first real “business” trip alone, or perhaps it was that feeling of knowing I was going to be away from my classroom for two days. Whatever the reason, I managed to crawl out of bed on the appointed Thursday morning and put myself on a plane to Georgia. And I am so glad that I did.

Savannah is amazing. Sherwood Anderson once said that when he was in Savannah something down inside him made him sing. As I stepped off the plane and into the 88-degree southern heat and humidity, I too was beginning to sing. I knew I was in the land of southern hospitality when my cab driver opened the cab door for me and called me “pretty lady” without making me feel creepy.



But it was on Friday that I really started to sing. After meeting up with other NWP folks in the hotel lobby, we were off to discover Savannah. Walking through the city blocks, with a luscious park in each square where trees folded over our heads like long arms, I was transported to another time, a time when Flannery O’Connor was raising chickens in her backyard and Conrad Aiken was walking these same cobblestone streets. We ended our day in the historic Massie School with a group reading of an O’Connor short story and time to write and share a portrait of a Savannah character. It was as if Ms. O’Connor was guiding my hand as I wrote.

As a teacher who participated in the summer institute only last year and who is just completing her third year of teaching, I was nervous as I walked through the doors of the Georgia Historical Society for Friday night’s reception and dinner. Within minutes, however, I was talking with teachers from Chicago, Indiana, California, Philadelphia, and lots of other places. There were directors, co-directors, national committee members, and teacher-consultants from all over the country filling the room, and we all came together easily because we all care about writing. As Suzie Jacobs,

codirector of the Hawai'i Writing Project, told me, being a part of the writing project is like belonging to a church that opens its arms and accepts you no matter where you're from.

At the opening of the Saturday morning session, we were pulled onto our feet and entertained by the Georgia Sea Island Singers. I found myself singing and dancing and chanting at what was, for me, a ridiculously early hour for a Saturday. The sessions that followed hit every strand of teaching from English language learner issues to literacy concerns to site project ideas. I left with an armload of materials to share with my fellow teachers back in Denver.

At most conferences, I tend to gain the most knowledge from the one-on-one conversations that take place in the hallway before a session begins or over lunch in a crowded cafeteria. This weekend proved to be no different. While each session gave me a new tool to take back to Douglas County, Colorado, the "aha!" moments happened at other times. As I talked with other teacher-consultants, I came to understand that *urban* and *rural* are just terms to describe a school's population. What all of us in NWP share is a desire to give our students a voice, no matter what their voices sound like. The tool that brings all of these students and teachers together is the written word. A student in New York may give voice to her experience in

an inner-city apartment complex, and a student in rural Iowa may write about her farm. The surrounding circumstances may be different, but that's also true for the student in the first row of my room and the one in the third row. A socioeconomic label does not change a child's need to be heard, and to be read. What is truly important is letting the student know that what he has to say is important.

All of us who attended this conference have new tools to take to our students. We may have various results in using them, but that's the beauty of this career. When I teach a student in Douglas County to retell a story, she will now have a tool in common with a student in Detroit whose teacher taught her the same thing because we were able to come together in a city in Georgia. And we all want our students to have the same tools as the next student. We may not be able to change our students' economic or family situations, but we can provide the skills necessary to communicate in the world. This is what I took away from the Urban Sites Conference . . . that and a nagging desire to cover the Rocky Mountains with Spanish moss.

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