

Urban Sites Conference 2002, Southern Style

BY E. LA WANDA RANSOM

As the host site, we at the Coastal Georgia Writing Project were feeling both anxious and excited on April 26 as the two-day Urban Sites Conference got underway in Savannah, Georgia. Savannah was to be the Southernmost location yet to host the Urban Sites Conference, giving extra intent to the theme *Bridges: Connecting Lives Through Literacy*. We had spent almost two years planning the event, making sure to infuse the conference—which drew 162 participants—with a mix of network-related activities, strong doses of southern hospitality, and Savannah culture.

We welcomed the crisp morning air on Friday for those who chose the walking tours. Participants were guided through historical Savannah by a local teacher-consultant who has a vast knowledge of the city's historical landmarks and features. Others visited local public schools in both urban and suburban communities, where they talked with students and wrote about the experience. One participant reflected, "Friday's immersion into Savannah was a chance to unwind and approach Saturday's sessions with a fresher perspective."

Not only did participants get to see Savannah, they were treated to a taste of it as well,

sampling our low country boil—a mixture of shrimp, potatoes, corn on the cob, and sausage. And they also had the chance to listen to our music. On Friday night, the Savannah Arts Academy's Sky Lite Jazz Band performed at the Savannah History Museum. Then on Saturday morning, the Sea Island Singers gave us a wake-up call. The group from Brunswick, Georgia, has toured worldwide for over a quarter of a century, singing traditional spirituals. They engaged the audience with movement, music, call and response, and renditions that have survived since the days of slavery in the beautiful Gullah language. Conference participants reflected that this presentation "fed our spirits," that it was "energizing but also educational and good for community building."

Later, Congressman Jack Kingston (R-GA) joined us to welcome the conference participants and offer his support for the work of the National Writing Project. He reflected on the influences of teachers and family on his own educational development.

The break-out sessions on Saturday focused on issues that are central to the work of the Urban Sites Network. The presenters shared the work of their classrooms and local sites. Ideas about teaching, learning, leading, and professional development abounded. One participant

commented: "I'll use the family stories project, the variety of approaches to revision, the poetry café, and the reading list from the teacher research presentation."

The exciting two-day conference came to a close with a town meeting, where participants gathered to learn more about the work of the network, reflect on the conference activities, hear announcements, and prepare for the next conference. A local dance group, Sankofa, closed the conference.

As the conference chairperson, I learned that it takes teamwork and a love for the work of the Urban Sites Network to plan and execute this conference. It is my hope that a positive image of the South is indelibly marked in the minds of those from the North, East, and West. One participant verbalized the balance we were trying to achieve, saying "I really liked the way cultural presentations were intermixed in our weekend experience. The Sea Island Singers, the jazz band on Friday, and Sankofa helped create a broad context for thinking about literacy."

E. LA WANDA RANSOM is a teacher-consultant with the Coastal Georgia Writing Project.