Rough Writers Ride Again

by Susan Al-Jarrah

I was among 28 teacher-consultants from the Oklahoma State University Writing Project (OSUWP) and Oklahoma Writing Project (OWP) who arrived at the historic, meticulously restored Harrison House Hotel in Guthrie, Oklahoma, on February 22, 2002. Pencils blazing, we would be attending the Rough Writers Professional Writing Retreat (named in honor of Theodore Roosevelt, a previous lodger at the hotel).

For three days, we would write and share with fellow teachers in an atmosphere enhanced by dark woodwork and shimmering brass fixtures. Art Peterson, a senior editor at the National Writing Project, flew out from Berkeley to help us shape our ideas for submission to Write Angles III, a collection on the teaching and practice of writing by participants in Oklahoma's two writing project sites. Two previous editions of Write Angles, one from 1985 and another from 1990, have proved valuable and popular resources for Oklahoma teachers.

OSUWP Co-director Janice Cramer knew we needed to do another Write Angles volume, but she wondered how she could get busy teachers to produce the work. Then, at the 2001 National Writing Project Annual Meeting in Baltimore, Janice attended the session on how to set up a writing retreat. She was inspired. A writing retreat would allow us to carve out the time for writing and writing groups that would be necessary to create a successful publication. The idea for our Rough Writers Professional Writing Retreat was born.

Lodging and travel expenses were funded by the Oklahoma Department of Education through the efforts of State Language Arts Coordinator Claudette Goss (OWP class of 1979). It was Claudette who had also engineered the publication of Write Angles I and Write Angles II.

We spent our first evening with Art looking at "Ideas, Focused and Otherwise," during which time I became convinced that my own idea definitely belonged in the second category. But the next morning, Art showed us ways to move drafts to articles using six key ingredients: focus, voice, credible detail, benefit, change, and warts (that is, admissions as to how some of our brilliantly conceived strategies have been a little less successful than planned). We wrote, talked, revised, and conducted conferences with Art and our writing groups. The magic of the writing project never failed us. By Sunday, when each participant read a sample, most of us had miraculously produced works ready for polishing into respectable articles to submit for the Write Angles III deadline.

This professional writing retreat was the first such collaboration between the Oklahoma writing projects, but the success of this joint activity seems to point the way to more mutual efforts.

As participants left at the end of the too-short weekend, they took with them the satisfaction that the work they had accomplished would before long be out there to benefit teachers and students across the state of Oklahoma.

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