Rural Voices Radio Launches Three New Pieces

by Laura Paradise

Three new radio programs in the Rural Voices Radio series were launched in January. Teacher coordinators from Hawai‘i, Maine, and Mississippi gathered on the UC Berkeley campus with producer Deborah Begel and narrator Kim Stafford to learn about writing for audio and preparing for recording. Coordinators from the three new sites included: Suzie Jacobs from the Hawai‘i Writing Project, Ken Martin from the Maine Writing Project, and Suzanne Thompson from the Mississippi Writing/Thinking Institute. In one weekend, the group wrote, revised, and produced an eight-minute CD that will be used to introduce the new programs.

The new programs will echo the themes of the initial Rural Voices Radio series. Each will contain the writings and voices of students, teachers, and community members focused on the unique characteristics of their rural communities. The radio programs will be recorded on location at each of the three writing project sites, and final CDs are scheduled to be released in November 2001.

The first set of six radio programs, released in 2000, was one of the unexpected successes of the NWP/Annenberg Rural Challenge Rural Voices Country Schools project. Public radio stations have aired the series across the country from Alaska to Massachusetts, and NWP continues to receive praise from listeners who have heard the programs. The next three programs, funded solely by the NWP, will give the writing project network the chance to further explore the use of multimedia to document and disseminate its work.

The January launch meeting was an opportunity for coordinators from each site to learn about radio production and to lay the groundwork to help producer Begel become familiar with their communities. In addition to writing and testing place-based prompts, the coordinators unpacked reference materials, local music, and anything else that would give the group a taste of their homes. Ken Martin fed the group Maine blueberries and explained the origins of the term “Down East.” Suzanne Thompson demonstrated call and response and played recordings of Mississippi Delta blues. And Suzie Jacobs read to the group in Pigdin. Everyone became acquainted quickly as they wrote about landscapes and language unique to their homes.

Samples of the preview are printed below, and listeners can hear the full eight-minute Rural Voices Radio preview on the NWP Web site, www.writingproject.org. To hear the completed new half-hour programs, however, listeners will have to wait until the Annual Meeting 2001 in Baltimore. For more information on the Rural Voices Country Schools project, contact Laura Paradise at paradise@uchicagob.berkeley.edu.

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“The greatest ownership of all is to look around and understand,” narrator Kim Stafford states in his opening of the new Rural Voices Radio preview. As a way of introducing the three new program sites, he continues by asking, “What would this mean if you lived on the rainy Hilo coast, in the red clay hills of Mississippi, or the blueberry barrens of Maine? We asked ourselves these questions and began to write.”

Short, texture-laden samples of writing from each of the three sites answer Stafford’s question and intrigue listeners. Printed samples of these pieces—from Hawai‘i, Maine, and Mississippi—follow:

Mama’s Button Box

by Suzanne Thompson, Mississippi Writing/Thinking Institute

Playing “buttons” was one of my favorite childhood memories. Sitting on the hooked rug in front of the gas heater in my grandma’s parlor where Mama kept the black Singer foot-pedal sewing machine, my sister Debra and I would pour out the contents of the Quaker Oatmeal box that contained all of the unused buttons of her work. The buttons would spill on top of one another, and we would begin the slow process of categorizing and sorting them into piles that we named: all of the strawberry buttons in the back pile because they were the largest and took up the most space on the rug; the tiniest ones we placed in front; and the most unique ones would stand alone in their own special spot away from all the other button groups. It felt as though a silent understanding passed between the two of us as we asked questions about the buttons and listened intently as Mama revisited each button with us and supplied her own special connection. Then the button became more than just a button. It grew a life and a story of its own.

There was a button among all of the others that spoke just to me. It was a brown button, made from the cross-section of a sweet-gum ball. The inside of it was black as coal, centered by a circle of light tan, and edged with a dark-brown, spiky rim. I didn’t particularly like that button at first, yet soon I was drawn to its solitary presence. Among all of the others, its rough raw texture invited me to explore it with all the curiosity and interest of a young child. I was compelled to touch and finger it. Smooth in the center, worn and waxen, rough around the edges, bumpy and ridged. Placing my tongue on the edge of the button, I would trace its rim—each ridge and deep groove a journey to the next until I would grow tired of sticking out my tongue to do the work of learning. Its bitter, woody taste lingered long after the licking was done. Finally, I would bring it to my nose for a smell, inhaling its fragrance and holding it there as long as I could before exhaling again. Lost and found in the button box, surrendering to the breath of becoming, losing the sense of time and place—only to return again and repeat the familiar ritual.

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Come with Me
by Ken Martin, Maine Writing Project

Come with me through the doors of the Davis Service Station where men meet to evaluate the condition of town roads this year.

Come with me down a pasture road to the shore when the tide is out. My black lab goes on ahead, so we will arrive just after a cloud of ducks has lifted and gone skimming across the mud flats.

Look with me across those flats to where the men stand in olive hip waders: feet spread, bent at the waist, digging, pulling clams from the mud.

Come with me to a kitchen where women around the table discuss last Sunday’s bean game while picking meat from crabs.

Come with me where blueberry barrens in fall take on a deep red hue—white lines of string still separating each raker’s territory.

Sit with me while teenagers return from sorting berries at the factory, hands stained with a blue that will still be there after they scrub up.

Come with me to Down East Maine, where the earth breathes and we breathe with it.

I Have a Weakness
by Susie Jacobs, Hawaii Writing Project

I have a weakness for one six-year-old Kekoa and his somehow-blood-cousin Pua—their voices in the backseat.

“Grandma, can we go back to the Pali?

The Pali is no place
to feel a weakness.
You let your hair go
slipping out of its barrettes,
and, like Pua, her long black hair flying,
you’ll think the wind
coming up the face of the cliff
from the windward beaches
is going to carry you off in its big mouth
and then let you drop a thousand feet.

“That’s what happened to the Hawaiian soldiers, you know.”

“What? Their hair wen fly up and they wen blow away?”

“No, no, the warriors that King Kamehameha chased up and pushed off.”

“They all went make?”

“You bet. They all died falling off the cliff.”

I could see he was thinking: “Grandma? Was every warrior killed?”

“Well, that was a long time ago,” I said.

He rode silently in the back seat of the car. We descended the mountain, trees swaying at the side of the road, until we got close to town and the 12-story housing project where he lives.

“Is King Kamehameha related to Martin Luther King?”

“No, no. King Kamehameha was a long time ago, and Martin Luther King just died.”

“So was Martin Luther King a warrior too?”

“I suppose you could say that.”

By this time, we were headed up School Street. We had to stop. The large Samoan guard checked my insurance papers.

“And were they Samoan like me? Because my name is Kekoa, and Kekoa means ‘warrior’.”

“My darling, they were a lot like you are now, and you’re a lot like them.”