Illinois, Washington Teachers Share Moffett Award

BY ART PETERSON

"Jim Gray always has said the writing project doesn't have a theory, but in fact I believe he would concede that our work does have a theoretical base, and that theory would be the work of James Moffett."

The speaker here is Sheridan Blau, director of California's South Coast Writing Project, as he prepares to announce the teacher winners of the first James Moffett Memorial Award. The presentation of the Moffett Award took place in November at Milwaukee's Pfister Hotel, the site of the National Writing Project (NWP) Annual Meeting for 2000.

Gray, founder of the NWP, working shortly after Moffett's death in 1996 with representatives of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), conceived of the Moffett Award to honor classroom teachers who share Jim Moffett's ideas about education as expressed in and inspired by his writings. The award program asks teachers to propose projects linked to Moffett's work.

Moffett may be best known for thinking through and writing about a continuum of writing assignments that helps students move from the private and spontaneous to the abstract and theoretical. But as Gray wrote in The Voice last April (Vol. 5, No. 2), "Jim's interests were wide ranging and constantly developing (so) those who apply will have a range of choices in fashioning a proposal that derives from his ideas."

The proposals were first reviewed by a committee of NWP and NCTE teachers familiar with Moffett's work and finally by a committee of professional leaders who had close ties to Moffett.

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The three winners of the 2000 James Moffett Memorial Award are: Judith Ruhana, a teacher of seventh and eighth grade language arts at Nichols Middle School in Evanston, Illinois, and a teacher-consultant (TC) with the Chicago Area Writing Project; Diane Babcock, a third grade teacher at Olivia Park Elementary School, Everett, Washington, and a TC with the Puget Sound Writing Project; and Carla Jankowski, who works with a team teaching sophomores at Morton East High School in Cicero, Illinois. Jankowski is also a TC with the Chicago Area Writing Project. Each winner has been awarded $1,000 to carry out her project.

Judith Ruhana's proposed project centers on work she intends to do with her students at Evanston's Northside Sculpture Park, where approximately 100 pieces of outdoor sculpture are on view. Ruhana expects to involve up to 150 seventh and eighth graders in a semester-long project in which they work in groups to select, study, and interpret a piece of sculpture from the park's collection. After frequent visits to the park, each team will develop a set of varied products including photographic impressions of the sculpture, a written expression in any form, and an artistic representation of the work. Such a presentation might be in the form of a video, drama, speech, song, or mime. The group will also present an analysis of its work in a written, photographic, or video journal. The activity will conclude with a "Team Night" to which parents are invited and at which students display and celebrate their projects.

"Her proposal is pure Moffett," said one judge of Ruhana's submission. "It sees school as a special kind of community within a larger community that both nourishes the smaller group and is nourished by it. Most teachers and administrators would steer clear of this kind of out-of-school activity because of the planning that has to go into it, but Jim Moffett thought of the planning itself as a central part of the learning process for both students and adults."

Diane Babcock proposes a project in which pairs of her students will collaborate with a senior partner at Everett Washington's Seabrook Assisted Living Community. The teams will interview the senior, drawing from his or her memories of the past century. After using this collected information as the basis for writing, they'll put this writing into digital form, adding images and using other new technology. All of the stories will then be linked into a CD-ROM presentation and presented to the Seabrook community.

A reviewer of Babcock's proposal who knew Moffett well comments, "One of James Moffett's dreams was greater use of technology to create multimedia learning environments and presentations of student research. Diane Babcock's proposal is to do just that and at the same time reach beyond the classroom to resources in the larger community."

Carla Jankowski chose an epigram from Moffett to introduce her proposal: "The master argument for curricular integration is simply that life is not divided into subjects."

Jankowski has firsthand knowledge of the truth of this statement. For 15 years before going into teaching, she worked as a graphic designer and marketing manager. "I was always meeting with other professionals, collaborating, arguing, and compromising to get things done. We needed to draw on our educational resources—our skills in science, mathematics, history, reading and writing—to accomplish our goals and our employer's goals. After going into teaching, it didn't take me long to realize that most students—and many teachers—haven't made this crucial connection. That's why I have been actively involved in initiating changes at Morton East High School to deal with what I feel is a short-coming of traditional American education."

Jankowski, who has been granted sabbatical for the next school year, will use her Moffett Award to develop a team-teaching manual for Morton High School. Next year, all freshman students at Morton will be organized into groups of 100 students and assigned the same mathematics, English, science, and world history teachers. Jankowski's manual will help these teachers organize their teams more efficiently and integrate curriculum more effectively.

"Moffett," says one proposal evaluator, "always saw dividing the curriculum into separate subjects as a deterrent to deep understanding. Ms. Jankowski's proposed project will help break down artificial divisions and create a genuinely integrated curriculum."

In addition to the $1,000 award, Moffett winners each receive an award certificate, a collection of Jim Moffett's books contributed by Heinemann-Boynton/Cook, and three titles from The Writing Trek, a CD-ROM series inspired by Jim Moffett's work and contributed by EDVantage Software.