Idaho Site Director Has Energy to Spare

BY ART PETERSON

Anyone who has been acquainted with Elinor Michel, director of the Northwest Inland Writing Project in Idaho, for more than 23 minutes will be able to recite for you her favorite expression: “I love it.”

The “it” in this sentence may refer to something she has just read or an idea that someone has just presented, but more generally these words epitomize Elinor’s approach to life.

She loves the details of the world. “If you are interested in taking a brisk, serious hike for exercise,” says writing project TC Cheryl Johnson, “I wouldn’t recommend you go with Elinor. She’ll stop every few feet and examine the specifics of a wildflower. She loves arguing about petals.”

One reason Elinor has been successful as a writing project director is that she gives people even more attention than she gives flowers.

Johnson says “Elinor sees the whole person. She doesn’t judge or go on a first impression.”

Among those she works with, Elinor has the reputation of carrying around about 17 boxes of books in the back of her car. “She has an amazing sense of who needs what,” says TC Ramona Hillebrand. “If a teacher says something about wanting to know more about portfolios, she’ll just pull out the right materials.”

She is continually helpful, always trying to make things better for people.”

Back in the 1960s, with a BS in zoology from Washington State University, while undertaking graduate work in biochemistry at the University of Washington, Elinor would not have suspected that she would someday become a leader in literacy education in the state of Idaho and the director of a writing project that works throughout northern Idaho and eastern Washington. Her transformation began when the chemistry folks at the University of Washington wanted her to take more units than she thought were reasonable. She went to the English department where she was offered a significantly better deal.

“I didn’t know it at the time,” she says, “but I was beginning to prepare myself for a job in teacher education in English.”

Elinor completed her graduate work in English and moved to Idaho where for the next 10 years she worked as an instructor in English composition and reading and study skills.

During her early years at the University of Idaho, she spent her summers teaching kids in Upward Bound, a program for at-risk high school students. While at Upward Bound she proposed a course—reading in the content areas for teachers—that became part of the Upward Bound offering.

“I thought that if the teachers of these students could focus on the importance of reading in all subjects, these kids would have a better chance of getting through high school.”

After working at the University of Idaho for 10 years, Elinor took a sabbatical to pursue a doctorate of arts in English at the University of Michigan. “I had no theoretical background,” she says. “It was during this time that I was exposed to the work of Mofett, Britton, Shaunessey, and others.”

But after a year, Elinor had a chance to return to the University of Idaho to join the education department teaching language arts for elementary teachers, secondary English methods, and reading in content areas.

By 1981, word of the National Writing Project had made it way to Idaho. “The person in charge of language arts for the state at the time was a woman with the wonderful name of Driek...”

Zirinsky. She wanted to get writing projects started in Idaho, so she offered two of us federal funds for a summer institute at the university. At our informal informational meeting we drew 100 teachers. Our institute was fully subscribed. But the next year the federal government went to block grant funding. We had no stipend to offer and we had only five fellows. That’s why I get pretty nervous when I hear talk of block grants. A couple of years later we began to get funding from NWP.”

Elinor is described by those who know her as woman of unbounded energy driven in part by a need to get things right.

“She actually reads every word of all our journal entries,” says one TC who attended Elinor’s summer institute.

Nancy Larsen, an Idaho Teacher of the Year who worked with Elinor to prepare for her National Board Certification, comments on Elinor’s efforts to push herself and others toward the highest achievement. “We called her the comma queen,” says Larsen. “She wanted everything from the ideas to the cosmetics of our pieces to be of the highest quality. She had me rewrite one paper eleven times.”

Elinor admits that she insists on polished work. “What’s often wrong with the process approach to writing,” she says, “is that we never get to the end of the process.”

During Elinor’s tenure at Idaho, the writing project has been enriched by her energy and competence. Here is some of what the Northwest Inland Writing Project accomplishes in a year.

• To kick off the school year, the project co-sponsors a conference with the Inland Northwest Council of Teachers of English in Lewiston, Idaho.
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- In October, the writing project holds a student writers' conference attended by up to 275 student writers. The conference emulates the structure of an academic conference with a keynote speaker and up to 25 TCs leading breakout sessions, with topics such as "Writing Leads" and "Punchline Paragraphs.

- Also in the fall, NIWP biennially sponsors a two-week Poetry Alive! tour—a performance by professional actors who dramatize famous and not so famous poems before K-12 school audiences in various locales. NIWP then follows up with poetry workshops for teachers with the Poetry Alive! team and NIWP TCs. "It’s great publicity for the project," Elinor says.

- Then there’s the yearly NWP directors meeting in November to which Elinor tries to bring several TCs.

- In March, NIWP holds a spring conference which draws at least 80 TCs from all over the region.

- Throughout the year, groups of TCs in scattered locations—remember, this is a writing project that covers a lot of ground—participate in book discussions where they mine professional texts like Donald Graves's A Fresh Look at Writing. Four or five of these discussions may be going on at once.

- The project hosts its share of retreats. There are two advisory board retreats, one in the fall and one in the spring. In June, there’s the project-wide Reading and Writing Retreat that allows TCs a haven for personal writing.

- This June, NIWP held its first retreat devoted to writing for professional publication (see story above).

- And, of course, in July, there’s the invitational summer institute.

Despite Elinor's many years of experience and success, she will be the first to tell you the project's course has not always run smoothly. "Some districts," she says, "just don’t have the money to pay for our services. And others, particularly those in Washington, are oversized and with their own agendas. We have never, for example, figured out how to break into Spokane."

The site also has the problem faced by other sites whose service area covers a lot of territory. "We need to become better known," Elinor says. Toward this end, TCs have designed a logo, produced note pads, created posters, and contrived a collection of T-shirts, one of which—developed for a recent young writers conference—is inscribed "Writing is not for Wimps, Revision is not for Sissies."

After many years of teaching and directing a writing project, Elinor, still much in love with her work, does think about retirement. She wonders what it would be like to have more time to camp and pick huckleberries and garden. A folk-music maven, she'd like to take up the autoharp and the dulcimer.

She sometimes drops hints of these plans to her colleagues, who are beginning to catch on. At a recent NIWP advisory board meeting, Elinor put out a request for assistance that was greeted by silence. Then someone said, "Do you all forget Elinor is trying to get us to take on some of this stuff so she can retire?"

Elinor thinks a lot about the future of the project. She'd like to help the University of Idaho find a writing project endowment so it won't be dependent on the largesse of the university to fund the director's position and to ensure there will always be a writing project grant.

"Then the advisory board and classroom teachers could take over the leadership. That's my dream," she says.