First in a series of articles that will introduce readers to NWP national directors.

BY ART PETERSON

“I wanted to learn more new things,” says recently appointed NWP Associate Director Jayne Marlink. “But I’m just not sure I was prepared for this many new things, and maybe I didn’t understand just how new they would be.”

Marlink heads the new NWP initiative Focus on Standards, a 3-year program, supported by the Stuart Foundation in the states of Washington and California. The work, says Marlink, is exhilarating, but it is also “heady” and “complicated.” “We have state standards, local district graduation requirements, content standards, performance standards, opportunity to learn standards, the standards by which teachers judge themselves and the standards they apply to learners in their own classrooms.” Add to this issues of accountability and assessment and it becomes clear that teachers who trek into the land of standards had better be prepared for an uncharted, sometimes hazardous, journey.

Knowing all this, Marlink still has brought together 60 teachers from six writing project sites in California and Washington who are ready for the expedition. “When I first became involved with this work,” Marlink says, “I noticed that there were almost no teachers writing about standards. We are the ones who understand that we have some students who need a lot more help.”

Of course, the writing project, which has been a major feature on the literacy landscape for 25 years, necessarily has had an influence on state standards. “The clearest example,” says Marlink, “is when one looks at the writing domains required by the new standards — autobiographical incident to argument — this structure resembles very closely (for good or bad) the writing modes required on the old California Assessment Program.”

What Marlink’s group hopes to do is bring a classroom perspective to the standards dialogue. “We want to pay attention to what students do,” she says. “Almost all of our teachers come from schools where there are a majority of low-performing kids. In addition to those with more traditional assignments we have a teacher who works in a school for the homeless and another from a school where the majority of students come from families who work in migrant camps. None of these teachers are making excuses. But they are asking what does this (the imposition of standards) mean educationally?”

Citing an example of a way the discussion of standards get dicey, Marlink refers to the California standards that require 2nd grade students to write a friendly letter and a narrative — both correct in every way. “But,” Marlink asks, “what about information writing? What about writing to learn and the other uses of writing that exemplary writing project teachers have brought into their classrooms?”

That’s when the Area 3 Writing Project at the University of California, Davis came into her life. She participated in the summer institute, then presented workshops and coordinated workshop series. In 1988 she became inservice coordinator for the site and in 1991, when director Laura Stokes left to take a position at Stanford, Marlink became the site’s director.

This sudden elevation to site director may have prepared Marlink for another of her NWP responsibilities. She is working along with Joye Alberts, another newly appointed associate director, to create opportunities that will allow sites to learn from each other. “The NWP reviewer may have identified an area in which a particular site’s work is problematic. Our job is to assist. To help sites make real the abstraction of the NWP, site directors need to see it, to spend time with directors at sites that have faced and solved fewer staff development days all the time?”

By 1983, Marlink was feeling that she had gone as far as she knew how to go with her writing lab students. Many were making great progress, but she did not know how to take them to the next stage. “I was sick and tired of being a cheerleader,” she says.

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similar problems.”

Those who know Jayne Marlink know she has one interest that may seem distant indeed from the waters of educational reform in which she is currently immersed. That interest is Vietnam, and the concerns that draw her to that land may, in fact, be a piece with her other priorities. “I was a part of the Vietnam protest marches during the late 60s and early 70s, even though I didn't really know what that meant. In my teaching I was creating writing programs for Cambodians, Vietnamese, and other South East Asians. It was like the whole war was in my classroom,” Marlink says. Her work with these students came to the attention of Leyna Nguyen, a Sacramento TV anchor and native Vietnamese. The two became friends. According to Nguyen, Marlink was the only “white person (Nguyen) knew who got it.” By “it,” she meant the Vietnamese perspective on the war.

The respect and friendship these women share has had results. The pair has created a foundation, Love Across the Ocean, and raised $4,000 that has built a school for first-graders in Dong Ha, the city which once was Nguyen's home.

Marlink does not believe, of course that one school in Vietnam will alleviate all the pain that is the aftermath of a tragic war. But she is a believer in small steps. She is under no illusions that the Focus on Standards Project or educational standards will provide the magic bullet necessary to cure the ills of American education. “But,” she says, “if NWP is a teacher leadership program, then we need to be involved in this area. This is where the rubber hits the road. Documents don’t teach kids, teachers do. And they’re the only ones with the knowledge to make standards work.”