NWP Teachers Find Kindred Spirits Across the Nation

by Joye Albers

The NWP Teacher Exchange Program, begun in 1995, offers travel grants and honoraria to support teacher consultants' cross-site participation in summer institutes across the country. These exchanges—from Georgia to California, Louisiana to Pennsylvania—have proven to be a powerful means of making site-to-site connections and strengthening the NWP network. During the summer of 1998, five NWP sites exchanged teachers: JoAnne Donovan, Maryland Writing Project; Donna Vincent, Western Kentucky University Writing Project; Lorraine Nelson, South Coast Writing Project; Julie Conason, New York City Writing Project; and Iola Jones, Southwest Georgia Writing Project.

After participating in another site's summer institute for two weeks, exchange teachers return home and reflect on their experience. Exchange teachers are most often struck not by the differences in the places they visit, but in the similarities. Lorraine Nelson writes, "As a California elementary teacher among New York City secondary teachers, I knew my teaching experiences were different, but I also recognized similarities. I was surrounded by passionate teachers with an understanding that learning never stops." Julie Conason also found kindred spirits in the Fellows of the Maryland Writing Project. Julie tells of being "reminded that I am part of an extraordinary profession—and that the same sort of work that I do is being carried out in many other places." And Iola Jones speaks of "the fellowship, the coming together of twenty-four teacher Fellows, a director, and several consultants, representing a mixture of people with a very singular purpose—exploring ideas, sharing ideas about learning, writing, and discussing the ways and means to encourage colleagues to do the same..."

Following are the reflections of exchange teachers Donna Vincent and Jo Anne Donovan.
The Peach State, the Pink House and the NWP

by Donna Vincent

Since 1990 when I first attended Western Kentucky University’s summer institute, I have been consumed with knowing: knowing how students learn, knowing best practice, and knowing other educators who share my passion for literacy. As the elementary co-director, I now attend the institute every summer and my knowing has mushroomed into an even greater need to know.

Opportunities to learn abound in the National Writing Project, and the summer of 1998 was certainly no exception for me. Not only did I spend the month of June with my site’s summer institute, I also traveled to the Southwest Georgia Writing Project in Americus, Georgia, to attend their summer institute for two weeks as a participant of the NWP Teacher Exchange.

As I entered the James Earl Carter Library where the institute was held, familiarity bred contentment: a professional library, a closely-knit esprit de corps (with room for one more), and, of course, food. The schedule was familiar, too: time to write, time to read, time to talk … precious time to devote to knowing. And the resources! Angelia Moore, whose insight and investment are undeniable, Tom Liner, co-author of Inside Out, one of the textbooks we used in my writing project in 1990, not to mention institute assistant directors Pat Turner and Deloris Spears . . . The voices were the same (although the accents were a bit different): “Children learn to write by writing . . . the best teachers of writers are writers themselves . . .” I knew I was at home.

Every morning started with time to read and reflect and check out books. Since attending my first summer institute, I have viewed professional books, written by people like Tom Liner, as houseguests I can’t ignore. Whenever I bring a new one home with me, we have to visit on the couch or the front porch. It would certainly be rude to continue with household chores or sleep while they waited to communicate with me.

Luckily, in Georgia I had even more time to indulge myself with reading. No floors to vacuum or laundry to do, thanks to my gracious hostess, Jeannie Stanfield, and her husband, Steve. Their skillfully renovated home has been featured in Southern Accents magazine. The Pink House, as it is called, is a plantation cottage from the 1830s that has been renovated and expanded in keeping with nineteenth-century architecture, using appropriately aged materials. Jeannie prepared delicious meals and provided all the comforts of home. I became part of the family. My housing arrangement was one of my favorite parts of the trip, especially since Jeannie, a fellow of the SWGWP, and I spent a lot of time talking about what we’d read.

Of course, there was also time for discussion built into the project. Just like at Western Kentucky, we met in small groups according to grade levels and/or interests to share what we had read, our thoughts, and our connections. From Regie Routman to Lucy Calkins, I knew I was right at home.
It was no surprise to me that we took time to write each day. Many great pieces were generated from the demonstrations given by the participants. One demonstration led me to write a poem about my home back in Kentucky called “Broadway, The Louvre, and Carnegie Hall.” I also wrote a whimsical poem about the condition I expected to find my house in after, “two weeks away with husband batch/batching/reeks of mold and film and hatching . . .”

Some of my writing was content-area writing. I learned from Terri, for example, about Picasso’s masterpiece, Guernica, and how it was inspired by the Spanish Civil War. The poem I wrote about this painting informs my audience about the history of the artwork.

We formed response groups every day after lunch to get perspectives about what was working and what still needed work. We were specific with our praise and questions to enhance our understanding of audience, purpose, elaboration, and organization. We bonded even more. How could we help it? We had packaged our very souls for scrutiny. Laughter mingled with tears as each writer relived experiences, revealed secrets, and refocused dreams . . .

Field trips carried us down the streets of Americus from Plains to the cemetery to a historic hotel downtown for our last meal together. There we sang, read, laughed, and embraced. . . . My new friends loaded me down with a photo album full of memories, the anthology, and a T-shirt with all of our names on it proclaiming our commitment to the cause, In hoc signo vinces, just below a picture of a quill pen.

When asked to write a piece reflecting on the value of this experience, both personally and professionally, I could see no way to separate them. My personal and professional lives have fused into one. I networked with colleagues, brought home new ideas to try in our project, and made some very good friends from a beautiful place. Thanks, National Writing Project, for yet another opportunity. I’m looking forward to the next one.
My Journey from Coast to Coast

by JoAnne Donovan

Getting There . . .

". . . with service to Los Angeles, welcome aboard." The trip west begins. It was just three months ago that the opportunity to participate in the NWP’s Teacher Exchange program landed in my e-mail and here I am jetting west. Ultimate destination? From Maryland’s Atlantic Ocean to Santa Barbara, California’s, Pacific Ocean. Five hours later I am on the last leg of the journey. The small airplane flies north, hugging the coastline. Dolphins dance. Fishing boats bob in the blue-green water. Hundreds of houses dot the cliffs. Miles and miles of uninhabited land pass below. Finally, the small airport welcomes the weary traveler. My host, Jack Phreaner, greets me and whisks me to his home and introduces his lovely wife, Anne. Our conversation is cut short as my yawns interrupt our stories.

The next morning I’m awake at 5:30 A.M. My mind and body are functioning on Eastern Standard Time. I listen to California news for an hour before I get up and underway. It appears Jack is the front man for SCWriP. He has to make sure the coffee pot is turned on and the fruit and bagels are out and ready for class! I am a stranger for thirty seconds and then my classmates begin to make the connections. “At orientation you were just a name. Welcome to California.”

Sheridan Blau, Director of SCWriP, arrives. No time is wasted as we begin to get to know each other. Sheridan directs us to stand in a large circle and “using the letter that begins your first name, think of a word to describe yourself.” Runaway Ralph begins and we discover each person who introduces him- or herself must then name all the classmates who have already been named. The pressure is on and jet-lag JoAnne is able to recall all those who have come before. Running Doug insists his name be unique. Sheridan goes a hundred miles an hour as he keeps the activity moving.

Sheridan shares several strategies, always going back to review what we had done and why we had done it. The writing project comes through again with useful, meaningful ideas to take back to the classroom. Did someone mention that teachers are the best teachers of other teachers?

And the days continue . . . we write, we listen, we discuss, we laugh, we disagree, we compare, and we share. It is the comparing and sharing that stays with me now as weeks later as I fondly recall my adventure with East Coast cohorts who keep asking, “What did you do out there?”

What did I do? I came to appreciate California teachers. The first week I was visiting, Santa Barbara’s newspapers printed school test scores. The student populations were mind boggling, reflecting Cambodians, Vietnamese, Hispanics, Thais, Hmong, and so on. Unbelievable! At our school we have the Coppers and the Brittinghams, old Eastern Shore names that do not reflect the diversity that West Coast educators struggle with. The passage of Proposition 227 has done away with the bilingual education that teachers favor. Politicians have also mandated how and when phonics-first reading skills will be taught. These intelligent, frustrated educators are handicapped by the limitations of their systems. California teachers are fighting a frustrating battle. But does this battle stop them? Are they worn down by these bombshells?
Hell, no! Perhaps it is because the upbeat teachers I met live in one of God’s more pleasant spots on earth so it gives them the energies needed to do battle. The outrageous, colorful flowers, palm trees, cacti, and greenery delight the eye. As the allies go to war every day under blue sunny skies, they are aware of their surroundings and appreciate where they live. Gaining strength from the commute must give these men and women the will to fight on. The daily presentations made by the classroom teachers were outstanding. Revising ideas, portfolio pointers, poetry appreciation, writing, videotaping, and dialoguing is happening in many classes. Not just happening, but under the guidance of trained troops, it seems all the children are progressing and becoming better speakers, thinkers, listeners, readers, and writers. They are encouraging a diversity of viewpoints. I was dutifully impressed. I was humbled to be in such esteemed company.

Before I realized it, my two weeks had slipped by. The class had picnic potlucks on Fridays. The authors met for early breakfasts on Thursdays at the Blue Dolphin and more discussion took place than I thought was possible. I went to a barbecue at a classmate’s home and the discourse continued. The “girls” took me out for a glass of wine on the pier and dinner and even more important conversation took place. As I sit back and contemplate my two weeks at SCWriP, I just can’t put into words my feelings for being selected in the teacher exchange program. I feel privileged for the growth and development I underwent as an educator. But, geez, am I ever thankful!