RIP VAN SITEMEISTER
AWAKENS IN 1991:
A Fantasy about the Future of the National Writing Project

(Sandra, a young woman, is talking to Rip, whose whiskers reach his belt.)

“You’ve been asleep for five years, and Jim asked me to explain some of the changes since you were a site director back in ’86. We’re at the big annual convention, where we hold our televised national fundraising campaign and awards ceremony.”

You mean a telethon?

“We don’t like to use that word. But we did finally realize that television was the only way to get attention on a national scale. And one other thing. . . .”

She suddenly stepped back from the man with the whiskers as two energetic pre-teens—half-walking, half-running—dashed between them and across the hotel lobby. Rip Van SiteMeister looked startled.

Kids? At a national conference?

“That’s it, that’s the other main change I wanted to tell you about. Somebody made a big fuss at one of the Site Directors’ meetings—told Jim he was crazy for trying to raise money, in America, for grownups. ‘Can’t be done!’ says this guy. ‘Did you ever hear of cannisters in all the convenience stores to raise money for JERRY’S GROWNUPS? Of course not. Did you ever see a TV spot about the charming National Poster Adult for the March of Dimes? No, and you never will. Americans won’t give money for adults—only for kids.’ Oh, he went on and on about it.”

I still don’t see. . . .
“It’s not just a fundraising gimmick—several other factors converged to turn NWP towards serving kids directly. One was the *Foxfire* movement, the idea that kids can write and publish books by doing oral history interviews. That idea had been around for a while, but then Eliot Wigginton’s book about his first twenty years doing *Foxfire* came out just as desktop publishing was taking off. The price of microcomputers came down and down, and then laser printers came along, and page-layout software got easier and cheaper, so that first-rate camera-ready typography, the kind that used to run eight or ten dollars a page if you were lucky, was only a dime a page, or a quarter at most. So of course lots of teachers and quite a few principals wanted their students to do a good-looking publication too. . . .”

Wonderful! I always knew . . .

“Well, it wasn’t so wonderful at first. Everyone expected a well-printed piece, with crisp, professional-looking typefaces, to have some other virtues too—nothing outlandish, mind you, just good solid writing, editing, and layout. But good grief! We had some ghastly-looking publications back in ’87, ’88, when grassroots publishers were getting access to desktop technology. And after people began to learn the basics of layout—yes, you need lots of white space; no, you don’t want seven different fonts on the same page—well, it turned out that good solid writing and editing was not that easy to come by. But there was one resource—a national network, available in most states, well prepared to deliver training workshops, or to recommend competent but not expensive writers and editors. . . .”

*THE NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT?*

“Like cavalry to the rescue. It was funny: as if all the site directors had one voice, and that voice heard the hubbub about desktop publishing, how it mixed tomorrow’s technology with yesterday’s literacy . . . and that voice said ‘Hello? You Rang? Writing? Editing? Training, did I hear Training? My, my—yes, I think we can help you out.’ And then, of course, the PSA’s, the Public Service Announcements for Writing Project were all over the TV networks. . . .”

How do you mean?

“Excuse me for digressing, but—are you at all thirsty? I sure could go for a Bloody Mary about now.”

The man with the whiskers slowly smiled, and said that whatever else might have changed, he was glad to know that big hotels still served drinks at national conferences. He followed the blonde hair and pale blue blazer of his guide past the clusters of people by the elevators to the lobby bar, where they found a small marble table. There was a keyboard plugged into a dark video screen on the wall.

*I don’t think I caught your name.*

“I’m Sandra, one of the Associate Directors of NWP. Here, take a look at this Program for tonight’s awards ceremony; it will show you some of what I’m talking about. Let’s see, who did this one?”

*This logo on the back? It says “document design by the Varsity Writers of Jefferson Junior High, in association with the Great Lakes Writing Project.”*

“OK, that’s the usual pattern—the kids do the work, with adult guidance from their writing coach, but the local Writing Project is the hub, the clearinghouse that lines up nonprofit writing and publishing jobs for the kids to do. It’s become a real money-maker for most local sites. They have a database of all clubs, groups, associations, and museums in their area, and once or twice a year they send out a mailing offering reasonable rates on writing and editing services, including artwork, layout, design, and sometimes distribution. You’d be amazed at how many people think that what they’re doing deserves to be written up in a book, a brochure, a leaflet—garden clubs, church groups, Rotary and Kiwanis. . . .”

*What does it mean, “Varsity Writers?”*

“Well, in the Bad Old Days, writing teachers were almost forbidden to associate with the best and brightest young writers. You’d get a stack of papers, and the few that were clean on spelling and mechanics and reasonably intelligent—those essays got the least of the teacher’s time. They were kissed off with a jifly “A” and a silent “Thank you,” while the best energies of the teacher were poured out on the worst papers by the weakest students. It was hard on the teachers, the weak writers hated all the red ink, and the strong writers got almost no help at all.”

She pulled the celery stalk from her drink and munched on the dripping end. “Now, of course, we rarely see a hand-written paper—thank God and Silicon Valley for laptop computers—and what with spell-checkers, grammar checkers, and now the new AI text-tutorial software, many of the things we used to have to repeat, over and over, to class after class of students, are learned from computer screens with a lot less pain all around. Speaking of screens—” she pushed a button on the keyboard, and the 20-inch video screen by the table lit up.

So the Varsity Writers are like the yearbook staff and the school paper staff and the *Foxfire* kids? Rip still seemed a bit confused.

“That’s right, plus a few more. We have teams, and a good typographer or layout designer or
computer graphics illustration specialist is in just as much demand as a top editor or an aggressive reporter. Listen, these kids get recruited by the colleges almost like athletes. But that didn’t start happening until the local Writing Projects were linked electronically—you know, modems, computer conferencing and bulletin boards, all that online messaging back and forth. It really strengthened the regional WP networks, and they began to coordinate competitions and tournaments among their young writers, and you know what?” As she spoke, her fingers did little ripples of clicking on the keyboard, and video images came and went on the screen.

“No, what?” said Rip.

“Our teacher/consultants and teacher/researchers found it was a whole lot easier to get time off and even travel money if they were shepherding a small team of Varsity Writers to a workshop or a regional competition than if they tried to go alone. And writing teachers began to think they weren’t really doing their jobs unless they could do as well by the young writers as the band director was doing by the young musicians—or the coaches for the football and basketball players—or the science teachers by those science fair kids. For instance, this year, for the first time, when the top two winners of the National Science Fair leave for Stockholm—with their teachers, of course—to attend the Nobel Prize Ceremonies . . . we’ll have two young writers, and their writing coaches, also making the trip. The President of the airline that’s picking up most of the tab will make the announcement tonight at the awards ceremony. He’s a new donor, and Jim likes to do special favors for new donors.”

Hold it, said Rip, looking at a bespectacled face that had just appeared on the video screen. Isn’t that Steve Allen?

“This must be the Middle Division Comedy Writing Competition,” said Sandra. “It’s going on right now in the third floor ballroom, and Joan Rivers and Steve Allen are the celebrity judges.” She touched a key, and they could hear Joan and Steve discussing the basics of writing comedy—the fun of being around kids with fresh, wacko imaginations—the strong and weak points of comedy-writing teams from different parts of the country—and whether the local kids from the Great Lakes Writing Project could possibly make a comeback against the zany tall tales spun by the kids from the North Georgia Writing Project.

“We have James Baldwin and Joyce Carol Oates,” said Sandra, “judging the fiction competition; Ralph Nader, Steward Brand, and Mike Royko judging the non-fiction local color competition; Gary Snyder and Lucille Clifton doing poetry; Marvin Hamlisch and Andrew Lloyd Webber looking at student-written musicals—”

“Wait a minute. It sounds great, but who pays for all those airline tickets? How can you afford . . . ?

“Oh, they’re not here,” said Sandra. “Most of the judging is done on an online basis—you know, computers, modems, telephone lines. It’s much faster and cheaper than flying people around. It’s even cheaper than mailing stacks of manuscripts back and forth. No, only a few judges—one in eight or ten—actually travel to our annual convention. Usually they only come if they have a role in the televised awards ceremony. It’s a little bit like the Academy Awards, you know—nominees, presenters, Writing Coach of the Year awards, Lifetime Achievement awards. The works.”

Rip looked dubious. He shook his head, and poured the last of his beer into his glass mug. Modems, he muttered.

“Oh,” said Sandra hastily, “they’re much better than before. I know it was still rather crude in ’86, but today sending texts and illustrations over a phone line is almost as easy as making a phone call. Not quite, but almost.” She paused for a moment. “And having everything available online—all the winners, in all the divisions—ties in beautifully with grassroots publishing. We could never afford to print all the winners, but we keep them online for a full month so that local Writing Project sites can download as much or as little as they want to reproduce for regional consumption. Nebraska, for instance, does a series of booklets at different grade levels that includes even the Honorable Mention pieces by Nebraska kids, but only a selection of winning stories, essays, and poems from other places.”

What’s that on the screen? said Rip. Information Services from the National Writing Project—

Sandra touched a key and the sound came up. Images of kids came and went on the screen: kids at a keyboard, kids at a zoo, kids scribbling on lined paper. An announcer’s voice was saying, “Does your zoo want a kid-written Guide for Watching Animals? No problem. Call your local Writing Project.”

“It’s our Info Services PSA,” said Sandra. “It’s been running about three months now, and the site directors report that it’s doing well—bringing in some contracts, and bringing in donations too.” “Does a parent want to know if Junior’s attempts at poetry are any good?” continued the announcer. “Call your local Writing Project. Does Grandma want to know what kind of a gift-book to give to a..."
fifth-grader who’s a slow reader? Call your local Writing Project. Does a corporation wonder about ‘will-versus-shall’ in outgoing letters? Call your local Writing Project. For a small fee, your local Writing Project will answer any question on letters and literacy—and if they don’t know, they’ll find out.”

A different voice came on to add the final touch: “If the Writing Project still isn’t active in your area, write or call Professor Gray. . . .” Rip nodded as he saw a familiar name and address filling the screen.

*It’s beginning to make sense, he said.*

*Bill DeLoach is Director of the Greater Memphis Writing Project, Memphis State University.*