

# Writing Works

## Farewell to Linda

by Katie Hearn, T-C '05, [catherinehearn@glinenet.com](mailto:catherinehearn@glinenet.com)

I met Linda De La Ysla, (T-C '94) a few years ago in a graduate writing class at Towson University. From the moment she read her piece about growing up in Southern and Northern California, I was hooked on her writing. Later, after many conversations and class discussions about our work, we began to meet for lunch and talk about our lives, as well as our writing. We became good friends.



Linda De La Ysla

I'm not the only person who has discovered that working with Linda often evolves into a friendship. Everyone I interviewed for this farewell article said the same thing. Linda is a super-competent person. I like to work with her, she is a good friend, she cares about people, and she is sensitive to their needs.

Linda moved from New York City to Baltimore in 1987 with her family. When her children were young, she freelanced with a local publishing company. Later, she began teaching writing classes at Catonsville Community College and received a flyer with information about the MWP's Summer Teacher Institute. At the time, her son and daughter were too young for her to participate, but she kept the paper and thought she might someday.

Several years later, in the spring of 1994, Linda remembered the MWP STI flyer, pulled it out, and made a phone call. After a group interview, she was invited to participate. Barbara Bass and Linda Wharton were her STI coordinators. Linda said that the best part of STI for her was that she was

with a diverse group of teachers from many disciplines and teaching levels. She worked and studied with math, social studies, science, and art teachers and teachers from elementary school through university level.

Because of her outstanding work with the Summer Teacher Institute, she was asked by the then co-director, Maggie Madden, to be an educational consultant in the fall. She happily accepted and began her career and love affair with the MWP. Linda worked for the next year to organize and schedule conferences and special events. In 1995, Elyse Eidman-Aadahl resigned as MWP director to take an associate director's position at the National Writing Project at the University of California at Berkeley. Maggie Madden became the director, and Linda was encouraged to take the full time position of co-director in November, 1995.

Maggie Madden later resigned from the MWP to take a position with the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE). Linda, still relatively new to the job, took over as acting director with one half-time secretary. A few months after Maggie left, Linda's half-time secretary left, and she was on her own to keep the MWP alive and moving forward.

Because Linda is an energetic, positive problem solver who never says die, she found a friend and colleague to help support and advise her

*(continued on next page)*

## Inside:

- Summer Teacher Institute 2005– Frederick.....4
- Director's Report.....6
- The Journey from STI Fellow to Instructor.....7
- Reflections about STI 2005 – Towson.....8
- New Books .....9
- Chimpanzee Memories .....9
- NWP ELL Writing Retreat in Santa Fe, New Mexico, June 2005.....10
- Sunshine at Sunrise Springs.....11
- Summer Teacher Institute – Southern Maryland Coordinator Report.....12
- Editor's Note .....13
- News and Notes.....14
- An AVID Teacher Finds Success.....16
- Reflections on the 2005 Student Writers' Workshop .....18
- Casting the spell: The Wizards Workshop.....18
- And Then Along Came Mary! .....19
- National Writing Project Calendar .....19

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## Farewell to Linda

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through this stressful time. That friend was Barbara Bass. Barbara Bass and Linda had become good friends since the 1994 Summer Teacher Institute, and they often met to discuss the MWP. During that time Linda often called Barbara near lunch time and they meet at the bottom of the ramp between the two buildings in which they worked. They called their meetings *noonish-rampish*. It was their codeword.

Over the next months, Barbara met Linda for *noonish-rampish* many times and Linda related that she received invaluable advice and support from Barbara when she really needed a friend and colleague. Nine months after Linda had taken on the acting director's position, Elyse came to Towson University to help resolve the situation. Elyse asked Barbara to assume the director's position and she accepted.

Both Linda and Barbara knew they would be a perfect match. They had been troubleshooting and working unofficially together for months. Barbara was as devoted to the MWP as Linda was. Together they could really make things happen. And they have.

When Linda began at the MWP, the Summer Teacher Institute was offered primarily as a course for MSDE credit. That policy has changed. Now, the Summer Teacher Institute is a six credit graduate course given at Towson University and at satellite locations in Frederick County and Southern Maryland. Linda also coordinates staff development requests from Maryland schools and finds T-C coordinators and presenters for those workshops.

During Linda's tenure as co-director, the Student Writers' Workshop propagated to other sites besides Towson University—at times being held at the University of Baltimore and in Harford County. When Linda began at the MWP, there was no local Professional Writing Retreat and there have now been three of them. Additionally, the MWP has sent T-Cs to the annual NWP Professional Writing Retreat in Santa Fe, New Mexico, every year for the past several years.

It's not easy to sustain support for a program at a large university, but Linda has done so by attending all departmental meetings in the College of Education. At these meetings, she has been able to make other departments aware of the MWP and what they do. She develops



Linda De La Ysla and Katie Hearn

relationships by keeping everyone up to date on what's going on in the Writing Project and offering brochures for MWP programs. Through her networking, the MWP has remained a vital, thriving program.

In addition to promoting and administering MWP programs, Linda has always taught one writing course every semester. She has become the coordinator for the EDUC 301 course, Writing and Communication Skills for Teachers. She staffs this course with MWP T-Cs. At one time, EDUC 301 had only two sections but now has nine sections each semester. This course gives T-Cs an opportunity to teach at the university level. Linda also provides administrative support to the Teacher Inquiry course, which meets monthly from October through May.

Linda doesn't do all of these things without help. The MWP administrative assistants, Kris Moylan and Mary Stelzig, eagerly told me that Linda is the best boss they have ever worked for. She treats them with respect and values their opinions and suggestions. When Kris arrived on her first day of work, she found a vase of flowers and a card on her desk. And when her dog of many years died, Linda gave her a card and took her on a walk around campus. When Mary interviewed for her position, Linda made her feel completely at ease. When Mary said that her son was evacuating from New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina, Linda pulled up a chair and showed genuine caring and interest in her son's plight. There have been other

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## Farewell to Linda

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flower days, some for no particular reason, other than Linda saying, "I think this is a flower day." "I will miss her," Mary said.

When I spoke with Barbara, I could see not only how much she is going to miss working with Linda, but also how much she will miss just being around her. They met as teacher and student and evolved into colleagues and friends. They have been able to work happily and effectively by each doing her best and by knowing what the other needs and then offering it. "Linda is like a sister to me," Barbara said. When things have been rough at work, Linda will come into her office and say, "Let's go for a walk." On one occasion, they walked and talked and browsed in the bookstore, looking at all the funny low carb snacks. Barbara changed her outlook, smiled and laughed, and knew all would be well. Linda has that effect.

Kris, Mary, and Barbara are not the only ones who spoke about Linda's warmth and generosity. Terry Mobley (T-C '91) said that on Holocaust Remembrance Day, Linda opened her home to the MWP so they could listen to a survivor tell his story. It was a moving experience.

Cheryl Foreman (T-C '02), an STI coordinator, told me that Linda and the MWP transformed her life. In the winter of 2001, Cheryl went to her first Write to Learn workshop looking for ways to inspire and support teachers at her school. She went home after that first session with two examples of best practices. She continued to attend these sessions and gathered many best practices that she could give to her fellow teachers. Cheryl describes Linda as a wise and patient person who has not forgotten about the enthusiastic child within her. She said, "Linda De La Ysla has transformed me so that I can transform the lives of others. Linda has led me along paths riddled with truths that strengthen who I am and who I will be." Kathy Jenkins (T-C '82), a long time friend and colleague, explained how she and Linda developed the STI site in Southern Maryland, traveled to San Francisco and Indianapolis for NWP conferences, and kept tabs on grant money for the National Reading Initiative. She said, "My years with the MWP are intertwined with memories of Linda. It will be difficult to imagine the next project without her guidance, her focus, and her dedication."

Another long time friend and colleague, Mary Ann Hartshorn (T-C '94), who was a classmate of Linda's in STI, told me that during a RAG session, Linda read a beautiful poem about her father and a birthmark on her arm. After all these years Mary Ann remembers that poem vividly.

It's funny how everyone I talked to for this article said pretty much the same things about Linda. Everyone described Linda as a smart, savvy, warm, caring, perceptive, positive, tenacious and hard working woman.

Whenever I've been in their offices, there is laughter, and smiles and friendliness, even when it's obvious things are really busy and pressured. Linda says that she would not have been able to accomplish all she has without lots of help. But Linda has been able to inspire people to stay connected and involved in the Maryland Writing Project because of her enthusiasm and her personality. Linda is a person loved and admired by all those who have helped her.

When Linda moves to South Florida to join her fiancé, she won't be idle and she won't lose contact with her friends and colleagues in Maryland. She will continue working on the field study phase of her doctoral work in Education Policy and Leadership at the University of Maryland at College Park. For this work, she will be having conversations with several writing teachers here in Maryland, most of them T-Cs. She intends to continue her work in higher education and is looking forward to teaching more. And, then of course, there's scuba diving ... We will miss you Linda.

*Katie is an adjunct instructor at Towson University.*

"I know the Writing Project has transformed my life. In 1994, I was a recently divorced mother, with two young children, who wasn't sure what was next. And by 1995, I had a full time job at the university and was teaching and was surrounded by really good people. I felt very welcome in the College of Education and at this university and I love the Teacher-Consultants. I believe the Writing Project is the best professional development opportunity that there is. I really believe in the work...It's been a wonderful decade."

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