

"Every Experience Is A Learning Experience"

by Diane Pinkney TC '02

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It all started through an e-mail message from Barbara Bass stating, "The first person to e-mail me back will be the last person selected to attend the National Writing Project Annual Conference, in Atlanta, Georgia to represent the New Teacher Initiative." I didn't think I would be selected. However, I e-mailed Barbara anyway. My e-mail stated:

Hello Barbara,

This is Diane Pinkney, TC from Summer 2002. I'm e-mailing you because I am interested in attending and participating in the NWP New Teacher Initiative Annual Conference in Atlanta, Georgia! I'm very excited and eager to participate in this very much needed program. I hope you will consider me a candidate and select me to attend. Hope to hear from you soon.

Diane

I received another e-mail message from Barbara 13 minutes later stating that I was the first to respond. I was absolutely shocked and lost for words. Barbara's e-mail now stated:

What a team! So it's going to be Renaté Jones, Jennifer Goulston, and Diane Pinkney as the Maryland Writing Project New Teacher Initiative representatives in Atlanta.

Wow! I was on my way to the National Writing Project Annual Conference in Atlanta, Georgia.

At the conference, I found myself thrilled, eager and nervous all at the same time. I had been afforded another learning opportunity for my personal and professional growth. Although I felt nervous, I was eager to collaborate and network with other mentors, directors and co-directors of other writing projects. I knew I had to speak before my colleagues and present the components of our New Teacher Initiative Program and how we were going to implement these components to build upon what our team had already established.

At the general session of the conference, I anxiously waited for the scheduled program to begin. I pulled out my NWP



Attendees at the NWP Conference in Atlanta: (left to right) Jen Goulston, Renaté Jones, Executive Director of NWP Richard Sterling and author Diane Pinkney

writing pad along with my favorite pen and began to write down as much as I could. As each person spoke, I was mesmerized, capturing each message. Each speaker spoke with ease and confidence and I took notes from the moment the first speaker began. All of the speeches had one thing in common: How the writing project had impacted their lives. Their messages were inspiring to me.

One speaker, Ann Dobbie, from the Louisiana Writing Project, spoke on the topic of "Safe Audiences." She spoke about the times she shared her writings and felt comfortable enough to share freely without judgment. This speech was very comforting for me since I have a great fear of public speaking. After hearing her speech, I adopted the theory of "Safe Audiences." Then came the next speaker, Diane Waff, co-director and Hechinger Award Winner from the Philadelphia Writing Project. Diane's speech, "Write As If Your Life Depended On It," was very powerful. As she spoke about her experience with teaching and how she had learned something about herself through that experience, she too had to evaluate how she viewed her students and readjust her way of teaching.

The final speaker, Marcus Mason, represented the Southern Nevada Writing Project. Marcus's speech entitled "Write the Vision and Make It Plain" was inspiring and moving at the same time. He spoke in what we call a preacher's voice. The room became silent and instantly he drew the attention of each and every

person in the room. He stated that he had failed, and failed more than once at writing: once in high school, again in college and a third time when taking the Praxis exam (he missed the writing portion by one point twice). I could relate to how that feels. His words, too, were powerful. His speech became more than just an ordinary speech of spoken words: it was his testimony to the world.

After the general session was over, I walked over to Marcus, greeting him and his lovely wife and daughter. I shared with Marcus how moving his speech was for me. I also told him that I applauded him for having the courage to share his testimony with us.

At the New Teacher Initiative Meeting, we were to speak on how our mentoring program for new urban teachers will work. The Maryland Writing Project has received a \$10,000 grant to implement such a program to help keep new urban teachers in the profession.

When it was our turn to present, I reached over to Barbara and said, "Let's go first so that we can get ours out of the way!" But we had to proceed in alphabetical order. What a way to add more pressure. We had to wait for four writing projects to present before we could have our turn. I stated to my colleagues how nervous I was, but I reminded them that they were my safe audience. They all laughed and that was a relief for me.

I proceeded to explain each component of our mentoring program. Renaté

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and Jen then added their portions of our presentation. Barbara closed by stating that our program was already in place and that we had already selected and had begun to work with our new teachers. The consultants from other writing projects were intrigued that we had already started our program. Marci Resnick, director of the NTI, not to mention Richard Sterling, the National Writing Project executive director, who sat in on the entire meeting, were both impressed with the work we have done.

At the end of each conference day, a few of the writing project fellows went out for dinner and discussed the day's events. The conversations were exhilarating and extremely thought provoking. Later, as I settled for the night, I found myself jotting down my reflections on paper. This was indeed a powerful, enriching experience.

To recap my experience at the National Writing Project's Annual Conference, the experience was absolutely “priceless,” an experience you cannot purchase

at any prestigious department store (and I love to shop). In addition, the nurturing I received from my director, NTI coordinator and the other TCs was greatly appreciated. The experience was also “educational,” for me. I learned how to network and make the most out of every moment. As I said before, “Every Experience Is A Learning Experience” and I wouldn't trade this one for the world.