

A Transformative Summer in the Student Writers' Workshop

By *Jacquie Toner, parent*

As a first grader, my daughter Rhianna spent much of her time under her desk. She was argumentative and had trouble following the flow of her classroom routine. After being identified as dyslexic, she entered the Jemicy School where she repeated first grade with great success. Her educational career proceeded smoothly through the elementary years where her strong memory and analytical abilities made her a star.

Then middle school hit and Rhianna's troubles began anew. Ready to take on abstract ideas and complex concepts, Rhianna's weakness in written mechanics locked her into drills in workbooks. Try as she might, she continued to make the same silly mistakes in spelling and punctuation. Although she knew the rules well enough to recite them, application just didn't flow easily.

At the same time, her head was awash in ideas. The commute home from school was often filled with nonstop discussion of everything from capital punishment and solving environmental problems to the greater meanings within Harry Potter. Yet when faced with a blank sheet of paper, Rhianna just couldn't produce. Hours could go by without a single sentence appearing on the page.

Summer work with a beloved tutor helped, but Rhianna's writing was stilted and her ideas hard to organize. Efforts at dictating and the use of fancy computer software often distracted more than aided her. The hours spent sitting in front of a blank computer screen continued.

Then, quite by accident, we stumbled into the Maryland Writing Project's Student Writers' Workshop summer program. Rhianna, now in high school, had enrolled in a summer camp devoted to the study of Shakespeare. At the last moment, the camp was cancelled leaving a long empty period in her summer. A friend suggested looking into the Student Writers' Workshop. Although quite skeptical about enrolling her in an activity that was at the heart of most of our parent-child battles, the option of having her home in front of the television seemed worse.

After meeting her fellow writers at the orientation session, Rhianna's anxiety about the workshop was greatly reduced. Much to her parents' shock, she talked about how exciting it was going to be to get to know "other writers." With no specific demands for output, she produced several poems and the beginnings of a short story over the course of several weeks. Unlike her previous writing, these works reflected the advanced vocabulary and thinking skills evident in her spoken language. When the summer ended, she became part of a group of Student Writers' Workshop high school students who wanted to continue to write during the school year and has met monthly with her newly found writer friends at Towson University under the supervision of two

Maryland Writing Project Teacher-Consultants, Rus VanWestervelt and Jim Frazier.

The true "test" would come when she was back in the classroom. With the start of school, Rhianna seemed less "stuck" when asked to write. The written word continued to come slowly, but it came. In the fall she joined a group for teens at a local theater that encouraged each individual to explore and develop their talents. Now a "writer," Rhianna refined the poems she had written over the summer and performed one in front of an audience. At a second performance, she read another poem that she had completed minutes before show time and received praise from many of the adults in the audience. Armed with newly acquired confidence, writing came even more smoothly. Ironically, mechanical and spelling errors were less frequent and easier for her to identify for editing.

At the time of this writing, Rhianna is waiting to hear the results of her applications to several "mainstream" private high schools. For the first time since elementary school, she seems willing to take on academic challenges and confident that she can overcome the difficulties she knows she will encounter. Although she has always been aware of her educational needs, she is now keenly aware of her strengths as well. The Student Writers' Workshop was a transformative experience for her.

I Sit in the Dark

By *Rhianna Toner*

I sit in the dark, alone in the dark I wait
I wait for a friend to come and change my fate
but no one comes
Sometimes I think I see someone, I hear a step
But I find no one is there and in the dark I'm kept
Sometimes I see a star in the black dead sky
But I know it is not real and I can't help but wonder why
Why is it my fate to wait alone here in the night
When every other person lives within the light
So I stand up and I scream, screams no one hears
I sit back down in the dark and dry my pitch-black tears
And as I sit in the dark I start to sense a change
I open my eyes and look around and see something
rather strange
The world is full of lights and color and friendly faces smile
And I have to sit in the light and wonder for a while
And what I come to understand comes as a surprise
I was never alone in the dark, I just had to open my eyes



Rhianna (l) and Jacquie Toner (r)