

Lessons Learned in Indiana

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Traveling to a new city is always exciting. Some of my traveling companions are more experienced at this annual event than I am, so as I approached the friendly, smiling members of the Indiana Writing Projects at their table at the entrance to the main meeting room in the downtown Indianapolis Hyatt, I watched my veteran companions' reactions to these new Indiana friends.

There are five independent Writing Project sites in Indiana. All are affiliated with either Purdue University, Ball State University, or Indiana University. Collectively they are called The Indiana Network and cover almost all of the distinct sections of Indiana.

The hosts at the "Welcome to Indiana" table offered NWP members a tour of Conner Prairie on Saturday evening after many of our workshops were finished. This opportunity sounded like a great way to use this last bit of time before we left for home. My companions Kathy Jenkins and Amy Miller, from our Southern Maryland site, seemed eager to participate. Kathy Jenkins, a real veteran of NWP conventions, commented that she always tries to pick up on the flavor of the state where the convention is held. We agreed to go together to this Indiana event.

Conner Prairie, I learned, is a 1,000-acre property dedicated to preserving the history of the 1800's through a group of preserved 19th-century buildings, authentically dressed workers, and role-playing activities with live actors. The brochure certainly looked intriguing enough. It reminded me of Williamsburg, Va., because the staff is dressed in the authentic dress of the period, and there were shops and inns set up in colonial decor for us to visit. So, I signed up, paid my fee, and looked forward to a nice ending for my trip. Little did I know that it would become the experience of a lifetime.

We got off the tour bus that had taken us about 35 minutes north of our hotel to Fishers, Ind. We wandered around the first-floor colonial museum housed in the Information Center. Then we were escorted upstairs to a beautiful dining room on the second floor. The room was softly lit by dimmed chandeliers and candlelight; there were cloth napkins and tablecloths and beautiful table settings. We were seated and waited on by 1800's-authentically-dressed staff. The dinner was lovely. We had roast pork with sauerkraut, corn pudding, salad, and chocolate cake for dessert. I was lucky enough to sit near a co-director of the Philadelphia Writing Project so the conversation was equally lovely.



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After dinner we were divided into two groups. One group was going back to the hotel, and I joined the other group that was staying and going on the Underground Railroad reenactment tour called "Follow the North Star."

I should have known something was more involved here when they had us sign medical waivers, but I just figured it was just because this event took place at night and was outside. Oh no, there was much more to this than I had ever imagined.

Out in the parking lot we are each given a thin piece of white sheet that we can use to tie around our head if the experience gets to be too intense for us.

Now, I am a little concerned at what I may have gotten myself into. I am thinking to myself that this was the night before we are to fly back to Baltimore and had to be up early. I keep thinking that this just couldn't be that strenuous; we are just a group of English teachers from out of town. I glance back at Kathy and Amy. They just shrug back at me; clearly they have no clue either about what all this meant.

It is now about 9:15. It is pitch dark except for the lighting around the Information Center, where we had just had dinner. We are walking behind an older male guide who is now explaining that we are going to be part of the Underground Railroad re-enactment. Yes, we are going to play a part in the drama. We are informed that we are going to be the slaves. Hushed sighs are audible from members of our group. It all finally registers what we had signed up for two days earlier.

As our guide leads us from the parking lot, we are frantically trying to process how we are going to be part of this experience, but we all know our American history only too well. This will not be the most relaxing role in the drama.

We are now standing in front of an old wooden pavilion in the middle of a rolling open field. The guide continues, "From here on in you are now in the year 1836. You are slaves from the South who have been brought to Indiana to be auctioned off to new masters. Remember, as slaves, do as you are told."

CRACK! Goes a gun from behind us. We all jump. The re-enactment has begun!

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“Get down on your knees! Keep your eyes down! You are in the presence of white men! Who do you think you are looking at?”

A very harsh sounding man starts snapping commands at us!

“You have only two things to remember now that you are about to be sold. Keep your eyes down and say, ‘Yes, sir.’ Do you hear me?”

“Yes, sir,” we answer weakly.

“What did you say? I can’t hear you!”

“Yes, sir!” we answer much more loudly.

The 15 of us now know what our part is going to be like in this play.

Even though I know this is only a re-enactment, a sinking feeling settles in my stomach, and I brace myself for the role. Just role-playing the part of a slave is difficult to endure; the reality must far exceed this. As I proceed through the play, I am called a “breeder.” This crude term meant that I was good for producing children — more slaves. Later, I stack wood with my fellow slaves under the critical eye of an overseer. We experience only the verbal and psychological abuse a slave must have had to deal with. We are not whipped or chained or struck for little or no reason like slaves in the real world have to deal with.

Then in the middle of stacking wood, women dressed in lovely period clothes come out from behind the fence and spirit us away to a barn while the overseers go to lunch. The women tell us not to look at them. They want to help us, but they don’t want us to be able to identify them. The one woman hands me a lantern lit by a thick candle.

“You will lead the group to the Quaker home. Look for the red scarf hanging on the gate post in the next neighborhood.”

She tells me to leave the group at the gate and go up and knock on the door and say, “I am a friend of a Friend.”

I am stunned that I have to lead this group of people whom I hardly know to a place I have never seen before on this cloudy, cold night. I do a reality check and figure that this can’t be too difficult because we really are just a group of tourists, but for a moment the thought crosses my mind that I might need a little help with this mission. I cautiously play along as we are led out of the barn and are pointed on our way.

A couple of people in our group come up and whisper to me, “Do you know where we are going?” I reply, “No, but I’m sure we can all see the red scarf. Please, look for the scarf.”

We pass what looks to be an abandoned campfire, but just as the group passes it and are back on the trail, a gruff slave catcher fires a gun, which startles us dramatically. The slave catcher stops us and makes us get down on our knees around the campfire. He explains how slaves have put his family’s small farm out of business. The bigger plantation owners buy up farms like his. He steals slaves because he cannot afford to buy them. We are commanded to stay there on our knees while he leaves to get his dogs. We see our chance to escape and make a run for it down the trail.

We finally see the red scarf just ahead. We rush to the gate. A Quaker family lets us in. Now the code word makes sense to us. Quakers really call themselves Friends. We explain to the person at the door that we are friends of a Friend. We are out of breath and afraid to look up as we get seated on the floor of their modest home. They offer us cornbread, which most of us take. Their son is going to take us to the next stop on the Underground Railroad. We really appreciate their kindnesses and courageous attempts to help us to freedom.

After an hour and a half of the dramatic ups and downs trying to escape to Canada on the Underground Railroad, we finally get back to the Information Center. Going back to the year 2004 never looked so good. We end up in a conference room. We are treated to cookies and drinks. Now we discuss what we have learned, how we felt, what we thought about as this re-enactment unfolded. The actors come into the room, and we get to talk to them about what we have experienced with them. One woman of African descent mentions that her grandfather had passed on stories to her about their family’s use of the Underground Railroad. A young man of Irish descent tells of going to a museum in Ohio that was about the Underground Railroad, but that the experiencing here was far more powerful.

I feel very fortunate to have been a part of such an authentic experience because I have felt on a visceral level the hardships slaves have endured.

I pull the brochure out of my purse and read again what I had signed up for, and I realize that there was no way I could have understood what an evening like this would be like. But I am glad that I signed up for all of it.