

Writing Works

My Wild Ride through the Annual Meeting

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(left to right) Cheryl Foreman, Linda De La Ysla, Katie Hearn, Stephanie Leddy, Barbara Bass, Valerie Heller, Angela Cephas, Maggie Madden, Pam Bryant, and Vickie Adamson.

In November I embarked on a new journey as a T-C. To those of you who have attended the NWP annual conference, you know that it was a whirlwind journey. From the train ride up from Baltimore, to walking the twenty blocks from Penn Station to the hotel at 10 pm with suitcases, laptops and Cheryl Foreman snapping pictures and sucking in the atmosphere, I walked full tilt with a look on my face that she describes as the unwavering concentration of a linebacker at the goal line. Cheryl soon came to the realization that I do not like crowds.

We finally reached our hotel and concluded, through bouts of hysterical laughter that if there were a fire, we would not be rescued on the ledge of our hotel by NYFD's finest, because there was no ledge and we had the sneaking suspicion that a ladder would not reach our floor. You may ask why we were having this discussion. I believe that we were overtaken by exhaustion and giddy with excitement regarding the next day's events.

The next morning dawned as rather bleak with the threat of thunder showers. We, however, found a silver lining in the guise of a great little diner where we had breakfast platters for under \$5. We were rather proud of our thriftiness and walked the ten or so blocks to the convention center. We signed in, commented on the attendees, as old friends were reunited, and others found areas to write, whether on benches, backed into corners on the floor or on chairs that had most likely been removed from an over crowded session. Some wrote in daybooks or on laptops, while others used the notepads of various hotels in the area. It was wonderful to feel the buzz of excitement as T-C's hurried to their sessions and to see the contentment on the faces of those who had found the need to drop everything and begin writing.

Alright, let's get to the meat of the matter. Cheryl and I split up with a plan to reconnect in front of the complimentary bottles of water, apples and cookies after our first session. As the presenters spoke, I believe my mind split and began to function in parts that were interdependent of each

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other. I divided my paper into three parts and took notes on how the presented information could be applied to my position as a curriculum writer, my involvement in the MWP site, and in regards to a creative nonfiction piece that I have been skating around for the past year.

Can a brain actually implode? I feared for my life for a few moments as my mind went into overdrive. Excitement doesn't even breach the outer layers of what I was experiencing. Cheryl and I met up and the flood gates opened. We were talking at once, partially listening to the other, having conversations with ourselves and processing our own thoughts, while sucking in energy from each other, and internalizing snippets of what the other was saying, all the while trying to integrate the other's information into the plans that were running rampant in our own minds. Words can not adequately describe the experience.

We realized that we had five minutes before the next session, in which I met Barbara Bass in the ladies' room, where we embraced like we hadn't just seen each other several days earlier. There is definitely something about an NWP conference.

Cheryl and I entered the next session where our very own Joe Bellino was one of the presenters. I remember thinking that the NWP practices exactly what it preaches. The NWP creates a safe and welcoming community, where presenters feel comfortable sharing the joys, trials and triumphs that they encountered while developing their best practices.

Each session is empowering in that you not only learn from colleagues across the nation, but you see the application of NWP's mission. We all have something to offer each other and we are all appreciative of the opportunity to share, take in this knowledge and use it to uplift and empower those in our communities, teachers and students alike.

As the day progressed, Cheryl fell in love with the applications of the Flip video camera, which she later purchased for her youngest son, Chris. He and his friends have since created numerous short films that include not only detailed plot development and dialogue, but instances of foreshadowing and suspense.

I was inspired by several writing project sites in California. As they shared, three profound points stood out.

- Instead of always showing our students examples of what is wrong, let us give them examples of what is right through, "mentor texts."
- They also shared an organizational chart and activity that were used to identify the strengths, needs, resources and goals within your site or organization.
- The most encouraging component of this session was how effectively these sites worked together, despite being spread across California, which is significantly larger than Maryland.




(left to right) Maggie Madden, Angela Cephas, and Cheryl Foreman in the back row and Stephanie Leddy and Katie Hearn in the front.

I'm happy to say that creating a stronger connection between each of the Maryland sites is already underway. Our mini-retreats occur throughout the state and after our last Leadership Conference we discussed ways for T-C's from our numerous sites to get together and collaborate. I must say that writing this article has reminded me that we need to follow-up on this pledge. Whew, the busy lives of teachers, T-C's...

But, back to the NWP conference. After sitting and reflecting on the day's sessions, Cheryl and I realized that we had to get back to the hotel to meet the rest of the Maryland T-C's for dinner. This includes Linda De La Ysla, because she will always be a Maryland T-C. Unable to catch a cab and refusing to walk another twenty blocks, we hopped in to a Pedi-cab, whose driver insisted that he could get us back to the hotel in record time. So picture this, two thick hipped women in a Pedi-cab (which is kind of like a bicycle rickshaw) traveling through the streets of New York, in the rain, in the dead of night being pulled by the most engaging waif of a man, slight of build, but with thighs of steel. After Cheryl and I willed ourselves to be lighter, we embarked on the ride of our lives. Of course we ended up in the middle of a parade – who knew they had parades at night? – we barely missed being side swiped by a church van and if that weren't enough we got stuck at a light on a hill and drifted back into a hot dog cart. We literally had so much fun on our ride that we reached the hotel, struggled out of the cart, took pictures with our driver, the man with the amazing thighs, and convinced several couples in front of the hotel to forget the yellow cabs and embark on the ride of their lives.

Still on an adrenalin high we were able to freshen up and meet everyone in time for dinner. Of course, when T-C's get together, everyone in the vicinity better watch out because our energy and enthusiasm is contagious. We met for dinner at B. Smith's restaurant, reveled in the architecture, fell in love with the Mango Mojitos and consumed inordinate quantities of succulent fare from seafood bisque, fried chicken and ribs to decadent tortes, mousses and bread pudding. We reminisced, discussed the conference, and held each other accountable for unfulfilled projects and new projects on the horizon. After returning to the hotel, Cheryl and I wrote into the night until we slipped into an exhausted sleep. I believe that Cheryl woke up around four and went into the bathroom to continue writing, as not to disturb me.



While sitting in the general session on our final day in New York, I felt as if I had been shown the secret of the Matrix. A tribute to Richard Sterling, recently retired Executive Director of the National Writing Project, allowed me to see the vision and development of the National Writing Project and the journey that brought us to this place. The realization that, “Sir Richard” as he was lovingly dubbed at the ceremony, who never considered himself to be extraordinary, exemplifies the premise that teachers teaching teachers can and has had a profound effect on our society. He accepted a task that had far-reaching implications for my/our existence as T-C’s and thousands of students and teachers across this nation. The over 1000 T-Cs at this general session sat and reflected on how we

are all like stones thrown into a pond. The ripple that is caused by our existence, our love for teaching and writing, will have effects that we might never know. Imagine the ripples that are caused by you, by all of the T-C’s you know, all of the students we have touched and all of the people that have been touched by those we have touched. The National Writing Project, including all of our local sites, is a powerful force and I am blessed and proud to be a part of this phenomenal organization. MWP, my home, drives and sustains me. It uplifts me and fuels my passion for teaching. We have all undertaken an awesome task; isn’t it wonderful that we have each other to share in this wonderful journey?