



Twenty Years!! Reflections on NWP-KSU

By Deb DeBenedictis

Attend a Summer Writing Institute four days a week for five weeks? All day? In the summer? Why? I've been teaching 25 years. The district will pay? And I can earn six graduate credit hours? Hmm. Well, oldest son is in college, and younger one in high school. No problem there. Husband says whatever I want to do. Ok, I'll do it!

Little did I know the summer of 1997 would be a life-changer for me, professionally and personally. Attending the very first Northeast Ohio Writing Project (NOWP as NWP-KSU was originally called) at Kent State University was the best professional development I ever participated in, and it would re-direct my educational future. I know that most Teacher Consultants (TCs) over these past 20 years would agree.

Led by Dr. Nancy McCracken (who initiated this NWP site at KSU), approximately 28 teachers—elementary, middle and high school, as well as those teaching at university—spent 20 days in room 209, White Hall, writing, reading, discussing, and performing. With windows opened due to faulty air-conditioning (that never did get fixed), and lawn mowers buzzing daily, we were somehow able to form a literacy community unlike any other.

*It's hot, very hot
My racing mind contrasts
With my wiped-out body
(Is the sweat on my brow
from the former or the latter?)
So much to experience, to absorb
The Daily Flashes grab me at once
Ten reasons, headlines, and news stories
Academy awards and quiz shows
Jigsaw puzzles
STOP?
My senses cannot soak up so fast
I want to remember it all.
Maggie, Annie, Fletcher, now Graves
All speak to me as
Parent, teacher, writer
The walls will not stop talking to me
I want to read it all
To understand those like me
And those not
Just where do I fit?
My confidence wanes and waxes*

*Over and over throughout the day
Discussions with journal partners
With writing groups
RIG groups
Walking to lunch groups
My mind keeps switching modes on me
I write safely—essays—it changes
Phrases from nowhere pop out
Poetry?
Then it shuts down
Back to blank
Or writing about what I already know.
Thank goodness for
Ink Sheddings
Others feel like me
Have the same fears
Thank goodness for discussions
At Susan's
I think maybe I can write
Maybe I have something to say.
(Written after first week at ISI—could
have been written by any TC, right?)*

A new world opened up to me that summer—one where writing was valued, where it was understood that writing was an on-going process, and that what the writer had to say was important. That summer I found my voice.

I now knew that all my students were writers. We were in this together; we would learn from each other. When I went back to the classroom that fall, writing permeated every subject, every day. My enthusiasm spilled over into my colleagues' classrooms, and beyond.

Over the years, TCs have been given many opportunities to apply for mini-grants, to present at local, state, and national conferences, and to publish in various state and national journals. TCs have often taken the initiative to form book clubs, writing groups, and research groups. For many years federal and state funding made this possible, and, when funding decreased, NWP-KSU continued to bring in income by expanding their PD programs year-round, in the form of workshops, Write Here Write Now Annual Conference, and in-services at the schools' campuses.

Time marches on and things change. Dr. McCracken retired in 2006, and Dr. Anthony Manna took over for one year. Dr. Alexa Sandmann (who previously served as Director of an NWP site at The University of Toledo) took the reins in 2008 and has successfully led NWP-KSU through many changes these past ten years.

The Invitational Summer Institute transitioned to five days a week for four weeks, and then to three weeks. In recent years, the ISI has become a hybrid, with face-time meetings coupled with on-line discussions. Now, the ISI is sometimes held off-campus, and more than one Institute takes place during the summer. This is possible because of the strong leadership team working with Dr. Sandmann, along with TC Council, which meets three times throughout the school year to plan various PD offerings. NWP-KSU's success is also due to the many TCs who believe that *writing matters*, and who carry out this mission in their classrooms and their schools, impacting students, parents, and their colleagues.

Kudos to all these TC leaders who are the reason NWP-KSU continues to maintain a strong presence in the greater NE Ohio region. Here's to the next 20 years!



Deb DeBenedictis is pictured at left at a Kent State University National Writing Project event in the early 2000s. With her from left are Christine Ellis-Radie, Anna Ragghanti-Crowe, and Jen Sullivan. (File photo)