

NEW YORK CITY

NYCWP

WRITING PROJECT



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A NOTE FROM THE Editors

On WNBC News we watch ten-year-old Tyrienisha Smith hold her mother's hand as they wait to register for her new school in a city and state miles away from the flood-destroyed New Orleans home she will never see again. "I'm excited for going back to school," she says. "For writing, language, reading, math, science, social studies and recess." The smile on her mother's face shows pride and amusement at her daughter's bright answer and relief at this important step towards restoring normalcy to her life.

In a world recently beset by earthquakes, tsunamis, mud slides, floods and a seemingly endless string of hurricanes, it can seem trivial to be worried about tweaking our lessons or reflecting on teaching challenges. But as we watch one group after another dig itself out of the rubble and take stock of the future, we see that, after food, clothing and shelter, the fourth necessity is surely education. As soon as refugees settle into a new place, they begin to look for schools for their children. And the sooner the children find their place in a class, the sooner they can feel safe and their parents can again look to the future with hope.

With this as our lens, the work we do appears to be both honorable and daunting—honorable, because our classrooms represent a haven of sta-

bility, safety and purpose; daunting for the same reasons. We are reminded yet again that schooling is an essential of modern life. That is why it is so much a part of the public debate; why politicians build their campaigns around education issues; why homebuyers pore over the school district statistics before they choose a home; and why we, as educational professionals, think about, talk about, write about what does, can, and will happen in our classes each day.

In this issue of the newsletter, our contributors discuss their own daunting challenges as well as their recognition of the honorable nature of their work. In her book, *On Austrian Soil: Teaching Those I Was Taught to Hate*, NYCWP founding co-director Sondra Perl explores how her own feelings about the Holocaust affect the class of Austrian teachers who are taking her writing course. Melanie Hammer, in her review of the book, brings out to us how classrooms are about real people dealing with real life, and how writing can bridge the chasms among us.

Taking a longer view, Joe Bellacero looks back over his three decades of teaching to show us the astounding range of experiences that make a career in teaching ever challenging, ever surprising and a source of countless stories.

Katherine Schulten reports for us on the enduring power of the Summer Invitational Institute. Through the memories of numerous contributors, we see the Summer Institute for the transformative activity it is and has always been—and we are reminded once again that changing teaching practice does not come out of a box of training materials but out of a living experience.

Coming to terms with programs such as Teach For America and the Teaching Fellows can be difficult for those of us who have followed the traditional route to entering the profession. In a conversation from the listserv our members explore the benefits and drawbacks of approaches that bring in teachers from unconventional routes. Once again, the key question is, how does it work in the classroom?

Finally, we are pleased to welcome Alison Koffler-Wise as an editor. A poet, writer, and long-time teacher at Repertory High School for Theatre Arts, Alison joined us as an on-site teacher-consultant in September, and has generously offered her time to the Newsletter. She moves into the place vacated by Tracy Peers Pontin whose superb editorial skills; organization, and efficiency have been of invaluable service to those of us who have collaborated with her on the newsletter over the past ten years. We thank Tracy for all her contributions and wish her health and happiness as she and her family relocate to Albany.

WRITING

PROJECT

NYCWP SPRING PROGRAMS

2006 TEACHER-TO-TEACHER CONFERENCE

Lehman College/CUNY

Bronx, NY

May 6, 2006

Keynote Presentation by Michael Smith

Co-author with Jeffrey Wilhelm of

Reading Don't Fix No Chevys: Literacy in the Lives of Young Men

SPRING 2006 SATELLITE INVITATIONAL INSTITUTE

New York City College of Technology

Brooklyn, NY

Seven Saturdays beginning in January

TECH THURSDAYS

Coalition School for Social Change and Landmark HS

New York, NY

Thursdays

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EDITORS:

Joe Bellacero (NYCWP)

Alison Koffler-Wise (NYCWP)

Ed Osterman (NYCWP)

Grace Raffaele (Institute for Collaborative Education)

Katherine Schulten (NYCWP)

INSTITUTE FOR LITERACY STUDIES

Executive Director, Marcie Wolfe

Associate Director, Anne Campos

NEW YORK CITY WRITING PROJECT

Director, Nancy Mintz

Associate Director, Felicia George

Program Assistant, Maria Rocchi

ON-SITE TEACHER-CONSULTANTS

Jannett Bailey

Pat Becker

Joe Bellacero

Julie Conason

Debra Freeman

Felicia George

Amanda Gulla

Lucie Harris

Liza Hernandez

Lona Jack-Vilmar

Alison Koffler-Wise

Barbara Martz

Gina Moss

Ed Osterman

Katherine Schulten

Judith Schwartz

Laura Schwartzberg

Alan Stein

Harriet Stein

Susannah Thompson

Patsy Wooters

On the cover:
Summer 2005 at the NYCWP
Photos by Grace Raffaele

Institute for Literacy Studies

Lehman College/CUNY

250 Bedford Park Blvd. West

Bronx, NY 10468-1589

Telephone 718.960.8758

NEWS BRIEFS

Writing Marathons Go Digital

Last year we sponsored our first annual Writing Marathon, in which Project members gathered to walk around Central Park, pausing periodically to write and share. On Sunday, November 6, members of the New York City Writing Project made their first foray into transforming this Writing Marathon into a Photo-Taking/Walking/Writing Marathon. Fittingly, we met in Williamsburg, Brooklyn and began our own Marathon while watching the annual New York City Marathon pass us by.

Each member of the group, all of whom have participated in one of the technology seminars Paul Allison has coordinated as part of the NYCWP's Technology Initiative, came with his or her own laptop computer and digital camera (including my own latest vintage 35mm SLR find, a mint 1973 Canon F-1 I just had to show off). After taking images of the official Marathon, we wandered along quiet side streets taking pictures of words in windows and on walls, as well as anything else that caught our eyes. Then we went to a local coffee shop with free wireless internet access. There we imported our images to our computers and uploaded a few carefully selected images and descriptions of them to the Writing Project's page on Flickr.com, an online photo-sharing community. Our work can be seen at www.flickr.com/groups/nycwp/.

Some 30 NYCWP members have joined Flickr and become part of the Writing Project's group page posted on the site. Members have begun sharing images from their classrooms and from WP events like this Marathon. The page supports discussion threads in the same way as an online conference board like Nicenet does, and invites comments on individual posts the way a blog does. Currently there's a lively discussion going on about what we should do with the images we took at our Marathon. (A photo "write around?" A group show?) It is also easy to embed images in the discussion on Flickr as you go.

As I write, there are rumblings about another Photo-Taking/Walking/Writing Marathon that will take place indoors in Manhattan, so dust off those lenses and come join us. All WP shutterbugs are welcome. We are hoping to find new, creative ways to link

writing and image, and we are hoping to see work done with everything from point-and-shoot digital cameras to vintage, antique, toy, twin lens reflex, rangefinders, Soviet and Chinese-made cameras, SLRs, and DSLRs.

--Ken Stein
Satellite Midtown

(see page 8 for a look at this webpage)

National Writing Project Professional Writing Retreats 2005

As classroom teachers, we have to struggle to make time to write. That essay or poem always seems to remain unfinished in the face of student papers or curriculum units.

The National Writing Project (NWP) understands this dilemma and, thus, each June it offers teachers from Project sites around the country the opportunity to participate in writing retreats. These 4-day retreats provide time and support for teachers to write, revise and gain feedback from peers in a comfortable, tranquil setting far away from the daily demands of our familial and professional responsibilities. Recently, these retreats have been designed specifically to support Project teachers in the writing of articles about classroom practice for publication.

This past June, I finally took advantage of this opportunity. After 20 years of saying to myself, "I wish I could go, but school responsibilities interfere," I realized that now, in my first year of retirement, I finally had the time. In June, I attended one of two NWP professional writing retreats. Each retreat was limited to about fifteen participants. One was geared toward teachers interested in beginning an article on some aspect of their practice; the other was designed for teachers who already had a draft in hand and might be closer to publication. (For the latter retreat, writers had to submit their drafts beforehand.) I had been working all winter on an article about the ways in which the NYCWP had supported my development as a teacher-consultant. A shortened version of this piece appeared in our previous newsletter issue, but I felt I had much more to say to a national audience.

The retreat was held at a spa outside of

Santa Fe, New Mexico. I paid for my airfare, but the NWP paid for food and lodging. The retreat had two facilitators: Tom Fox, director of the Northern California Writing Project and Rebeca Garcia-Gonzalez of the Central California Writing Project. Writers were also supported by the presence of Roxanne Barber, editor for NWP publications, and Michele Foster, guest consultant and editor of various professional educational journals. Though individuals ultimately wrote wherever or whenever they needed, there was a large workroom for whole group meetings that also housed computers and printers, utensils and paper supplies, and a broad range of sample educational journals and information regarding submission and publication requirements. At one point during the four days, Roxanne and Michele discussed issues involving publication and answered participants' specific practical questions.

The accommodations were beautiful, the food was great, and the company was delightful. Yet, what was most amazing was how focused and critically supportive all the writers and facilitators were and how productively the time was used. People really did come to get as much writing done in the four days as they possibly could. There were various formats for writing and sharing. In advance of the retreat, Tom and Rebeca divided the group into smaller response trios. On the first day, these trios decided when, where and how often to meet, based entirely on need. Suggested guidelines for response were provided. During the day, writers were often on their own or, sometimes, conferring for professional feedback with Tom, Rebeca, Roxanne, or Michele. Once a day, the entire group met for brief progress reports. The amount of knowledgeable support we had was extraordinary, but it was most gratifying to be able to structure one's day to suit one's composing needs. The retreat ended with a read-around; each writer had 3-5 minutes to read a selected excerpt from his/her draft. All finished articles were due in January.

I left the retreat feeling excited by the experience and confident about the future of my article. I hope the NWP will not only continue to offer such retreats, but also vary the locations and the times of year. How about some on the East Coast? What about a retreat during February break? The retreat also left me won-

continued on next page

dering what we could do here in NYC to support more writing for publication. We used to hold writing retreats twice a year, in January and July. I'd love to see that tradition re-established. Somehow, we need to secure the money to support it and the people to facilitate it. The writers we have.

Announcements about upcoming writing retreats are available online at <http://www.writingproject.org/> or contact Nancy Mintz at the NYCWP. Applications must be submitted online in April.

--Ed Osterman
NYCWP

"Eighteen Teaching Nerds Who Have Found A Community": The Experience of the Summer Invitational Institute

If you've ever taken or taught one, you'll never forget it--or, at least, that's what I heard from person after person when I posed a request on our listserv for memories of Summer Invitational Institutes. "It changed my life," several people wrote. "It changed my teaching forever," nearly everyone agreed. Now in its 28th year, the Summer Invitational Institute is such a revered Writing Project institution that one participant says that before she took it, she remembers hearing people talk about it "in hushed tones as if it were something sacred."

More than 500 people have participated in the Institute over the years, and its structure has barely changed in all that time. "It started with a belief that teachers know important things about the teaching of writing, but that they have developed their strategies in isolation," says Writing Project Director Nancy Mintz. Taught at Lehman over sixteen intense seven-hour days in July, the Summer Institute brings teachers from all educational levels and disciplines together to share this knowledge, to work on their own writing, and to read, discuss and write about research in the teaching of writing. Participants demonstrate strategies from their own classrooms for each other in formal presentations, and many go on to hone these strategies for presentations at our Teacher-to-Teacher conference, at other local and national conferences, and for their

own school communities. In fact, much-loved Writing Project techniques like "point of view" and "memory chain" were first presented at these Institutes.

The first NYCWP Summer Institute was held in 1978 at Lehman College in what Sondra Perl remembers as a humid room in Carman Hall without air conditioning. She also remembers being "skeptical" about what Jim Gray, founder of the Bay Area Writing Project, wanted her and Richard Sterling and John Brereton to do. (At the time, Jim was helping Sondra, John, and Richard establish a New York City Writing Project site, and had described for them the features of the Summer Institute model.)

"None of us was familiar with writing groups or with the idea of sharing rough drafts. We thought it all sounded too 'California' for us--people sitting around and *sharing*," Sondra remembers. Soon, however, she was sold. "I began to see the power of this model: we were inside each other's writing, we were thinking about each other after class ended for the day, we were coming in early and staying late so that we could listen to each other as we developed our pieces, we were writing and revising and laughing and sometimes crying, and by the end of the summer we didn't want to stop."

And, in fact, many of the participants in that first Invitational never did stop. Besides Sondra and Richard, participants in that first Invitational included Marcie Wolfe, currently Director of the Institute for Literacy Studies (ILS), and such long-time and influential Writing Project members as Ed Osterman, Carla Asher, Lillian Rossi, and Michael Simon. In the next two or three years, Summer Institutes would include Elaine Avidon, Toby Bird, Christine Cziko, Melanie Hammer, Gail Kleiner, Linette Moorman, and Helen Ogden, all of whom shaped our in-service program and the activities of the Project for years to come.

Though the essential components of the Institute--writing and writing groups, readings in the field of literacy, and participant demonstrations-- have been in place from the beginning, the Invitational Institute has gradually shifted its focus toward an inquiry stance over the last fifteen years. According to Linette Moorman, former Writing Project Director and facilitator of at least twelve Summer Institutes herself, this began around the time when the National Writing Project first began to receive federal funding - and projects from all over the country began to come together to talk about their work. Originally the participant presentations were a kind of "best practice" model--teachers

simply presented lessons that had worked well with their students and that they wanted to share with others. But by introducing structures such as the "Tuning Protocol" from the Coalition of Essential Schools and the Descriptive Processes model from the Prospect Center, teachers at the Invitational Institute began to be encouraged to raise questions about their work rather than to simply present exemplary models of practice. "Where before you might have a teacher who was teaching *Things Fall Apart* and who wanted to make masks with the participants, now we would encourage that teacher to focus on why she wanted her students to make masks. How does it connect to the reading? What is the value of it? What theory underlies it? Now we use the phrase 'promising practice' rather than 'best practice' to encourage teachers to present something they want to think through, and want the help of 20 other Summer Institute participants to help them think through," says Linette.

Last summer, sixteen NYC teachers from across grade levels and content areas joined facilitators Candy Systra, now working for Long Island University, and Jennifer Rygalski, of Mott Hall II, to become part of the tradition. In the words of the introduction to their "instant publication," a collection of writing that participants traditionally publish at the end of the summer, "We are eighteen teaching nerds who have found a community. We've revealed our goofy sense of humor and unabashedly taken seriously the things that matter to us... In contrast to how many of us feel during the school year, we are safe here to be ourselves. We've learned about writing, teaching, ourselves, and each other. We've learned how vital--and how possible--it is for us to continue learning."

A list of the summer of '05's presentation topics will give a sense of the richness of the Invitational Institute to anyone who hasn't been involved: there was work on cross-age tutoring, playwriting, backwards design, songwriting, teacher/student portfolios, multiple intelligences, writing for publication, poetry slams, developing choice in writing, ode writing with ESL students, drama, literature circles, timelines, monologues, using imagery in the classroom, and descriptive review. Two of the participants, Annie Thoms, from Stuyvesant, and Tim Frederick, from Thurgood Marshall Academy, even presented the work they did this summer at the NCTE conference in November.

Every summer "burning questions" emerge. When I took the Invitational in

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1987, those of us in traditional schools wondered how our administrations would react to strategies like journal writing, independent reading, and writing groups. These days those practices are accepted almost everywhere, and teachers are worrying instead about issues like mandated curricula and standardized testing. "In a climate focused on high-stakes testing, how can we incorporate authentic assessment into our teaching?" this summer's group asked in a list of questions they published. But they also asked the question that goes to the heart of the Writing

Project experience, the central "burning question" that has kept the organization going for 28 years: "How can we continue to grow as teachers and learners?"

At the end of this summer, in a final report, facilitators Candy and Jen summed up what nearly everyone who has taken a Summer Invitational feels: "Although we were co-facilitating for the first time, we were part of a long tradition and we knew much about the power and excitement of the Summer Invitational. We wondered if we would feel at its conclusion the way previous

facilitators had. They had told us their Summer Invitational had been the best, the most transformative, the most nurturing, the most revitalizing, the most urgently needed, and came at the time, when the 'system' was the most oppressive. It is amazing how every summer this can be true. There is something about this model and about the people the Writing Project selects and about those who choose to participate that makes it be so."

--Katherine Schulten
NYCWP

Contact Nancy Mintz at 718-960-8758 for information about the 2006 Summer Invitational Institute.

Summer Institute Memories

I 1983 was my first Invitational. Gosh, 1983. I was young then, and unformed. I didn't even have much of a philosophy about teaching. But several memories jump out, things that influenced me tremendously: 1) Values. Reading and discussing and writing and coming clear about what I value and about what values were being communicated on the less obvious levels, subtextually. What messages am I giving about what I believe about children and education and teaching and learning and reading and writing? 2) Heterogenous grouping. Learning from so many teachers at so many different levels, sharing ideas and lessons and our own stories, and ever so gently. 3) The idea of a "back pocket" filled with possibilities (a phrase that lingers from Elaine Avidon), and developing a repertoire of techniques solidly supported by a philosophical stance.

--Lisa Rosenberg, Middle College HS

I was lucky enough to take the Summer Invitational in 1987, only a year or so into my teaching career. On the first day I sat next to Lucy Kim. We were the only ones in our early 20's that year, and we became friends instantly and intensely in the way that writing about your lives together induces. I remember hot afternoons out on the lawn hearing drafts of Lucy's story about her immigrant father who sold wigs for a living and who devised punishments for any of his daughters who gained weight. I remember, too, the awed silence in the room after she read the final draft aloud to the whole group.

For years after that summer Lucy and I would meet every few months in the same bar downtown to talk about our writing, our teaching, and what we considered the high drama of our single-women-in-NYC love lives. We would always remind each other how the other women in the group that year, women in their 30's, had liked to reassure us that life got a lot easier in the next decade, if only we could hold out.

Lucy died seven years ago in a boating accident in Alaska. I still have a copy of her story from that summer. She gave it to me as a present on the last day of the Summer Institute, just as I gave her mine. In the end, she only got to see about half of her thirties. This always strikes me as particularly tragic since those women in the Institute turned out to be right: nothing--not teaching, not writing, and certainly not love and friendship--has turned out to be as difficult since. I only wish we could have continued our conversation..

--Katherine Schulten, NYCWP

I still remember my demonstration lesson. It was about using sense images to elicit description of an object. I brought all these apples into the class so that people could touch, smell, look, and eventually listen to the sound of them being eaten. And then we all wrote. So hokey, now, it seems. I never told Sondra or Richard that the lesson was really my colleague Susan's, who was also in the Invitational. I just couldn't think of anything. I remember other presentations. Marcie Wolfe opened up the idea of journals to us. I had never used them and I think that was the first thing I brought back immediately to my students. Carla Asher helped us realize that you can "hear" punctuation from the way people spoke. Michael Simon had us write poetry, by cutting up and arranging words we wrote on random strips of paper. Sondra Perl demonstrated point of view with Fitzgerald's "Babylon Revisited" and you know how much all of us have used that one! So much talent....

I was so nervous. It was the first time I ever presented any aspect of practice to peers. Teaching was so isolating. Ironically, as I write this, I have two workshops this very week and realize that I have been presenting ever since that time. People tell me I am good at it, but the tension about doing them has never left.

--Ed Osterman

I was a struggling teacher in my first few years, and what the Invitational gave me was a language-specific ideas and ways of working that embodied what had vaguely lived in my head up until then. It opened up a world of possibilities. Co-facilitating years later, especially with someone as seasoned as Ed Osterman, brought the experience full-circle... One wonderful bit of continuity is that I worked with Jennifer Rygalski as a WP Teacher-Consultant, and then she ended up co-facilitating the Invitational this past summer. Makes me feel like a proud mother.

--Amanda Gulla, Assistant Professor,
English Education, Lehman College

**What do participants
READ during the Summer
Invitational? For a look at
the *READING LIST* for the
2005 Summer Invitational,
see page 11.**

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My first Invitational Summer Institute was in 1980. Twenty-five years later many things still stand out in my memory. Our very first meeting in Richard Sterling's apartment on Riverside Drive had a tremendous impact on me. It was the first time I was meeting with a group of other teachers for a professional conversation about the teaching of writing. It was also the first time I had been a part of a group of teachers who were treated with such respect and professionalism.

Writing a POV piece in response to "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" was quite an experience for me. When Elaine Avidon, one of the facilitators, encouraged us to write "from where you are, from what you know and feel" and then Sondra Perl, our other facilitator, encouraged us to write out of our "felt sense," I thought they were wonderful, caring and crazy. But then, as we talked about Peter Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers*, I saw them implementing the theory and research of the day. Things also seemed a little strange when they asked us to write "process pieces" on what we had written. No one had ever asked me to write from deep inside myself or to try to capture on paper how I had done what I had just done. As they continued these activities consistently for the next four weeks, I realized this was different. That Summer Institute changed how I saw myself as a teacher and learner, and it helped me understand the value of a professional community for teachers at all stages of their careers.

--**Linette Moorman, former NYCWP Director**

In 1983, after 5 years of learning-by-doing teaching writing in Paris, I took a leave of absence and ended up in Berkeley, California. On campus one day, I noticed an article about a writing teacher who'd won the "teacher of the year" award. This startled me--in my experience, writing teachers didn't get recognition. I phoned him, and he invited me to his office. As we chatted I think he was struggling not to express astonishment at what I didn't know about writing instruction. He suggested I might benefit from taking a course with the Bay Area WP. As luck would have it, a summer Open Institute would begin in about a month, costing only \$1000.00 or so. I remember saying to Gerald Camp, "But I don't have any money." And he responded, to my amazement, "Well, maybe we can find you a stipend." So I was stipended into the BAWP Summer Institute, which changed my life. All my instincts were validated; all my questions were addressed. Every possible lightbulb switched on... Fifteen years later I was in New York and applied for a position with the NYCWP. I am still nourished by every conversation with WP colleagues, in person or on the listserv.

--**Margaret Fiore, Teacher Center, Herbert H. Lehman HS**

Writing groups became the vehicle for our bonding as a learning community. Through the personal stories we shared in writing groups that summer, we connected as people, as writers, and as teachers.
--**Lona Jack-Vilmar, NYCWP**

I didn't believe this experience would change my life, as you said at the beginning. Boy was I wrong.
--**Summer '05 participant in her final reflection letter to facilitators.**



The 1978 Summer Invitational Group



A writing group from the 1978 Summer Invitational

The 1978 Invitational formed the basis for some of the presentations we continue to do or think about. Mine was only ten minutes long -- on journals. I showed a sheet of topics and sentence starters that I had developed and cobbled together from a variety of sources, then said, "that's it." While people liked mine, Carla's presentation, on punctuation, was a revelation to me. First, it had a source -- Jim Moffett's work. Second, it demonstrated a set of related, practical approaches to getting students to think about punctuation after they've composed a piece of writing. Some of my colleagues may have, as their strongest presentation memory, the time that we all wrote while a participant played a recording of whale songs, but I remember Carla's work which was, like Carla, methodical, focused, and smart.

My first writing group had within it people I still know and work with today: Sondra Perl, Ed Osterman, Barbara Gurr. I remember how much I enjoyed hearing each of them talk about their work and mine. From ideas based in the work of literary scholar Wayne Booth, we experimented with point of view throughout the Institute. That first Institute was the first time teachers wrote together in response to a short story, manipulating the point of view to understand the author's original choices and the changes in a piece of writing that are made possible with a shift in perspective. Our writing for the rest of the Institute consisted of one central moment or idea that we worked and reworked in three different treatments or points of view. All of us in the group were writing to explore something about ourselves. We were our most compelling characters, the center of our pieces. My writing, which I searched for and found last week, focused on three generations in my family. I wrote "Call Hollow Road," a story told in third person about a young woman struggling to make sense of her marriage. I wrote a first-person interior monologue about a woman of my mother's generation, entitled "If She Wrote." Finally, I wrote "My Grandfather's Checklist," a to-do list I imagine my grandfather had for his life and through which I told his story. I had not written like this before. To find a way to join the personal and the professional through writing that meant something to me, through sharing practice with new colleagues, and through forming lifelong professional friendships, was something I had not thought to dream of.

--**Marcie Wolfe, Director, Institute for Literacy Studies**

Every day in a teacher's professional life is fraught with possibilities. There are the wonderful possibilities—that you will say something memorable, clarify an important concept, bolster a student's self-esteem, help some child onto a path that will transform the world for the better. There are the dangerous possibilities—that you will stifle a question, crush a spirit, bruise a heart. In this article, Joe Bellacero takes a look back at his career, warts and all, and reminds us that teachers are only human, and love makes that all right.

Victory Lap

Joe Bellacero
Evander Childs HS

I plan to retire in January of 2006. Why January? Because I deserve a victory lap.

It may be that there was never a time when I didn't teach. Surely, as the older brother, I was always showing my siblings whatever it was I knew. And as a camp counselor from the summer after 8th grade in 1964 until my current job as an associate camp director, I have been teacher to both campers and staff. But I suppose, technically, my teaching career started when I walked into Haaren High School in Hell's Kitchen to begin my student teaching experience in the spring term, 1972. Bernard V. Deutschman was the principal—how could I forget the name of a principal whose initials were BVD? The school building had been used not long before I got there as the internal setting for the movie *Up the Down Staircase* from the Bel Kaufman book, which might give you a sense of how run-down the place was. The chaos in the halls, the emptiness of the classrooms (despite having 34 on register), the weirdness of being among teachers during their down times ("I'm really starting to get someplace with my novel..."; "I got a new gun that fits neatly in my briefcase..."; "You coming to O'Neal's Balloon with us on Friday...?"; "What the hell are we supposed to do with a tachistoscope? When do we get time to just teach...?"; "Teach? These kids? You can't shine shit...!") I was exhilarated and terrified by turns and simultaneously.

When I got my degree and got started, I spent the first years asking why I was subjecting myself to this abuse—"I don't need this. I'm a smart guy. I can do anything I want, make a lot more money and get a lot more respect." But, of course, when other things did come along, I turned them down and stuck with teaching. I knew it was what I was meant to do.

It's been a gauntlet, of course. I'm lucky to have survived as long as I have--the father who came to school with an ax asking about why I was touching his daughter; the student who was caught at the door carrying a gun

looking for me because I had refused to let him into the building; the boy who went for the knife in his bookbag when I stopped him from pounding on a classroom door; the boy whose ear I cut when I threw a piece of chalk at him to get him quiet; the girl who pressed her butt against my crotch on the crowded subway during a class trip and told me of her fantasies of wearing skimpy lingerie and tying me up; the A.P. who leaned against the school door talking to me about how tired he was at the end of a long day, then drove up to the Kensico Dam, jumped in, and drowned himself; the young boy wakening to his sexual difference telling me he was in love with me; the colleague who sweetly opined, "It's little assholes like you who are what's wrong with this system!"; the gang of students who surrounded me on the street as I waited for my ride home, started pushing me, stole my hat and tried to steal my briefcase before a squad car turned onto the block; the last day of school, when I walked out, last to leave the building, to find all four of my tires flattened; the A.P. who observed my lesson, listed 23 things I had done wrong and 3 things she liked, including that the window shades were even; the girl who fell off a swing in Central Park on a class trip and broke her hand; a hundred angry students over the years sneering, "Fucking white faggot" at me; the A.P. at my first interview who said, "Not everyone can be a teacher. You might want to look for other work." I survived all of that and much, much more but that's not why I think I deserve a victory lap.

I deserve this last semester, this victory lap, because of the other side of the story--over 15,000 names learned; hundreds of thousands of essays assigned, read, responded to, graded and returned (albeit, usually late); 5,000 college recommendations written, 40,000 hours in schools; 60,000 hugs; 10,000 cheeks kissed; 100,000 taps on a shoulder, arm or back; 1,000,000 smiles given and 30,000,000 received; the girl who called me weekly for 20 years after she was in my class,

just to pour out her troubles; the hundreds of students who returned expressly to tell me how I helped them in their lives; the boy who shook my hand after a class because, "That was the best lesson I ever had."; the 15 kids in one class who I helped pass the ELA Regents after they had failed it three times previously; the girl who put me in my place early in the year saying, "I already have a favorite teacher" then ended the year writing in my yearbook, "I guess I have a new favorite now"; the colleague who told me, "You are a true gentleman."; the A.P. who said, "Someday I'll be telling people, 'I knew him. I used to work with him.'"; the principal who said, "Please, stay one more year. We need you."; the yearbook that won an award; the student who came to my rescue when I was being harassed, saying, "He's my teacher. He's cool. Leave him alone."; the young writers I encouraged whose contest entries brought them a new taste of success; the beautiful students who invited me to their weddings; the colleagues who have sought my opinion, my experience, my companionship and shared the same with me; the kids who came to my house to work on the yearbook over the week-end; the group who painted a Bambi scene on the classroom wall as a reward to themselves for their hard work; the group who camped out with me at Pound Ridge; the kids who shared their troubles, fears, hopes, and hearts; the ones who fought me and made me find a better way; the ones whose affection buoyed me through difficult classes; and the love, oh my God, so much love I have been given and been allowed to give over these years. For the love alone, I deserve a victory lap.

And I'm taking it.

(P.S. As my school is on a semester system, I will not be leaving classes without a teacher in the middle of the year. There's no way I could do that.)

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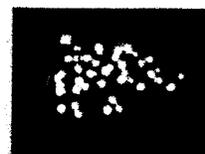
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About New York City Writing Project

Here are pictures of our classrooms and our professional lives.

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BOOK REVIEW:

We call it "the basic." You know, the workshop you participated in early in your experiences with the NYCWP or, a little later, led. In it, we ask participants to describe an early experience with writing and then to write a brief process piece about it. Every time, it calls up a rich assembly of moments from our lives as writers, and it focuses us on the joys and struggles of the particular bit of writing we are laboring over in that time and place. We ask members of the group to share their work with each other, even though they are frequently among strangers, and to reveal attitudes, experiences and skills as writers which we might be more comfortable keeping to ourselves.

Now imagine that you are leading this workshop with a group of people you're not sure you can trust. The success of Writing Project seminars relies on the ability of people to share openly in a safe environment, but suppose you are a Jewish teacher, one generation removed from the Holocaust, working with a group of Austrian teachers, one generation removed from those who perpetrated it. That elephant in the room is the subject of Sondra Perl's new book, *On Austrian Soil: Teaching Those I was Taught to Hate*.

In 1997, Perl, who is Professor of English and Urban Education at Lehman College and The Graduate Center of the City of New York, as well as one of the founders of the New York City Writing Project, goes to Innsbruck, Austria, for two and half weeks, to work with Austrian teachers enrolled in a Master's Degree program through CUNY. One of the classes is to focus on the teaching

of writing and another on literature. She begins the writing class, as we do so many of our NYCWP seminars, with the invitation to write. That first session, the basic, goes well, but Perl has also brought texts that frame teaching as a moral endeavor as well as an intellectual one. From those texts, pedagogical questions arise as to whether teachers really can "keep ourselves and our values outside the curriculum" and be "morally neutral" in the classroom. As with Writing Project seminars, part of the teaching of writing involves sharing writing in small groups. Perl brings to her group poetry she has written about her uneasiness as a Jew in Austria. Between the pedagogical questions about who we are in the classroom and the personal writing that makes connections between the lives teachers live inside the classroom and outside in the world, the seminars Perl leads about writing, literature, and, later, classroom research, become venues for examination of the teachers' own stances toward the past.

The teachers in the seminars are more and less willing, to varying degrees, to go on this quest with Perl. The journey involves not only the classroom activities of reading and writing, considering the moral position of teachers in the classroom and whether curriculum can be neutral, but a walking tour around Innsbruck with a historian who is an expert on the fate of Austrian Jews. The teachers' responses to a paper Perl distributes in which she has written about her first summer work with them (she continues the work over several years) makes for one of the more compelling sections of the book. Through letters, they

respond to what she has written, honestly expressing their personal reactions and addressing what this experience makes them consider about their lives as teachers. While there is anger and resentment expressed clearly in the correspondence, the writers—Perl and the teachers--persevere in their efforts to communicate and achieve understanding.

The last third of the book could be viewed as a sort of demonstration of the uses of writing to process and further personal experience. Perl includes lots of informal work here: chunks of correspondence between herself and one of the participants in the course in whom she has found a friend as well as another person who wants to explore the past as she does; shorter reaction pieces; a poem she wrote after visiting Mauthausen. This later section includes material about Perl coming to terms with her own connection to Judaism as well.

The book ends with the Austrian group coming to the United States to attend their graduation at City College. Afterwards, they repair to Perl's house for an American-style cook-out. They are all changed by the experiences of reading, talking, and, of course, writing together. Through her use of writing in her seminars, Perl has provided a model for bridging the abyss that sometimes looms between people who find themselves standing on opposite sides of history, an approach that could prove useful in today's divided world.

--Melanie Hammer
Director, Long Island Writing Project
at Nassau Community College

An excerpt from *On Austrian Soil*

I suggest they break into small groups to talk about their responses. But as I move from group to group, I hear: "We all follow the same procedures"; "Teachers here are taught not to speak about what they believe"; "We can't deal with morality in the classroom."

"This is not our way," says Hans...crossing his arms on his chest and nodding his head.

"That's right," echoes his wife, Martina. "We have been trained to keep ourselves and our values outside of the curriculum. In the classroom we must be morally neutral."

LISTSERV CONVERSATIONS

An article this fall in the *New York Times*, "Top Graduates Line Up to Teach to the Poor" by Tamar Lewin, charted the progress of Teach for America (TFA), a program that encourages some of "the best and the brightest" students from competitive colleges to teach in underserved areas of the US. This article generated a vibrant discussion on the New York City Writing Project listserv, some of which has been edited and reprinted here. We begin with NYCWP member and literacy coach Jeremy Kaplan's October 3, 2005 Letter to the Editor of the *Times* about the article, which Ed Osterman reprinted on our listserv.

To the Editor:

It is commendable that graduates from top colleges are taking some time to do something meaningful while they put off major career decisions. But putting people with almost no training into the hardest teaching situations in the country is not fair to the students.

It is also degrading for the teaching profession and smacks of elitism. We would never let untrained people become doctors or lawyers simply because they were well educated.

Jeremy Kaplan

Nancy Brodsky, Samuel Gompers CTC HS:

My issue with this article and with TFA is the characterization of teaching as a "public service." The field of teaching is not a place for "do-gooders" who are interested in giving back to society. A two-year commitment leaves a lot of room for high turnover in the schools, which is not beneficial to the school community. We need teachers who are dedicated for the long-term, whether it's a whole career or at least five years. Teaching is a profession and a craft that is honed through experience and time.

I admit that I am resentful of programs like TFA and the Teaching Fellows--for a mere two-year commitment, corps members get a free/subsidized Master's degree. What about the rest of us--those who became teachers "on purpose," as I often say. I spent four years preparing myself for a career in teaching...Teacher shortage aside, it would behoove these types of organizations and education departments to emphasize recruit-

ment for the long-term, and to seek out those who want to make teaching a career not an opportunity for feel-good service.

Nancy Mintz, Director NYCWP

I keep thinking about how long it took me to really learn how to teach. Year two was just the beginning...How can we ever make lasting changes in our schools if there is no continuity in the teaching staff? I chose to teach. It is my career and I can't help being angry at those who see this as a way to avoid making career decisions or seeing this work as a way to get into a good graduate school...

Yet many TFA teachers who have stayed in the profession have become leaders in their school communities and advocates for positive change. I hope that those who have left have become involved in public policy and continue to work for social change and equity.

Annie Thoms, Stuyvesant HS:

Putting practically untrained teachers, however intelligent and dedicated, into the hardest jobs they'll ever have seems like a bad idea, for both teachers and students. At the same time, the schools where TFA teachers are sent need more teachers, period.

Many of the problems lie in the ways in which our educational system is structured: it's really hard to be an excellent teacher under the conditions in which we work, and really hard to attract people to teaching as a career when it essentially means being overworked and underpaid forever. It is also, of course, the best and most rewarding job on earth, but most people don't seem to know that.

With all of the discussion about the new

teacher contract, and Bloomberg's joy in repeating that teachers are getting a raise because we'll be working more time, I'm struck again by how skewed the public view of teaching must be: I already work ALL THE TIME. I teach English to 150-170 kids a semester. Putting me in the building for an extra 10 minutes a day isn't going to change a heck of a lot.

Tim Frederick, Thurgood Marshall Academy:

Also implicit in a lot of this is that you only need to be highly educated to be a good teacher. I don't know about you all, but I know a lot of really, really smart people who would be horrible teachers. There's more to teaching than being highly educated. Besides the personal attributes you need to have (caring, patient, etc.) there's the ability to see how someone might not understand the subject you know so well. Many highly educated people know their subject really well and don't understand how someone could not understand it - and, thus, could not help those who struggle with it.

Ed Osterman, NYCWP:

I just want to add that while I too am dismayed at how quickly people leave the profession these days, I don't think it necessarily comes from one group of teachers more than another. It seems to me that many good teachers burn out fast and move on faster than ever before. Perhaps, fewer people view an adult's working life as comprised of one career. Perhaps, the current generation prefers a professional life of two or three careers. And yes, this turn-over has an often terrible effect on small schools where the loss of one or two key teachers can really have an impact. (But that often leads me to wonder: what does it say about a model or a structure that is so dependent on one or two key teachers or one superb principal?)

Joe Bellacero, Evander Childs HS:

What I like best about TFA is that, in the grand scheme of things, it is a small program.

As such I think it is useful. How many times have I heard--"I'd just like to put that person in my classroom for a week so s/he could see what it's like!" Well, TFA puts them in there for two years. That's good. Of course, a little knowledge IS a dangerous thing. I cringe at the thought of those former TFAers who will be spouting hairbrained ideas a few years down the road and introducing those ideas with, "I taught for two years so I know what's wrong with public education." And I also fear that two years is just about the amount of time necessary to really begin blaming the kids for the state they're in. Sophomores often live up to the original meaning of that word.

On the other hand, those Ivy League schools actually have produced some highly educated people who have a point of view and knowledge base that can be of use even for the short period they are with us on the road. (Of course, CUNY's 12 Nobel Laureates show that public education is nothing to sneeze at either).

All in all, I think TFA, as a small program, gives us an opportunity to meet and guide some of the people who will have a great deal of influence on the future of education in America. We ought to take advantage of that.

Margaret Fiore, Teacher Center, Herbert H. Lehman HS:

Perhaps those who enter teaching via TFA or the Teaching Fellows and leave have been touched by the magic of student/teacher learn-

ing moments and will speak out in their new work worlds. Perhaps they, carrying their insights wherever they go, will help energize a transformation of commitment to public education. How much can our generous collegiality and our NYCWP "teachers are also always learners" philosophy influence this possibility?

Elaine Avidon, Director, Elementary Teachers Network at the Institute for Literacy Studies, and Faculty at Lehman College:

OK, I can no longer hold back. Over the years I have worked with some wonderful, thoughtful and dedicated TFA teachers -- some who stayed and made teaching their life and some who left. I have also had wonderful and thoughtful students in my education classes who went into teaching and then left.

And I have loved people who went to Ivy League schools; I love some people who did not go to such schools. I know plenty of at-one-time do-gooders who became old do-the-work radicals. And I hated how the article characterized and generalized about everything. But I am worried that we are doing likewise.

From my own horrific first-year teaching experience and those of so many people I have worked with, I know how long it takes to learn to teach. And how horribly we sometimes do at the university level helping one become a teacher prior to teaching or during this first

year. I know too how we learn to teach by teaching and that two years is just getting one's mind wet.

Yet I do not worry so much about the young who come to us on their way someplace else. Nor am I willing to equate teaching with law or medicine though I deeply believe teaching is a profession. For better or worse there are few/maybe no teaching methodologies that I can equate with medical, scientific and/or legal precedents which to my mind do follow a requisite logic. As complex as illness is, as complex as legal matters can be, to my mind those fields are no match for what it is to deal with the complexities of a child/a student -- a group of students learning. Yes, that's right, I think our work far more complex, far more difficult and I am not convinced that we have a way to educate educators that is reliable. Or that we know enough about the individual and how she learns. So TFA is just another route. And some do stay... I want people out there who have touched base with the realities of inequity, who might shape a life that does something about it.

So I am not yet willing to allow one news writer's characterizations to damn the TFA effort. If anything, I wish TFA was better at supporting the teachers it sends into the schools. Their large group meetings are hardly enough; with more direct support, more might stay.

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Institute for Literacy Studies — Lehman College — 250 Bedford Park Boulevard West — Bronx, NY, 10468-1589



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