

President's Column by Kathleen McKenzie

I hope everyone had a restful yet invigorating summer! We all need time away from the classroom to reflect, read, write—those things that we regularly ask of our students. We need time to recharge our batteries, time to figure out what worked well and what we can improve. And time to gather new ideas and inspirations that will get us through the next ten months.

I feel fortunate that such an opportunity came my way this summer. I applied to the National Writing Project's Summer Institute. My site (since I live in the northeastern part of Georgia) is the Kennesaw Mountain Writing Project (KMWP) located at Kennesaw State University. I had had friends go through the Summer Institute (SI), and their accolades on the program and its benefits (personally and professionally) had me hooked.

For three weeks I drove to Kennesaw, made new friends, and caught up with old ones. We shared breakfasts, stories, writing, heartaches, research, books, triumphs...the list goes on. For the main goal of the institute, I believe, is to build a community of educators who will bring new ideas on writing back into the classroom. But it was so much more to me.

The SI is structured yet flexible. We began with a meeting in May to discuss what we might want to research and present to the rest of the group—our Demonstration. While research isn't the only focus in the SI, it does take the most time which is why we started thinking about it early. By the time June rolled around, I had a vague idea that I wanted to research effective methods of teaching writing to my high school students. While we worked on our research—a few people chose to present as a team—we also spent our time on reading books that are popular with our grade levels and on improving our own writing.

The first week was a bit overwhelming, but our coaches, Jen Dail and Amy Bryam assured us that we were on track. Their support, encouragement, and guidance were key factors in our success. Also on board as coaches were Jess Miller (guru of technology), Shaun Sudberry, Mandy Burgess, Kathy Nichols, Rob Montgomery, Michelle Goodsite, and Lindsay Hoots. Each one of these teachers had something different to offer us—from elementary through college, their classrooms are full of the writing we want for and *with* our students. I emphasize "*with*" because it is important that we write with our students. I know, this means taking papers home rather than grading during student writing time, but the benefits of writing with our students far outweighs any time we may save for later. Students who are reluctant or uncertain writers will come to see writing as an activity that doesn't end at graduation—it is a lifelong activity that is inexpensive, non-fattening, and healthy (for your brain!)

So what did we do besides research, reading, and writing? We learned how to create and maintain a blog. We posted reflections and writing everyday. We shared our writings in both small groups and with everyone else. We posted to eAnthology. We learned about

the art of memoir from Dawn Kirby, a professor at KSU and co-author of *New Directions in Teaching Memoir: A Studio Workshop Approach*. For several days, she joined us for a couple of hours to guide us through writing memoir—an experience that was healing as well as enlightening. I don't think anyone in our group will ever look at memoir in quite the same way again—it was, in itself, a life-changing experience. Other professors from KSU who assisted us were playwright Aaron Levy and writer Jeff Stepakoff. There were former SI fellows who joined us to offer support and advice—the list of people who believe that writing is vital in our lives could fill a page. Suffice it to say, when you are part of a NWP community, you are not alone.

And the best part? Now that the SI is over, I will have lots of opportunities to work with other teachers through programs developed by KMWP. No obligation—just an opportunity. I like that; it fits well into my life. And the friends I've made and the lessons I've learned over this summer will help me to engage my students (and myself) for years to come. Thank you KMWP. Thank you NWP. For more information on the Summer Institutes, please visit the site closest to you from the list below. Happy writing!

Georgia

Blackwater Writing Project

<http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/nwps/50>
Valdosta State University
Valdosta, Georgia

Central Georgia Writing Project

<http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/nwps/297>
Georgia College & State University
Milledgeville, Georgia

Cherokee Rose Writing Project

<http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/nwps/298>
University of West Georgia
Carrollton, Georgia

Coastal Savannah Writing Project

<http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/nwps/326>
Armstrong Atlantic State University
Savannah, Georgia

Georgia Southern Writing Project

<http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/nwps/188>
Georgia Southern University
Statesboro, Georgia

Kennesaw Mountain Writing Project

<http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/nwps/48>
Kennesaw State University
Kennesaw, Georgia

Red Clay Writing Project

<http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/nwps/257>
University of Georgia
Athens, Georgia

Southwest Georgia Writing Project

<http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/nwps/51>
Georgia Southwestern State University
Americus, Georgia