

Reflections on Receiving the NCTE Leadership Development Award

by Christina Frierman

In November, I was honored to receive the NCTE Leadership Development Award for the state of Virginia. Attending the NCTE Convention for the first time and receiving such a prestigious honor was both a wonderful experience and a time for reflection. I met so many wonderful people, was overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of English/Language Arts teachers, and even saw--believe it or not--several familiar faces. Of course, the venue was a wonderful background to all of it. I have a secret: this was my first trip to Orlando! I was like a kid in a candy store. Having never been to Orlando before, I did manage to sneak in some fun by visiting Sea World, where I actually got to hug a dolphin, going on a safari ride at Busch Gardens Tampa, and seeing the princess castle at Disney World.

While all the glitter and excitement of being in a place I had only dreamed of visiting threatened to overwhelm me and monopolize my thoughts and time, I was led to that place of reflection and thoughtfulness at the Affiliate Breakfast Sunday Morning. [Needle's Eye, Volume 31, Issue 1](#)

Keith Gilyard, the Vice President of NCTE, began the morning with a review of NCTE's history and mission. He spoke of the connective thread that weaves its way through K-12 education and binds that history with the college classroom. As I sat there and listened, I have to admit that my mind wandered—wandered down the food chain from NCTE to VATE to my local affiliate, VBATE. My mind pondered the role of writing/composition instruction in the K-12 classroom and the connection it has to composition instruction in the college lecture hall. Is there a tether that truly binds the kindergarten classroom to the college lecture hall, a spider web of sorts that spreads out to encompass all composition writing at all levels?

I was also honored to meet Sarah Brown Wessling, the National Teacher of the Year. By the way, I want to be her when I grow up. Sarah also contemplated the role of writing instruction and the perceptions of writing instruction nationwide. One politician complained to Sarah, "My daughter is 17 and doesn't know how to write in cursive." Is this all we are--handwriting instructors and coaches? Is this the perception that the nation has of English/Language Arts instruction?

Finally, Sarah ended with an anecdote about one of her rare evenings at home. As she was hugging her daughter Lauren one evening, she asked Lauren if she could see. Lauren replied, "If you don't let go, I can't see." As I heard those words, I thought "out of the mouths of babes." As a high school English teacher I fear that though there is a connection between writing instruction in the K-12 classroom and the college lecture hall, it is tenuous, frayed, and in desperate need of triage. It is so easy to become embroiled in the day to day minutia that consumes our lives when we walk into our school building. It is all too easy to forget to "let go" so "[we] can see"--see the bigger picture--see that we are all connected--connected by our passion for young people, by our love of literature and writing, by our desire to have a lasting impact on just one student.

Teachers serve many roles--teacher, mentor, researcher, councilor, mediator, tear wiper, fear calmer, pillar of support, guide, and parental surrogates--just to name a few. These roles are not relegated to the K-12 classroom teacher. All of us who have been called to serve in the educational arena, whether it is in an elementary school, middle school, high school, or college/higher learning classroom do so because it is our passion! It is what we were meant to do. It is our destiny.

That love, that drive, that zeal is all too easily forgotten in the day-to-day chores and tasks that accompany our chosen path. Attending the NCTE Convention reminded me that I need to "let go . . . so I can see," see why I became a teacher, see why I love my job so much, see why I get up every morning before dawn and come home every night after dark. I need to let go of the day-to-day grind that threatens to wear me down and wear me out. I need to allow myself to gaze into the future and see that, though it may not always seem like it, what I do--what we do--matters.

We are so much more than handwriting instructors. Who cares if a 17 year old can write in cursive? Can she think critically? Can he communicate his thoughts and ideas clearly? Can they work collaboratively to solve problems?

English/Language Arts instruction is so much more than a perfectly, neatly formed letter on a page. It is passion. It is love. It is the bedrock of our future. We must go back--back to the future--back to take a longer, deeper look at why we choose to be teachers and why we choose to be English teachers.

I can only speak for myself. If truth be told, I didn't choose to be a teacher. Teaching English chose me. Now, it is up to me to choose what I do with it. It is up to all of us to choose what we do with our talents, our passions, and our knowledge.

Do we choose to see the students only as they appear in our classroom? Or do we choose to see what they can be and help them realize their dreams? We are living ours. For many of us, it was a teacher who believed in us that led us to choose the path we are on. We owe it to the young minds and hearts that pass through our doors every day to wipe their tears, calm their fears, and give them the tools to find their dreams.