



LEILA CHRISTENBURY

Portrait of a Volunteer

Leila Christenbury has been a member of NCTE for almost 30 years and has served in elected positions in the Adolescent Assembly, the Conference on English Education, the Secondary Section, and the Executive Committee. A recipient of the NCTE Rewey Belle Inglis Award, she is also former co-editor of *The ALAN Review* and editor of *English Journal*. Her NCTE books include *Books for You* and *Both Art and Craft*. In 2003 Christenbury completed her term on the NCTE presidential team.

Currently Professor of English Education at Virginia Commonwealth University (Richmond), she is co-chair of the Department of Teaching and Learning. She continues her work with the NCTE Virginia affiliate, VATE, and serves on the Executive Board and as VATE Treasurer.

What motivated you to volunteer for NCTE service?

I had years of experience with my state affiliate as a local district president and then member of the state board. It was not only a logical step from state work to NCTE but, frankly, I was drafted—friends nominated me for elected offices or appointed positions, and it usually seemed like a good idea at the time to accept. And once I got into the organization and found real satisfaction in the work, I was hooked. One thing just led to another...

What has kept you interested in volunteering your time over the years?

There are dozens of things you can do in and for NCTE, and many of the roles are widely different. I like new ideas and new challenges, and have found that my association with NCTE is renewing and interesting.

What does your current role entail?

As immediate past president, I am currently resting a bit. As of this writing I am chair of the Squire Committee and on the Literacy Award Committee, but I have no other major responsibilities.

What key roles have you played and what did you find most satisfying in carrying them out?

Being editor of *English Journal* was probably the highlight of my professional career. For a variety of reasons I—and the *Journal*—were in the middle of controversy for much of my term, and while some of the battles were bruising, I also felt deep satisfaction regarding the work. Only second to my work with *EJ* is my time as president of NCTE. My term on the presidential team was almost five years, and chairing the Search Committee for our current Executive Director, being program chair of the 2001 fall convention, and writing a number of OpEd pieces advancing NCTE positions on teaching and learning were all highlights.

What satisfactions do you derive from volunteering?

I like doing something for others; I like the kind of people who are NCTE members. I feel the work is

important, and I am still enough of an optimist to believe that it is helping to improve teaching and learning in our classrooms.

Why would you recommend volunteering to another NCTE member?

I would absolutely recommend volunteering; you work with great people, and you get more out of it than you ever put in.

How or has your affiliation with NCTE improved your professional development and career?

My work with NCTE has essentially made my career. The ideas from the workshops and conventions I use in my classes; the books and journals NCTE publishes are the ones my students and I read. My professional association with NCTE members has widened my horizons and expanded my knowledge. As NCTE president I was in a position to work with national policy leaders and officials and to represent all our members. At times, I was in a position to forcefully advance the NCTE agenda, and I did so. It wasn't always comfortable, but it made me grow and stretch, and I'd like to think I also did some good.

Do you have a favorite NCTE publication?

English Journal, now, forever, and always.

What is the one book, article, or professional development experience you would recommend to other educators?

For me, there are far too many good books and articles to single out one for citation. On the other hand, I would definitely recommend attending one of the fall Conventions; there is nothing like mingling with great speakers, writers, poets, and 5,000 English educators to share ideas and strategies. The Conference is inspiring, stimulating, and never ever dull. If you haven't been to one, go.

How has being part of an educational community like NCTE improved your abilities as a teacher and as a leader?

NCTE has absolutely improved my abilities as a teacher and a leader. In particular my work with the Secondary Section and with the Executive Committee has taught me how to set an agenda, run a meeting, and listen to widely divergent opinions. Running a national search committee and being program chair of a major Convention were also character building. Finally, NCTE Conventions and publications, not to mention interaction with other members, have provoked and inspired my teaching.