

A Contest to Honor the Memory of Leslie Walker for Young Writers of Promise

background by W. Scott Smoot
Past Chair of the Contest, 2008, 2009



Leslie Walker, Writing Teacher

The Kennesaw Mountain Writing Project (KMWP) lost our colleague and friend Leslie Walker in early spring 2007. At her memorial service, we met her teacher who had inspired Leslie with a lifelong love of literature. Acting on that inspiration, Leslie had quit a successful career in business to become a teacher at Campbell High School in 1995.

After an exhausting year during which she admits “I slammed my door one too many times,” Leslie revised her expectations and searched for ways “to teach all the students, not just the Leslies” (TWG 137). By 1998, she had found KMWP. A year later, when I met her in the Professional Writers’ program at KSU, she pushed me to join her in this network of professionals.

Researching with KMWP, Leslie developed a special insight that writing is about establishing community. She would say that you write best with the support of a caring community of writers, you write best about the community you know, and you learn from your community when you write. Most miraculously, you draw others into new community through your imagination and language. Her essay about this subject can be read in the book *Teachers’ Writing Groups*, but she did not live to see it published.

A Contest to Honor Leslie

When her KMWP friends consulted with me about continuing her work through a writing contest, we agreed on certain qualities of Leslie’s own teaching that we would try to emulate in the design of the contest.

First, Leslie would want to recognize and reward qualities of insight and imagination, even when exhibited in an unpolished form. Leslie’s own students, who began their year thinking that their writing was no good because it was incorrect, learned confidence and fluency, along with proper usage.

Next, we wanted the writing prompts to draw teachers from fields other than Language Arts. Leslie collaborated with teachers in other disciplines, and she believed that writing was a gateway to understanding our world on many levels.

Then, I looked through Leslie’s writings and through her published work with KMWP for clues to what prompts might achieve some of her goals as a teacher.

Ideas from Leslie's Own Writing

I found ideas that might lead to different writing prompts from two of Leslie's essays, "I Belong to This Place: Claiming a Neighborhood Landmark" in *Writing America: Classroom Literacy and Public Engagement* (2004), and "Re-envisioning the Writing Classroom" in *Teachers' Writing Groups: Collaborative Inquiry and Reflection for Professional Growth* (2007).

A prompt to write about place (used in 2008): "Our lives are fashioned by where our families are from, what neighborhoods we live in, and where we call home. ...I want [my students] to take ownership in where they live, because, in part, it defines who they are" (WA 74). Leslie describes a field trip to the neighborhood cemetery and museum to introduce students to the past of their present surroundings.

A prompt to write in another person's "voice" (used in 2009): While describing her lesson about exploring the neighborhood, Leslie repeatedly writes about "recovering perspectives," listening for "voice," and interviewing to learn "stories." Our prompt in 2009 brought entries by high school students who spent hours interviewing loved ones and distilling their voices into 1000 words.

A prompt to write about the experience of trusting someone: the theme of "trust" and "confidence" runs throughout Leslie's work with Andy Smith and Vicky Walker in TWG.

A prompt to write a personal narrative or journal response: "Journal responses and personal narratives... while promoting self-discovery, also build confidence in writing, no matter what type of literacy background a student brings to the classroom" (138) .

A prompt to write about an artifact. Her students wrote about photographs of their own field trip (WA 81). Artifacts might come from personal or community history.

A prompt to connect the literature of the curriculum to the writer's own experience: Journal responses can be a "bridge between a student's life and the literature of the curriculum" (138).

A prompt to develop writing within a group: Leslie reflected with colleagues Andy Smith and Vicky Walker on the enormous value of forming a small writing group. She realized "that all writers ... can relate to each other on the basis of how challenging writing can be" (TWG 117). She looked for ways to establish small writing communities within her own classroom. (Her essay developing that topic is published in another book, "Making the Classroom Our Place" in *Writing Our Communities*.)



[Writing America: Classroom Literacy and Public Engagement](#)

Edited by Sarah Robbins and Mimi Dyer, foreword by Paul Lauter (2004)

[Teachers' Writing Groups: Collaborative Inquiry and Reflection for Professional Growth](#)

Edited by Sarah Robbins, George Seaman, Kathleen Blake Yancey and Dede Yow (2006)

visit www.KWMP.org

for the prompt, dates, entry forms. Questions? Contact:

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