

Welcome to Atlanta, y'all! We at Kennesaw Mountain Writing Project are excited to have you here! I should also say "Welcome Home".

In *What Happened to Goodbye*, Sarah Dessen writes, "Home wasn't a set house, or a single town on a map. It was wherever the people who loved you were, whenever you were together. Not a place, but a moment, and then another, building on each other like bricks to create a solid shelter that you take with you for your entire life, wherever you may go."

The National Writing Project is a home made up of like-minded people built upon the foundation of a shared love of writing and teaching writing. It is a home that goes with us wherever we are for our entire life. That home brings us all together here today.

Much like the National Writing Project being home for me, Atlanta is my physical home, the place where I grew up. It is here in Atlanta that I discovered my path to the National Writing Project, making being here in this space with all of you today a double homecoming for me.

Home plays a part in all of the decisions I make. I started my career in education teaching high school and then middle school here in Atlanta. In my classroom teaching, I always longed for a community of teachers who wanted to push boundaries, carve out spaces for personal and professional writing, and engage with one another beyond the classroom and faculty meetings.

I did not have that. I did know that this thing called the National Writing Project existed, but there wasn't a site available to me at the time.

When I started by graduate school journey here, I began to think about possibilities beyond classroom teaching and how that might change the ways I interact with students, teachers, and schools. My journey took me away from Atlanta for further graduate studies at Florida State University, where I had my first opportunity to interact with teachers in the context of the National Writing Project.

I saw teachers being transformed in their conversations and practices, and it was exciting to see people pushing back against pre-packaged professional development and carving out spaces for authentic writing and conversation!

This is when I knew that NWP would forever be my professional home. As I have moved from place to place in my career, NWP has been the one constant variable, providing me with a place of professional refuge.

As all of us in this room know, home is where the heart is. The work of the Writing Project gets into our blood, and we crave and grow to need the community it creates and provides.

Working with NWP has not only transformed me as a teacher but as a university faculty member. It has offered me a way to stay connected to the hard, inspiring everyday work of teachers and schools. It has offered me the opportunity to grow and write with teachers professionally, and it has connected me with school administrators to advocate for real, authentic literacy practices embedded within meaningful contexts.

Every Writing Project site has its own story and context – its own home to invite teachers to join. The transformative nature of this work and the authentic connections are what make the NWP Annual Meeting one of our most anticipated and exciting times of the year. The opportunity this network provides to connect with other like-minded professionals in person to take up the powerful and messy work of writing and literacy still blows my mind and leaves me in awe of my colleagues and of teachers. It always brings me home professionally and renews me.

We can only do the work of the National Writing Project by carving out spaces to come together, both locally and nationally. As you come home to NWP and join in the meeting work here, I invite you to pause and reflect on your own journey into and with NWP. Atlanta offers a perfect venue for doing that; it is a locus for advocacy, it is a crossroads of cultures, lives, and journeys.

My KMWP colleagues, Rob Montgomery and Michelle Goodsite and our many TCs welcome you to Atlanta! In addition to all of the exciting events at NWP and NCTE this week, we encourage you to step outside, get some fresh air, and find some inspiration in some of the many local sites including the Civil Rights Museum, the Georgia Aquarium, Centennial Olympic Park, the World of Coke, Sweet Auburn, and Little Five Points. Atlanta is full of inspiration and writing opportunities. We also invite you to join KMWP TCs Friday for a Writing Marathon at some of these locations. Finally we invite you to reach out to any of us during the conference with questions or for conversation. Thank you for coming and have a terrific meeting and time in Atlanta!

Welcome home!