

# TEACHER, WRITER, RESEARCHER

CONNECTICUT WRITING PROJECT-STORRS VOLUME 10, NUMBER 2, SPRING 2018

## THE DIRECTOR'S CORNER

### Real Audiences, Real Purposes, Real Writing

We actually just missed the record we set two years ago for submissions to *Connecticut Student Writers* magazine. In 2016 we had 1,744 submissions, but this year we still had an admirable 1,670 submissions to our 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary issue, and more than 1,300 students, family members, and teachers in Jorgensen Auditorium for Recognition Night on May 10, with some people even in the mezzanine—a first for us.

Keynote speaker Matt de la Peña was amazing. One mom from Simsbury wrote me to say, "Little boys need to be inspired to pursue the language arts and Matt de la Peña was just a breath of fresh air."

For the fifth year in a row, we also hosted a Region-at-Large Judging Site for the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards. About 22 teachers scored approximately 2,200 submissions of writing from 7<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> graders. Of course, submissions from

Connecticut weren't scored by us. Our submissions came from California and Hawaii this year!

An exciting new endeavor was co-sponsoring the Library of Congress' Letters About Literature contest along with the Neag School of Education.

We managed to increase submissions from last year by 53%, up to 1,303 letters from students in fourth through twelfth grade from across Connecticut.

Doug

**CWP teachers scored nearly 5,200 submissions of student writing in three major contests.**

Kaufman, Dani King, and I got our juniors to read and score the submissions.

We recognized 120 students and then hosted nine finalists in an April 20 event at the Capitol building in Hartford attended by several state legislators, including Senator George Logan of Ansonia, who actually graduated from high school with me!

That's nearly 5,200 submissions of student writing in all scored by Connecticut teachers. Quite an impressive number.

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## Record Numbers Turn Out for Newbery Award Winner Matt de la Peña

### More than 1,300 students, family, and teachers fill Jorgensen for 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Event

The critical appeal of Matt de la Peña's first work of children's literature is the reveal. An African American boy and his grandmother leave church and board a bus that heads downtown, but many readers are surprised to find their own prejudices revealed when we learn that the twosome are headed downtown not to return home but to volunteer in a soup kitchen. It is this surprise, in addition to its celebration of diversity and compassion, that earned *Last Stop on Market Street* not just the 2016 Newbery Award and Caldecott Honor, but the National Council of Teachers of English's award for Intellectual Freedom.

De la Peña spoke before a record crowd of more than 1,300 K-12 students and their family members and teachers at *Connecticut Student Writers Recognition Night* on May 10 at the Jorgenson Center for the Performing Arts. The event honored the more than 400 students published or honored in the 30<sup>th</sup> edition of *Connecticut Student Writers*.



*A handful of fathers stood at the back and a few families had to take to the mezzanine.*

the first time my son age 11 really connected with your guest speaker. Matt de la Peña really connected with my boys. Before the readings I let my sons pick one book to buy. I confess that the advertisement for Matt de la Peña's speech with the kindergarten book had me thinking—'Okay, he writes kindergarten books. Might be good but my boys probably won't connect because they are too old.' But was I surprised! During Matt's speech, my oldest begged me to go back to the book sale before his speech ended to get a copy of *Mexican Whiteboy* because he was worried that they would sell out. As luck would have it, my son got the last copy!"

To see or download copies of *Connecticut Student Writers*, or to access the submission form for next year, go to <https://cwp.uconn.edu/ct-student-writers-magazine-2/>. To learn more about Matt de la Peña's work, visit his website at <http://mattdelapena.com/>. To hear or read a version of Matt's talk, visit NPR at <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/11/11/243960103/a-reluctant-reader-turns-ya-author-for-tough-teens>.



*Matt de la Peña charms the crowd.*

About 1,670 students from nearly 400 teachers from more than 200 schools submitted their writing or art to this year's magazine, just shy of the record of 1,744 set two years ago.

De la Peña gave a moving talk that riffed on a piece he has published about his own development as a reader and writer, and touches upon his relationship with his Spanish-speaking father. His message resonated strongly with many of the boys in the audience.

One mother wrote CWP Director Jason Courtmanche a moving email. In it she wrote, "I have two boys ages 11 and 9. We have been going to [Recognition Night] for three years. This year for the first time my son age 11 really connected with your guest speaker. Matt de la Peña really connected with my boys. Before the readings I let my sons pick one book to buy. I confess that the advertisement for Matt de la Peña's speech with the kindergarten book had me thinking—'Okay, he writes kindergarten books. Might be good but my boys probably won't connect because they are too old.' But was I surprised! During Matt's speech, my oldest begged me to go back to the book sale before his speech ended to get a copy of *Mexican Whiteboy* because he was worried that they would sell out. As luck would have it, my son got the last copy!"

## Celebrating 100 Years of Wilcox Technical High School

### Michelle Amann's ECE English students chronicle school history

by Julia Stobbie, CWP Writing Intern

Michelle Amann is both a CWP Teacher-Consultant and a new Early College Experience English teacher. This year was the first year Wilcox Tech offered ECE English. It also happened to be the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the school, and the year of the first graduating class to have spent four years in the newly renovated building.



Photo courtesy of Downes Construction Company

#### **Where did this idea originate from? What inspired you to create this project?**

The school will be graduating its 100<sup>th</sup> class this year. We were looking for a way to celebrate such a big milestone. In class, the students have been learning about identity in ethnicity, religion, gender, disability, and place. Therefore, the idea was not too hard to generate. The administration and principal have also been very supportive about the project.

We used the "Luck of the Draw" system that determined the years of inquiry for students. The students are writing and collecting information from the community about the history of the school. This allows students the opportunity to engage with people and their surroundings. The project is both special and meaningful to me as I grew up in Meriden, CT.

#### **Can you tell me a little about yourself?**

In 2000, I took part in Jason Courtmanche's Summer Institute program, which I encourage others to go to. It's the best professional development I have ever done. The Early College Experience (ECE) program has inspired me and helped me develop new ideas as I keep on learning. The ECE program is also a great resource to use. I have learned a lot from Jason which I hope to portray in my classes. This is the first year ECE has been at Wilcox Tech, and so far the opportunities it offers have been rewarding to me and my students.

#### **What do your students think about the project?**

My students were excited to be assigned this project. It is a great learning experience for both myself and my students, because they teach me something new every day. They really enjoyed learning about their school and town's history. This is a special group of students I am working with; they think outside of the box

and have a lot to offer the class. The students have also made great connections with other people in the community.

### **How as the community been involved with the project?**

A newspaper article was written about the project, and immediately alumni and the community got involved. The school has hosted special guest speakers. For example, a survivor of the Holocaust, a representative from the Historical Society, and more. The citizens of Meriden are such wonderful people. Their efforts to discover artifacts and contribute historical content to the project has been very beneficial for the students. They are incredible people who helped the students with their research.

### **What is the academic goal that they are working towards in the process of making this project?**

As an English teacher, the project has a major writing component. The students recorded their initial research in an annotated bibliography. Then after every guest we've had, the class was divided into groups to complete two tasks: one group wrote the thank you cards to be sent to the recipients (I'm a stickler for old-fashioned etiquette); and the other group wrote articles which were sent to our "webmaster," who selects the "best" article to be published on our school's website. Other work includes: a brief history of Wilcox, which will be published in the school yearbook, an advertisement for the event, an expository essay on Wilcox's identity, the presentation, and a reflection.

For more on the project, and a link to a *Record-Journal* article, go here: <http://wilcox.cttech.org/news/mar2018/100yearsofwilcox.htm>.

## Amy Nocton leads Democratic Dialogue Project at EO Smith

### Grant from UConn's Dodd Center helps Spanish teacher lead discussion on mental health

by Molly Tricoli, CWP Writing Intern

Amy Nocton (SI 14) teaches Spanish at E.O. Smith High School in Mansfield. With a grant from UConn's Dodd Center, she lead the E.O. Smith Democratic Dialogue Project, which this year engaged the school and surrounding community in conversations on the issue of mental health.

### **How and why did you get involved?**

Last year I worked closely with Joe Goldman to create a week-long symposium on Race and Gender Equality. Joe was definitely the lead teacher, but encouraged a team of us to bring in speakers and presenters to talk to the students about race and gender issues. The week culminated in presentations by two panels on these sensitive topics.

I have always been social justice. While at UConn, *las Américas* program in lived in a community and hygiene and oral rehydration scholarship to Cuba as one of United States Student a number of leaders in Castro's

I think it has all made us more aware of the importance of discovering what people's shared values are.

interested in human rights and I participated in the *Amigos de Guanajuato*, México where I helped build latrines, taught oral therapy. I also traveled on a full fourteen students from the Association. While there, we met cabinet. Closer to home (and

also while still at UConn), I spent two summers working at the Hole in the Wall Gang Camp. In my early years teaching, I had my students work with Cuban migrants. Later, once I started traveling with students, I made certain that my students and I participated in activities to "give back" to the places we were lucky enough to visit. We visited orphanages and spent time playing with children, as well as bringing medical supplies, toiletries, clothing and the like. We visited a needy school in Ecuador. We painted a school in Costa Rica and spent two days working at a wildlife refuge there



*EO Smith students lead teachers and community members in discussion.*

(in a deluge). My father and mother both played a role in my desire to participate in meaningful change for the communities I find myself in. **How effective was the project in teaching students about civic responsibility and leadership?**

I think it has been effective. We've already had about ten students lead conversations at Mansfield Middle School (MMS) after the Holocaust play *I Never Saw Another Butterfly*. I have been impressed with the poise and talents of the students

as they have practiced deliberation. The true tests are yet to come, though!

On May 14, students will lead teachers in discussions about Mental Health. Later (dates to be announced), students will lead peers and then community members in similar discussions.

#### **What was the most surprising/ memorable part of the project?**

How quickly and readily so many students picked up the skills of moderating. The goal of moderating is to be neutral and do more listening than speaking. I have watched many of the teachers who have also been trained struggle with this. It's not easy to do, but many of our students have embraced the skills quickly and, seemingly, easily. I was immensely proud of the students who volunteered at MMS after the play and also amazed with the students who agreed to speak on camera about their experiences this year in the project (a video blog was put together as part of the data gathering for the funding).

#### **Has the project impacted your perception on the role of teaching? If so, how has it affected you?**

I think it has improved my listening skills. I also know it has strengthened the ways in which I approach discussions. I have always done my best to relinquish control of conversations to my students, and the practices I've picked up in the various trainings I've been to now have absolutely shaped how I engage with my students during discussions. It's been really invigorating to be a part of this project this year.

Additionally, through meeting other fellows, I have been able to create unique experiences with other projects. For example, on April 10 and 11, Mary Mahoney spent hours at EO Smith recording students for her project on Audio Shelfies and Bibliotherapy. To hear her project, visit: [www.audioshelfie.com](http://www.audioshelfie.com).

#### **What else have you and the students learned during this process?**

I think it has all made us more aware of the importance of discovering what people's shared values are. Appreciating values is key to coming to compromise and to moving forward in spite of obstacles. After our program our students have opted to deliberate on Mental Health and what

we, as a community, might do to support each other and obtain better wellbeing. We are looking for actions to come out of our conversations.

I know that we all wish we had more time, too, to really refine our issues guide on Mental Health and to practice! Life is just so busy, though, so we all have done the best we can with the time we were given. I'm trying to be realistic about what the programs are going to look like this year, and know that there is room for growth. That said, I feel really fortunate to be working with such talented teachers and students.

Finally, I owe a great deal to Dr. Glenn Mitoma, Director of UConn's Dodd Research Center, for his support and guidance during this process. He has been extraordinarily patient and encouraging. I have learned a great deal from him about everything from grant writing to writing an issues guide to communicating and analyzing our work. Working with the other fellows and Glenn has been fantastic professional development.

### **Is there anything specific that you would like to add or talk about?**

If we are lucky enough to get continued funding, we hope to continue the work that we started this year, and are also considering looking into exploring more in the way of how we might build empathy within our classrooms and community. To that end, I have been very curious about seeing whether or not we might be able to work with *Narrative 4* (<http://narrative4.com/>) and then work that into storytelling and writing ... We shall see!

## **Tiffany Smith Departs EO Smith to Take New Position at EASTCONN**

### **Becomes new Literacy Education Specialist**

*by Molly Tricomi, CWP Intern*

Tiffany Smith (SI 10) has recently begun her new position as an educational specialist, or literacy consultant. She works in various projects based on the needs of the district. EASTCONN serves the northeast region, assisting schools when they need help in professional development. Smith explains that there has been a shift over time from professional development to embedded "professional learning." This shift has been reflected in the movement towards a teamwork framework of education professionals in which reflection is the major influence.

Smith explains that EASTCONN has promoted the increased frequency of visits to schools during the academic year to keep educational professionals motivated and on-track. They can return to those intended outcomes much more frequently, and check in to measure progress. Smith urges this especially, as she states, that if teachers don't implement what they learned in the immediate future, "it's not going to become a part of their practice, and they need to see the value in that."

When asked about what she hopes to improve about the professional learning environment, Smith remarked again on the importance of reflection. She wishes to make room, time, and space for teachers to reflect on their practice. The day-to-day work of teachers is so demanding, and they are making so many decisions, Smith would love to provide opportunities for them to reflect on what they are already doing well. She also adds that it is essential to balance between reflecting on what they are doing well with the notion that continuous improvement is their intended goal. She also hopes to improve learning outcomes for students.

Smith discussed various tactics that schools have used to improve learning for their students. Some schools have implemented resources such as reading and writing workshops, student-centered learning work, and other opportunities for support. Support between the different schools is also critical, Smith says. She believes that making connections between the schools is how one can "improve the schools on the whole level, as it creates a greater learning environment".

Smith also opens up about her favorite part of the job: stepping out of her comfort zone. She remarks that "It's uncomfortable to put yourself in situations that are out of your comfort zone. I recognize that it is important, and I enjoy seeing myself improve in skills and areas that I could not have seen myself doing. I really like learning from all the teachers that I am working with, and I am learning a lot from visiting the schools."

Smith ends the conversation with some advice for teachers. She says that when it comes to good teaching, it is a matter of teaching beyond the test. It is crucial to find ways to address the learning targets and the competencies that come with state testing, for example, while simultaneously finding ways to stretch beyond those expectations and incorporating choice for the students. In addition, she mentions that feedback is essential to positive learning. She says that "we underestimate the power of feedback; we don't always give the right kind of feedback that will help people improve." She adds with this last point that "Feedback, whether it is peer, metacognition, or from the teacher, can be extremely helpful."

## New TC Melissa Batulevitz Inaugurates New Peer Writing Center Mansfield Middle School joins Ashford School as feeders for EO Smith program

The writing center has impacted our middle school in such a positive way. After our successful launch party, the center has been talked about around the student body. We have many students returning to the center and rebooking appointments. Student tutors have felt like they have become leaders and have also expressed how it's increased their confidence as writers, as well. Students who come to the center have felt like they can continue the work they worked on with their tutor. We have trained our 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade tutors to help student tutees with goal-setting. Students come to the center to get help with not only their writing assignments in language arts but also for their content area work as well. 8<sup>th</sup> grade students have come to the center for assistance with their high school applications and students in grade 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> have come to the center to get help with their History Day projects.

There are two sixth-grade teachers and a seventh-grade teacher who help me run the center. We held an after-school club on Tuesdays where UConn writing center tutors' help and training have been vital in preparing our tutors for their sessions. Teachers at MMS have expressed their willingness to help, and we are looking to have content area teachers of social studies and science come in to teach the tutors how to write lab reports and how to compose writing in those different classes.

In conclusion, the writing center at MMS has not only brought student confidence to MMS but has also built a foundation that MMS is a community of writers at our school. Teachers are supportive of the center and are looking forward to seeing the center grow. We are looking to expand the center in having the teachers sign up for the "Rent a Tutor" program and looking for ways for tutors to help during different blocks of time during the day.

For more, read here: <https://www.thechronicle.com/stories/20180310WRITING.php>.

## QVCC's Jon Andersen Published Second Book of Poetry

### *Augur* wins David Martinson-Meadowhawk Prize

by Molly Tricoli, CWP Writing Intern

Poet and professor Jon Andersen (SI 09) took time out of his day to discuss his recently published book of poems. *Augur* is Andersen's second full-length book, and has been chosen as the recipient of the David Martinson-Meadowhawk Prize. <http://qvcc.edu/faculty-members-new-poetry-book-honored/>.

#### **Congratulations, first of all, on your publication of *Augur*. Can you tell me about what inspired you to write this book of poems?**

I try to let as much as possible inspire poems: love, rage, joy, curiosity. The poems are also inspired by my late father, my mother, brother, wife, sons, teachers, and students. And they're inspired by quirks of language, environmental activists in Central America, war-torn landscapes, camping trips, basketball, and lawn fungus. My process involves writing a lot of poetry over time and then looking at what is emerging in those poems as potential connective tissue. It's illuminating and sometimes startling to look back on what I've

I was trying to make sense of a world increasingly complicated by social forces that are not necessarily apparent.

written and discover themes that I did not necessarily intend. What really struck me when I started to look at the work collected in this book was how in so many of the poems, even the very personal ones, I was trying to make sense of a world increasingly complicated by social forces that are not necessarily apparent. The augurs of ancient Rome were seers, charged with reading natural signs to make decisions about courses of action. I realized that a lot of what I was doing, was, metaphorically speaking, trying to read the signs. Once I had that idea, once I knew I was creating a collection called *Augur*, I began to write poems with this metaphor in mind, and wrote towards the "holes"— topics that I needed to address but hadn't yet.

There is a UConn connection here, too. The poet James Scully, who is a UConn alum and a Professor Emeritus from the English Department, as well as a very important teacher for both me and my wife, Denise Abercrombie (SI 07), wrote not so long ago about a couplet from William Blake's "Auguries of Innocence": "We are led to Believe a Lie/ When we see not Thro the Eye." Scully noted that Blake was telling us to look beyond mere surface appearances to really take in context and deeper meaning. When we just go with first or easy impressions in making a judgement about a personal action or a political cause, we are in danger of not really understanding what the heck is going on, and may end up victims or unwitting accomplices. It felt meaningful to reconnect with the ideas of an old teacher this way in the book.

#### **Congratulations on winning the David Martinson-Meadowhawk Prize! How will publishing with Red Dragonfly Press affect your career as a writer?**

Thank you! I don't know about my career as a writer, but I feel fortunate to have found a press that really cares about the work. Scott King, the founder and publisher, takes bookmaking and publishing seriously; he wants artifacts that do justice to the words of the authors. Also, there is a whole community of authors from the press, so I feel lucky. I am not just some client and the book is not some disconnected product or subject of marketing.



**What are your hopes for your writing in the future?**

My biggest hope is that I keep learning and improving for as long as I can. I feel as if I expanded my range a bit further in this book, writing in modes and forms that I didn't have facility with before. The Connecticut Writing Project premise of "teacher as writer" will continue to be important for me. As a teacher of writing, I always want to be a student of writing. Kurt Vonnegut wrote that "to practice any art, no matter how well or badly, is a way to make your soul grow." So, if nothing else, maybe if I keep writing I can grow my soul a little.

**What have you learned through your years of experience in writing?**

I couldn't even begin to catalog everything I've learned about myself and about the world through writing. Meaningful writing is not just a matter of recording, or even accurately conveying, an idea or an experience; it's a way of finding out and a way of generating new understandings and experiences. Writing itself is an experience. The old writing advice "write what you know" can be misunderstood as meaning "only write about what you have experienced." The advice is also an imperative *to know!* To find out about ideas, beliefs, realities beyond the ones you've already happened to run across in your necessarily limited life.

## Kate Craven Travels Heaven and Earth for her Students

### Ashford teacher compiles an amazing set of professional experiences

Kate Craven (SI 12) of Ashford School wound up experiencing a lot of unique professional development opportunities and grants this year. A couple of them are:

First there was Space Camp, which, among other things, allowed her students to communicate with astronauts on the International Space Station. They wrote a blog you can access here: <http://ashfordadventures.weebly.com>.

Then, with a grant from the 2017 Fund for Teachers Fellow, Kate was able to follow the Brothers Grimm from Munich to Hamburg. And she wrote a blog about that experience, too. Get it here: <http://teacherstravel.weebly.com>.

Lastly, Kate is super excited to have been selected as a 2018 National Geographic Grosvenor Fellow. She got to spend a week in DC at Nat Geo Headquarters getting trained for it. You can read about that here:

<https://www.nationalgeographic.org/education/programs/grosvenor-teacher-fellows/2018-fellows/>.

## OTHER AWARDS, GRANTS, PUBLICATIONS, NEW JOBS, AND COOL HAPPENINGS

\*Vicky Nordlund (SI 95) of Rockville High and Danielle Pieratti (SI 14) of South Windsor High co-taught the MTHM's Neighborhood Studios Program this past summer.

\*Susan Laurencot (SI 15) won Teacher of the Year for Montville High School and received a Fund for Teachers Grant to study in Italy.

\*Former GA Sara Austin took accepted a position as Visiting Assistant Professor in Residence of English at Miami University of Ohio.

\*Shirley Cowles (SI 12) of Sage Park Middle School in Windsor received a Windsor Education Foundation Grant, and then accepted a position at Granby Memorial Middle School for next year as their new Enrichment Coach and Teacher.

\*Jacqueline Kremer (SI 16) of Huntington Elementary School in Norwich received her Sixth Year degree in Remedial Reading and Language Arts from the Neag School of Education and a Reading Specialist certification.

\*Kelly Shea (CRWP 17, C3WP 18) won Teacher of the Year for Manchester.

\*Shannon Bollard (SI 17) accepted a new position at East Hartford Middle School.

\*Emily DeFord (SI 14) accepted a new position at E.O. Smith High School.

## Letters About Literature Celebrates Students' Love of Books

CWP joins Neag School of Education as state Sponsor



CWP Director Jason Courtmanche and Neag Associate Professor of Curriculum and Instruction Doug Kaufman hand an award to EO Smith's Minahil Farooqi, who was one of nine state finalists in the Letters About Literature contest.

The Library of Congress sponsored the 25<sup>th</sup> annual Letters About Literature event this year, and the CWP partnered with the Neag School of Education as the state sponsor. Together, Jason Courtmanche of the Writing Project and Doug Kaufman and Dani King from the Teacher Education program in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction increased submissions to over 1,300. There were 120 students recognized and 9 celebrated as state semi-finalists. Three advanced to the national contest.

The event was held on April 20 at the State Capitol Building in Hartford. The finalists and their letters can be read here: <https://education.uconn.edu/2018/03/26/connecticuts-2018-letters-about-literature-contest-winners-named/>.

The Connecticut Writing Project (CWP)-Storrs, one of the oldest sites of the National Writing Project, was established at the University of Connecticut in 1982. The CWP offers a variety of professional development services to teachers and school districts, as well as a state-wide student writing contest. Through its annual Invitational Summer Institute, the CWP offers opportunities for professional growth to teachers in all disciplines who recognize the worth of using writing as a means of learning any subject matter. Improving writing skills improves thinking skills and thus leads to higher levels of achievement in all areas.

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Teachers are encouraged to apply for an Aetna Fellowship to attend the 2019 Summer Institute, or to nominate a colleague for a Fellowship. The 2019 Summer Institute will take place this June 23 till July 19. Participants can earn 6 graduate credits in English or a stipend for professional development attendance. The Fellowships will cover the majority of the cost. The English graduate programs (PhD, MA, MA for Teachers) as well as most Neag graduate programs accept the credits. **The application deadline is March 17.** Please see our website at <https://cwp.uconn.edu/summer-institute/> or email [cwp@uconn.edu](mailto:cwp@uconn.edu) with questions.

### CWP Staff and Program Leaders

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