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# Good Things Come to Those Who Attend the NCTE Annual Convention

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# Good Things Come to Those Who Attend the NCTE Annual Convention

*The Cultivating New  
Voices program made a  
significant difference in  
this member's life.*

**M**y hands were shaking and my stomach felt queasy, but I managed to walk to the middle of the floor of a crowded conference room in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and stand where Caroline Clark, my advisor, had positioned herself a few minutes earlier. I wanted to exude the same confidence she had but could not pull it off. It was my first presentation at the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Annual Convention, and I was there to talk about what happened when I tried to teach multicultural literature in my high school English classes. One day I found a letter in my classroom that accused me of making students in my predominantly white classes feel guilty about past injustices when I shared texts by writers such as Maya Angelou and Gary Paulsen. Embarrassed and confused about the unsigned letter condemning my efforts, I wanted to talk about it, to make sense of it. Yet, there I was virtually tongue-tied, until I looked around the room and saw friendly, welcoming faces. This experience led me to present at other Annual Conventions, where I met people who helped me grow as a scholar.

## Connecting with CNV Fellows

One of the friendly faces at my first presentation belonged to Valerie Kinloch. After the presentation, Valerie and I talked, and she told me she was a part of a mentoring program called Cultivating New Voices Among Scholars of Color (CNV) and invited me to meet with a few of the CNV fellows in the hotel lounge later that evening. We listened

to music, danced, and talked about research and teaching. CNV was founded in 2000, and Valerie was among its first group of fellows, so I asked lots of questions about how I might get involved. On the trip back to Ohio, I mentioned the program to Caroline, who knew all about it. "You should apply," she said. "I'll write a letter on your behalf." She did, too, and a year later, I was accepted into the program.

While I was a CNV fellow, NCTE staff member Dale Allender was the director, succeeded by Maria Fránquiz, and my mentor was Nancy Tolson, though Carol Lee, JoBeth Allen, and Arnetta Ball were also helpful and inspiring. At least one CNV meeting per year was held at the NCTE Annual Convention. When I was not busy attending conference sessions looking for ways to improve my teaching, I was seeking out opportunities to offer service within NCTE. This was not always easy because I was an emerging English educator. Joseph Rodriguez, another CNV fellow to whom I am indebted, helped me with my efforts. From the very beginning, Joseph pulled me along, making sure I worked on proposals for the Annual Convention, recommending me for service opportunities within NCTE, and inviting me to serve on the NCTE Committee Against Racism and Bias in the Teaching of English.

## Connecting with Subjects

While my dissertation was almost behind me, I was coached by CNV mentors who encouraged me as I widened my research beyond the study of black women's young adult literature and began

to interview authors. I had become curious about how authors write and how their process could be passed on to middle school and high school students (Atwell; Murray). At the 2002 NCTE Annual Convention in Atlanta, I stood in a long line waiting for young adult author Jacqueline Woodson to autograph a book for my son. While she signed, and I gushed about how much my son and I appreciate her work, I gathered the courage to request an interview. “I’m working on my dissertation about young adult literature by black women writers. Would it be possible—could I—um, may I interview you?”

Woodson stopped signing my books and looked up at me. “Sure, I’m going to be in Ohio visiting family around Thanksgiving. Give me a call.” Though I didn’t get the opportunity to interview Woodson face-to-face during the Thanksgiving holiday, I have interviewed her several times and published an article and a children’s book about her life and work.

Something similar happened at the 2006 NCTE Annual Convention in Nashville. Though I had met Sharon M. Draper at Ohio State University while I was a graduate student, it was my conversation with her at the Convention that turned my scholarship toward educational biography (Kridel 8). While I sat with an audience of more than 100 excited fans and listened as Draper talked about *Copper Sun*, her latest novel, I decided to talk to her about possibly writing a book-length study of her writing and teaching. Draper was cooperative and encouraging throughout the process, urging me to enhance my teaching, scholarship, and service.

### Connecting with Others

When new scholars join an organization as large as NCTE, the size of its Conventions can be daunt-



CNV fellows meet in St. Louis in March 2011.

ing. I was fortunate. After my first presentation in 2001, NCTE members embraced me and helped me find my way in the field. Now it is my turn to assist others. 

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