

When Debbi Laidley was appointed as NSRF's new Co-Director, Katy Kelly of the National Center took some time to talk with her about her background, early experiences with NSRF work and hopes for the future.

Katy: Debbi, can you tell us a bit about your background and how it has shaped the educator you are today?

Debbi: I don't know if I can talk about my background without talking about my roots. I grew up in the deep South, in Arkansas, in the 60's and 70's when schools in my area were entirely segregated. When I was in 7th grade, we started what was called, "Freedom of Choice." It was supposed to be a voluntary integration program. What it actually meant was, for the first time, children and families who were in black schools could now have the "Freedom of Choice" to attend white schools, that almost invariably, had better facilities. Everything was better and everything was up to date.

It also meant that white students also had the "Freedom of Choice" to attend the schools that had traditionally been all black. As you can imagine, the schools that had been traditionally all black, remained so. A really small handful of black students went to do the voluntary integration at white schools.

K: Were you one of them?

D: I was one of them. My mom taught, up until two years before this, at the same black school that I attended. She had been one of the black teachers that had been forcibly required to go teach at the white school two years earlier, because that had been kind of the easing-in of this whole thing.

You take a few black teachers and sprinkle them into white schools and a few white teachers and sprinkle them into black schools, and get people to start thinking, "OK, this is going to happen, and you can get used to it, see, these people are OK." Mom was one of those, "OK," pioneers. I, and some of my friends were some of these first little seventh-graders who were pioneers.

Because of the difficulty of that whole period of time and the discrimination that I experienced, both subtle and overt, I think I put a tremendous emphasis in my life on issues of equity everywhere. I see, I worry about, and I know that there is not equity, and it is right in front of my face all of the time.

One piece of it that I really am concerned about is the issue of community, or lack of. In black elementary schools there was such a tremendous sense of community; everybody



Debbi Laidley

owned everybody. We knew we belonged and that people cared.

When I hit seventh grade, that all changed. I didn't belong and I wasn't wanted. That lack of community is so harmful. I hear people talk about small learning communities and tossing the word, "community," around and doing things with educational decisions that superficially address the window coverings and structures that should lead to small learning communities. However, I don't see an emphasis on what makes a community – how you create that belonging, that ownership of one another, that caring. Those things I really notice in our profession.

K: What did you notice about NSRF when you first heard about it or when you first became involved with it. Did anything surprise you?

(continued on page 16)

NSRF Mission Statement

The mission of the National School Reform Faculty is to foster educational and social equity by empowering all people involved with schools to work collaboratively in reflective democratic communities that create and support powerful learning experiences for everyone.

CONNECTIONS

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Interview with Debbi...
(continued from page 3)

D: I think the thing that surprised me was how connected it was to things I had already been doing at my previous school, that I didn't know had been connected to NSRF.

I was a teacher at Foshay Learning Center, and at that school, we were using lots and lots of protocols, examining student work. We had a State of California Grant called SB 1274. That grant used, "the California Protocol" as a tool to examine our work. It was the way that our school, as a whole school and in small groups, looked at the impact of the changes we were making. I had been doing that for years, working with hundreds of teachers, on our government structure, leadership and at every decision that we made. I was just so shocked to see where this came from.

K: I have never heard of the California Protocol.

D: It's the Tuning Protocol! I was amazed. I was blown away. I thought, "You know, I had no idea that this is what we were doing." I didn't know the genesis of what we were doing.

K: When did you first hear about NSRF?

D: I was a faculty member with the UCLA School Management Program. It was working on improving LA Unified and the surrounding metropolitan area that were just finishing up their fifth year with Annenberg and the LA-Annenberg Metropolitan Project (LAAMP), and both had been doing CFG work. These projects were going to be closing and LAAMP began looking around for organizations that they felt confident would carry-forth the work of CFGs.

K: I see, and they approached the UCLA School Management Program?

D: Yes, and asked if we would take that on. Patricia Averette took about

eight of us at the School Management Program under her wing and put us through a week-long seminar. She gave us an intense version of a facilitator's training over period of weeks. With that and with her ongoing support, we began to roll out our first CFG coaches institutes. She supported us through that, coached us, gave us feedback, and we began to make adjustments and began to work with the NSRF. It struck me as a way to really create true community. I was selected as the person to spearhead the effort for UCLA SMP on this.

K: Last year you moved from working full-time at the UCLA SMP into the LA School District. What are you doing with the school district, now?

D: This year, I am acting coordinator for secondary literacy. Our local district has about 65,000 students. In the secondary we currently serve seven comprehensive middle and high schools and we have five more that are either starting up right now, this year, or will be in the next three years.

K: What do you do?

D: We're a professional development arm around literacy. We support teachers and literacy in a few ways. The central district has what is called, a secondary literacy plan. It is a very clear and focused plan that looks at content literacy. It takes the fact that so many students at the secondary level are really struggling readers and focuses on those specific strategies that we can use, and coach one another to use effectively, to help readers do what they need to do in order to become strong readers. We have a group of coaches and we have literacy cadres. Our work is to coach those coaches and to work directly with those cadres and directly with the school-site teachers.

K: You use the word, "coaches." How

does the coaching you are talking about relate to CFG coaching?

D: It relates really well for me. I think it's just lucky that it does, because CFG coaching is not the design of the LAUSD. The coaches in our area have, prior to my joining the team, received training in cognitive coaching, there is of course a link there, and have received training in specific literacy strategies. The place where they are now, the CFG-type coaching is really beneficial to them because it provides them with a really systematic way to coach one another. Many of them have just been together now long enough, this is starting their third year of working together, that they're really ready to start looking really directly at one another's work, so we have some protocols ready for them on how to do that well.

The other portion of how CFG work connects is that our local district is really focusing district-wide on the use of protocols when looking at student work. We've been training and supporting that.

K: Have any of those coaches had a chance to go through coaches seminars?

D: A number of them have, and it's really fortunate that when I returned to the district that I had so many already existing relationships in so many schools, because the people had gone through coaches training, and there were people out there already either using protocols in small groups as it kind of came up as a need in their schools or who are officially seriously coaching a CFG.

K: I want to ask you about your personal CFG experiences. Do you have any memories of coaching your first CFG?

D: I do. It's about the CFG that I have been a member of the longest, the

one that is entering its third year. The thing I remember most is how excited we were about the fact that there were really smart people in the room. And together, we were going to have the luxury of time to sit and learn together. At the same time there was that feeling of tentativeness. “Am I really going to be safe? What do we have to do to make sure that we’re safe?” We all worked in the same building, at that time, and we knew that each of us had alliances with people in the building who were not a member of our group. There were concerns about confidentiality. There were concerns about, just how honest we can be, really. There were concerns about making sure that we were clear about what we wanted to get out of this, that the time was not a waste of time.

K: Had you been part of a CFG before you coached that one?

D: No. I had learned from my experience of having used protocols extensively at my school and having gone through transition work later on from Annenberg to the UCLA SMP.

K: What did you learn from this experience?

D: The thing I learned the most is the importance of being honest with new coaches in coach’s institute and about how much we’re learning that we don’t know. Even now, with as many institutes as we do at UCLA, and even with having been a CFG member for going on three years with a really stable CFG, coaching two others, and being a member of a second one, there are still so many things I don’t know, that I am finding out, and I am amazed at all of this work. I feel that I am just as green as I was when I coached my first CFG!

K: Can you talk a little more about learning how much you don’t know?

D: I think it really has put us in good stead that we’ve really had to be humble, because we truly couldn’t even possibly think that we knew anything, going in. We just continue to feel that same way, that we have had lots more experiences, and still know that there is a lot that we don’t know, and that same sense of humility and wonder and questioning, but then hopefulness that we could think of that first institute. I think we still have that and I think that is what makes our institutes good at UCLA.

K: You talk about a sense of hopefulness. What hope do you have for schools now?

D: The hope that I see comes from a heightened sense of awareness of subtle discriminations and not just a willingness, but a sense of responsibility, to not let that be OK. The example that comes to my mind is watching students on TV from schools in east Los Angeles, which are the schools I serve. They were protesting in front of the school about the number of army and other military recruiters that more or less stay at our schools. They wanted to know why these people are practically camped-out on our school site, when they’re not visible at the schools in the San Fernando Valley and the affluent areas. I think a few years ago, students I was working with may have not been willing to say that or to take action around it or may not have even noticed that.

The other thing that gives me hope is seeing teachers and certain administrators feel the impact that a true CFG or truly using CFG processes can have on their school. The story that comes to mind is about high school kids who noticed something going on with their teachers who had been to Critical Friends Institutes. The teachers had started coming into one

another’s rooms and watching each other. The kids noticed that the teachers were starting to use similar practices. One of these teachers told me a kid came up to her and said, “Miss..., are you guys learning something?” (laughing) and that gave me hope.

K: (laughing) That’s wonderful. Debbi, looking back over your growing involvement in NSRF – which began with the “California Protocol” at the Foshay Learning Center and grew rapidly as your positions within LA Unified and UCLA SMP evolved, and even included co-hosting the NSRF Winter Meeting in 2003, your recent acceptance of the role of co-directorship in NSRF isn’t that surprising! What are you going to do as a director of NSRF?

D: (laughing) I don’t know, yet.

K: (laughing) What do you hope you might do?

D: You know, this is probably going to sound funny because it’s not going to sound very...specific. Again, it goes back to that thing about community for me. As I listen to our group on the listserv, in groups of three, in groups of twelve, any group that I’m a part of in NSRF, the thing that I notice is a need to really pay attention to communication. So that’s where my focus lies right now, in really listening and watching to see what are the dynamics of communication. I think it’s not a coincidence that, “communicating” and, “community” are practically the same word. That’s my focus. I don’t know how that will play out, but that’s my interest. ■

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