

Winter Meeting Reflections

Kim Carter, New Hampshire

“So, do you like your new job?”
“Less than 50 % of the time,” I blurted wearily.

“That’s not good, Kim.”

Arriving at the gate for my flight to the 2004 Winter Meeting, I was greeted by Jim and Peggy, two long-time colleagues from Souhegan High School. Jim was asking me about my new endeavor, leading a small “public school of choice” that was in its second year. Jim had been my first CFG coach and in true coach manner, he had just asked, intentionally or otherwise, the probing question that was to define my Winter Meeting experience.

NSRF work has always been deeply meaningful for me, structured to encourage dialogue about issues of profound personal and professional significance. Over the years I’ve found it is largely NSRF colleagues with whom I have developed lasting bonds, built on foundations of shared passion for and commitment to the power of education. It had, however, been a few years since I had been able to attend a Winter Meeting and I was uncertain about my place in that particular professional community. I planned to stay in the background, keeping my struggles private, listening carefully to others and spending my evenings reflecting on my ability to sustain the work I’ve been involved in for the last two years.

The opening session on day one sent a powerful message, directly in conflict with my plan to keep my struggle “private.” In her introduction of Victor Cary, RoLesia Holman stated, “Victor taught me you can’t be effective in this work without doing it AND dealing with it in your mind and in your heart.” The message for me was clear: my time at Winter Meeting was very much about my own personal struggle.

Victor’s presentation about his work with BayCES, the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools, resonated within my mind and throughout

my being. “Leadership means taking responsibility for what matters to you.” In sharing his work with the 350+ educators present, Victor spoke words that shot straight to the core of my struggle. I listened intently, feeling in that opening presentation I received full value for my time and investment in Winter Meeting. I could have gone home content in the greater clarity about WHY I do the work I do.

But knowing the Why, however helpful, isn’t sufficient. And so, it turned out, every single activity I engaged in over the next three days held its own set of meanings and implications, offering me the What, the How, and above all, the What If of leading for equity. The World Café brought me two young high school men whose words of encouragement and symbolic drawings hang on my office wall. Workshops provided new protocols, insights, and diverse perspectives. Lunchtime conversations offered up essential questions to guide my explorations. The opening day Kiva participants, Jennifer Nails’s poignant portrayal of one sixth-grade girl’s indomitable spirit in “Lylice,” and Dave Lehman’s musical testimony to Nancy Mohr, gave witness to the power of the human life.

And Home Group. Home group provided the sanctuary for me to share my question “Am I strong enough for this work?” And the individuals present offered space, patience, witness, knowledge, experience, insights, and more patience. They allowed me my zone of dissonance, replete with strong emotions and confusion. At the same time, I felt I was able to offer

perspectives for others’ questions, not just focusing on myself. For the three days we were together, we were a community, in the BayCES definition: “Community acknowledges discomfort, upset, and fears, as well as the longing and the love that is deep within every human being.”

My notes provide me with a wealth of continuing explorations, from feedback directed specifically to my dilemma (pay attention to the difference between strategy and tactics; identify the allies who can help do the storytelling; pay attention to sharing ownership; work toward a legacy of sustainability) to questions and reflections of others (What am I afraid of? What is my theory of inaction as well?)



Artwork from World Café which hangs on Kim’s wall

I want to give them my strength, not my fears. A quote from James Baldwin: “To act is to be committed. To be committed is to be in danger.” How do you bring yourself fully to your work *and* not lose yourself in that work?)

Ultimately every minute of Winter Meeting contributed to the epiphany of realizing that what I grapple with is the really big beast of systemic oppression. It’s OKAY for this work to be hard. The tools of developing a theory of action, systematically identifying allies, and intentionally building alliances are among the many invaluable gifts that Winter Meeting bequeathed me.

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Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "Certainly there is a possible right for you that precludes the need of balance and willful election ... Place yourself in the middle of the stream of power and wisdom which animates all whom it floats and you are without effort impelled to truth, to right, and a perfect contentment." The 2004 NSRF Winter Meeting was a "journey through mud to magic" (to paraphrase my storytelling protocol partner) which placed me back in the middle of the stream of my life, impelling me toward truth and right, if not perfect contentment. ■

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Our World Café

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I am still thinking about the question, "What does equity look like?" Without open conversation, how will we get there? We won't. We will continue as an institution to tell ourselves we are reaching all students when in fact the data shows something very different. When every student is empowered to take control of their learning and all students see themselves as a vital connection to the world, then we will begin the road toward real reform. Until then, the best we can do is pretend and congratulate ourselves for thinking we are doing the right thing, instead of actually doing the right thing. It is not easy, but it is critical to have that conversation. CFGs give voice to progress and provide a check on what does and does not work. They bring voice to the table where no voice existed. World Café is not a panacea, but it is a bridge to the table where conversations about where to go begin. ■

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Report from the Directors

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This year, the National Facilitators' Meeting took place in Chicago in May. Conversations among the National Facilitators at this meeting, as well as among Center of Activity contacts at the annual Winter Meeting in January, are just two ways that leaders in the organization learn with and from each other, thus supporting the growth and development of NSRF work nationally.

Hawaii was one of those parts of the country that - up until this spring - did not have a formal way to participate in the decision making of NSRF, or to learn with people in NSRF from other parts of the country. There were people interested in pursuing CFG work, but since Hawaii didn't have any NSRF National Facilitators, there was not a Center of Activity to support the work or to facilitate CFG Coaches Seminars. Educators in Hawaii had to either go to the mainland for their CFG Coaches' seminars, or had to fly NSRF National Facilitators to Hawaii.

So, in February, two NSRF National Facilitators from the mainland and three CFG Coaches from Hawaii co-planned and co-facilitated a two-day Introduction to CFGs for 24 participants from Hawaiian schools. Following the two-day introduction, these CFG coaches from Hawaii were sponsored by an NSRF National Facilitator in Los Angeles, and went to California to co-facilitate a full five-day CFG coaches seminar with her.

Hawaii now has two NSRF National Facilitators, hopes to offer CFG coaches seminars with follow-up, and is our newest NSRF Center of Activity. One of the interesting things about Hawaii's Center of Activity is that it has involved public and charter schools, as well as independent schools, from its inception. Intentionally bringing together these diverse strands of educators is consistent with Hawaii's cultural value of interdependence, and other Centers of Activity will hopefully be able to learn from their experience and work together.

NSRF's National Center provides some direct support to individual CFG coaches, but the bulk of the National Center's work is focused on supporting local Centers of Activity and their National Facilitators. The NSRF National Facilitators in the Hawaii Center of Activity are not bringing national projects to their local community, but are instead using ideas, insights and tools gleaned from their work with the work of others in NSRF's national network to inform their local work and context. That is what building capacity is all about.

From Hawaii to Maine, to Washington and Florida, NSRF Centers of Activity are providing the necessary support to help educators move away from their previously isolated practice toward the development of collaborative learning communities. The ultimate goal? To support every child in developing his or her full capacity as a person, as a learner, and as a responsible citizen. ■

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