

NSRF's Living History: An Interview with Linda Emm

Debbie Bambino, Pennsylvania

Linda Emm is a Curriculum Support Specialist in Miami Dade County Public Schools, working closely with colleague Pedro "Pete" Bermudez and the University of Florida Lastinger Center for Learning, an NSRF Center of Activity and a cadre of both long-time and new NSRF trained coaches, to grow the work of CFGs in a variety of contexts.

Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and what drew you to NSRF?

Kids are my passion. First I was drawn to children's theater and then to teaching. I thought teaching drama was the one job that would keep me grounded and make me want to come to work each day.

At my middle school my principal got me involved in thinking about learning styles and peer coaching and lots of new ideas about teaching. When I heard about NSRF and CFGs it felt like this was the way to focus on the real work, a way to put the big ideas into practice.

You've played a few different roles in your district since becoming a coach in 1996. Can you describe a few high points of your CFG experiences?

For the first ten years I did double duty as a middle school drama teacher and a CFG coach/facilitator, and it really suited me. There was never a separation in my mind between using this process with students or adults, so I used it with both. This work was at the heart of all I was doing. When I was working with Secondary School Reform and creating academies within larger schools, I worked with the adults in those Small Learning Communities as CFGs.

Working with my students in 2000, we were talking in class about what divided people in their schools and what it would take to build bridges across those divisions. We created a performance piece from those conversations and my kids co-facilitated home groups based on their piece at the Winter Meeting in Ft. Lauderdale. I fell and broke my arm the night before the meeting began, but my students carried on without me. It was one of the high points of my career, and the experience of being taken seriously by groups of adults from across the country changed my kids forever.

This work and its power to transform how teachers are in schools, the way we engage our students and each other is what keeps me going.

Can you tell us about some of the challenges you've faced?

Sustaining the work is always a challenge; figuring out what it means for teachers who have been silenced in the past, often for their entire careers, to collaborate and come up with their own solutions, is a challenge.

Customizing the work in response to each context is also a challenge. Recently, I was working with a group of internationally trained teachers, who were all experts in their content area. These "experts" needed tools that would help them make space for conversations about, and with, their kids. They needed help making connections with their kids and their kids' lives. Their CFG provided the space for them to make these connections.

This challenge turned into a high point when these teachers got their kids' scores up and presented their work at a recent event organized by their union.

How would you describe your current goals and their connection to NSRF's mission?

My goal is the transformation I talked about earlier . . . our kids have to be engaged and we can only focus on that, on their engagement, if we hold each other's feet to the fire and figure out what engages and disengages them. Our CFGs are the only vehicle that I've seen that helps us keep the focus on ourselves and our place in this issue. In CFGs we don't complain about our students or their families, we focus on ourselves and what we can do differently.

The transformation is bound up with social justice and that's what got me involved in theater and in education, and it seems like when

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Courageous Conversations Across Difference

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ers” who benefit from the emotional energy of others, without having to make themselves vulnerable or do the hard work. Voyeurs do not expend emotional energy. Perhaps I have some personal work to do around this. My truth at this time is I still do not like or appreciate “voyeurs.”

I continue to speak out and I continue to grow and develop new and meaningful alliances across difference. I am particularly proud of the alliances I have forged with the hip-hop generation. Strong, young African-American men and women in their twenties, thirties and forties and I are working collaboratively on several education projects. I continue to speak out and grow as I develop alliances with my white colleagues. I used to feel isolated in my work. Now I feel supported, understood, challenged and respected. Having many strong allies across difference has had a significant impact in my work as a CFG facilitator and school coach. ■

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Kim Carter, continued

to move toward the world I want to live in, where my being is not taking away from or diminishing another’s but rather contributing to healing and transformation.

Since I entered the book chat, I’ve become more aware and able to interrupt, to raise questions, to hold space, with adults in various contexts. I wrestle mightily with questions of how to do this with an open hand and open heart in situations such as disciplining a child of color; coaching, evaluating or disciplining a staff member of color; or disagreeing with a parent of color. My journey has just begun. My gratitude for my colleagues of color and their willingness to enter into, stay in, and be patient with me as I develop skill through these courageous conversations is immense. ■

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we added “social justice” to our mission we took it, as we say in the theater, “from the page to the stage”. We decided to really walk our talk in schools. It’s like moving from Discourse I and talk about drop-outs, to Discourse II and the recognition that our kids are being pushed out of our schools.

Our CFGs are the space, and social justice is the work.

What are your hopes and fears for NSRF in the next period?

In our quest to sustain ourselves organizationally and financially, a quest I support, I hope we don’t lose sight of our core practice of working together to sustain communities of practice that focus on social justice. I guess my hope and my fear are bound up in this question, How do we raise our profile about who we are and what we do, without losing the essence of who we are and what we do? I think if we stay true to our essence, when people think about learning communities, they’ll think of us, of CFGs, as the real thing! ■

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