

Sharing Our Stories: Tales From The First Ten Years

JoAnn Groh, Arizona

For ten years educators around the country have been doing what we have fondly come to call “the work.” And for ten years “the work” has spread, not from some grand design, but because people found value in it. However, the grassroots, organic nature of this movement has made its impact difficult to keep track of. There is a new effort underway to gather hard data on how Critical Friends Groups impact school reform, teacher development and retention and student achievement. But there is another face to this narrative which lies behind the numbers in the stories that we have lived and that we share with each other.

This year in Denver we would like to honor and celebrate those experiences. We are asking people to write their CFG stories. There will be a forum at the Winter Meeting for those who bring stories with them to share or you can send your stories to

Learn more about the NSRF 10th Annual Winter Meeting on page 13, or visit www.nsrffharmony.org/winter_meeting.html

Connections in advance and we will try to put together an anthology to be published in January.

What constitutes a story? A lot. Perhaps anything. For example, when I think back to my own Coaches training at Whispering Pines I remember how our group adopted a tradition that anyone could spontaneously call for a standing ovation of a colleague. We did it often and with gusto. I remember we had grown so close as a learning community by the end of the week that one of us danced her closing *Connections*.

A story could be one of those standard tales you tell when facilitating a training. When debriefing *Connections* after the first time I always share how my own CFG couldn't handle the quiet together time and instead came up with their own process which they named “PG-13” or “Powergripe – 13” – ten minutes of griping wiped clean with three minutes of positive sharing. While that might seem like wallowing in the negative, in actuality it allowed me to follow my colleagues through six years of their lives together. I have always thought that teaching is an unforgiving profession. Your life could be in absolute turmoil, yet each day you stand in front of your many children – thinking about their lives and learning. It was a little moment of humanity

to allow us to honor each others' lives beyond our classroom walls. Through our PG-13s, I experienced life's rhythms—births, weddings, bar mitzvahs, graduations, deaths. Who knew that 13 minutes a month could mean so much to us?

You could share frustrations – I remember being the sole on-time participant to one meeting, after just having had a serious conversation the month before about the “be on time” norm. I decided to spend the rest of the meeting time alone and outside in the student-created desert path, wondering if I had it in me to keep coaching my group, all the while keeping my eyes open for sleeping rattlesnakes.

I could write about lots of exciting “aha” moments where it felt like teachers were almost

dogpiling upon each other with their shared ideas and abundant energy. I remember the sadness I felt at hearing about my Navajo teachers' experiences at the white boarding school they had

attended and how honored I was to be invited to hike in the private native lands of Canyon de Chelly. I could write about how much I have learned from working with Carrie Brennan and how in awe I am of Gene Thompson-Grove. I could write about Faith Dunne. I could share the story of how last Saturday I wandered into Brueggers Bagel shop only to see a sign for a weekly Socrates Café meeting. The next thing I know I am sharing chalk talk and the final word protocol with a group of grey-haired retirees. Finally, I could share how in the midst of the overwhelming everyday stress that comes with starting a new school, how grateful I am when I am finally able to turn my attention to what really counts – teachers talking with each other about how to hone their craft so that our children's experiences are deeper, more meaningful and filled with joy.

Having been around a few years, I imagine that our collective stories are filled with joy, frustration, anger, sadness and hope. I suspect they will make us laugh and cry. I know they will make us think. Ten years feels like a good time to mark what has been, before we push onward and upward towards another ten years. ■

JoAnn Groh may be contacted at jgroh@elpueblointegral.org

