Director's Report  Steven Strull, Director

We came home from dinner the other night and I had an extraordinary exchange with an amazing young woman – my kids’ babysitter. Rebecca is most decidedly a child of privilege, our children adore her, and we trust her completely. She is graduating from a suburban high school toward the head of her class, has been accepted to Vanderbilt University and will most likely become a doctor, her chosen profession. As I was fishing in my pocket for her stipend, she nonchalantly threw her Snapple bottle into the front receptacle of my garbage bin – I watched this happen, walked toward her and the garbage bin, opened the bin and moved her bottle from the front compartment to the back compartment – the difference in my house being garbage in the front and recyclables in the back. As I did this I said, “could you please save the f**k#&% planet!” With the timing of Jack Benny and the bite of Groucho Marx, she said in response, “what, are you Al Gore?” Both exchanges were light-hearted and good-natured – we like and respect each other and her placing the bottle in the wrong receptacle was inadvertent – yet her remark has stuck with me and I’m not completely sure why.

For me, I guess, part of it has to do with choices – I choose to recycle because it makes me feel better and I guess I’m contributing to our planet’s health in some small way – but I think my real motivation is because it makes me feel better, and quite honestly isn’t that taxing. It’s the role of choice that I’m thinking a lot about these days and how choice plays into the continuing development of NSRF.

Between the writing of this director’s report and its publication, NSRF will be unveiling our new membership structure. We have spent countless hours tinkering with, considering, tuning, receiving feedback, and landing on our structure and at the end of the day, what strikes me most is that deciding to join NSRF after all these years will be a choice – an individual choice for each of us.

My purpose here is not to outline our new structure, as that is being handled in a separate membership report – my goal, however, is to reflect on why we are making this transition and hopefully to articulate why each of us ought to make a choice toward membership in our collective. Quite simply, NSRF needs your support – not because you like us, but because your experiences resonate with our mission statement. We have been advised that folks join membership organizations either because they believe in what the organization does and what it stands for or because they want to get the “stuff” the organization has to offer – or some combination. While we certainly have some “stuff” to offer, much of it we give away for free anyway, and I am very comfortable in my assessment that the reason to join NSRF is because you not only believe in our mission statement but you think it vital for our future. And on this point, I want to be very clear: we have decoupled membership in NSRF from a financial ability to pay for membership, and as the structure gets unfolded, it is my hope that everyone realizes we are implementing a dues-paying membership construct specifically to support our mission,

(continued on page 15)
“Was Molly smarter than all the experts? No, she was just braver. The administration’s exploitation of 9/11 created an environment in which it took a lot of courage to see and say the obvious… Molly had that courage; not enough others can say the same. And it’s not over… Now, more than ever, we need people who will stand up against the bullies and lies of the powerful. And Molly Ivens, who devoted her life to questioning authority, will be sorely missed.” - Paul Krugman in a column mourning the death of columnist Molly Ivins

On Monday morning, I barely stopped myself from standing on a table at a faculty meeting in an urban school and yelling, “Stop! Stop talking about the kids that way!” The odds are if I had, I wouldn’t have been satisfied with the results. And yet, I still wonder. The picture replays in my head like a cartoon where my body stays seated listening to the discussion of how we control the kids with systematized and increasingly more serious punishments for infractions of dress code, being in the hallways without a pass and rude behavior, while my alter ego rises up to interrupt the direction of the discussion.

The next morning, in a more affluent school a few miles outside the city boundaries, I walked through the hallways surrounded by kids enjoying freedom of movement, choice of clothing, joking around with each other and with their teachers. The cartoon replayed in my head, this time with more specific questions: Why are the kids in the affluent school the kids with systematized and increasingly more serious punishments for infractions of dress code, being in the hallways without a pass and rude behavior, while my alter ego rises up to interrupt the direction of the discussion.

Once as a meeting was starting, a teacher stopped herself from yelling, “Stop! Stop talking about the kids that way!” I wondered what he did to cope with the look at me in a way that I interpreted as, “You can’t talk about the kids that way!” I wondered if I could have done the same… I had that courage; not enough others can say the obvious… Molly Ivens had that courage; not enough others can say the same…

The choice to support NSRF is made with the understanding that the organization stay committed to its core values and principles. We have had many conversations and thought openly and honestly about the business of NSRF. NSRF is worthy of your support because we are, have always been, and will continue to be an organization committed to mission first. We have what we realize and what we are asking you to do as a dues-paying member is that we must operate as a business in order to have the resources to further our mission. And our time is now. I believe we are entering a perfect storm for teacher voice and teacher empowerment. In the face of the punishing effects of an unsustainable accountability system based on standardized test scores, school systems across the country are asking out loud what service they are providing their schools. Systems from New York to Chicago to Los Angeles are considering and reconsidering ways to bridge the gap between theory and practice and are seeking ways to reward school success with increasing levels of school-based decision making and management autonomy.

New York City alone is in the process of dismantling a failed bureaucratic school management structure in favor of local control, that in order to further influence others to transform schooling, CFG practitioners must be more deliberate about collecting data and presenting evidence that demonstrates how we make a difference for our students. Because NSRF’s history is rooted in a tradition of “building reflective democratic communities that create and support powerful learning experiences for everyone,” NSRF is in a unique position to bridge the gap between theory and practice and use our strengths to transform student learning by transforming ourselves.

So what is YOUR research question? How does your practice influence others, and how can you use our strengths to transform student learning by transforming ourselves.

To share your practice and ask others to do the same, you will encourage others to do so as well. I have had great counsel from trusted colleagues and critical friends in this time of transition for NSRF; our work is stronger, more important, and more critical than ever — it is up to each of us to choose to make our organization equally strong as a voice for adult learning in the service of student achievement. We can choose to make NSRF strong and I believe deeply that if we stay committed, we can and will choose a more socially just and equitable society.