



**O**n Thursday, September 18th, Nancy Mohr, Director of NSRF NY and a founding member of NSRF, passed away. She was deeply involved at all levels of her work with NSRF, a dear friend, mentor and inspiration to many. Her final piece for Connections is printed to the right. The following poem was read at her service.

*For Nancy*

*Every time I breathe in the fragrant/pungent  
Warmth of a kitchen in motion,  
I will think of her*

*When I long for someone to work out the  
impossible  
To struggle with the unfair or unjust  
I will look for her*

*Catching a half glimpse of a stylish figure,  
An elegant form on a city street,  
I will expect her*

*I will see a sleek head bent over,  
Eye to eye with a child  
Listening to a story or a song  
And I will look for her*

*And she will remain here  
With us, tender and strong and beautiful  
Open and smiling  
Welcoming always*

*-Carole Saltz*

## Playing Doubles- Moving Beyond Tag-Team Facilitation

Nancy Mohr, New York

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**I** promise you, I am not always thinking about coaching while on vacation. Nonetheless, I was playing tennis with Alan Dichter this past weekend and it got me to thinking about partnering and facilitation. Probably if I kept my mind on the game, it would improve, but there is something about being on vacation that fires up thinking.

Anyway, we were playing mixed doubles and actually had gotten past the first elimination. We both agreed that this could only have happened because our partnership is greater than the sum of its parts. Alan is a pretty good player; I am, as in golf, an eternal beginner. Nevertheless, I have a wicked net shot and Alan is great about running back and forth doing most of the work. I do contribute, but don't necessarily work up the same sweat that he does. Together, we do well because we have developed this rather unorthodox way of doing things, one which works for us—and we maintain good spirits throughout, and I don't have to tell you how important (and rare for married partners) that is.

As my thoughts stray to facilitation with a partner, especially one I haven't worked with often—it is a case of OK, *you do this and I'll do that—but feel free to butt in if you want to*. I was thinking about how that wouldn't be too useful in tennis. We do have our respective specialties, but if it were, *I'll do this and you do that*, then we would be like some partnerships we've overheard: *Don't you know you're supposed to be up front; couldn't you tell I had that shot?* Those are usually the partnerships that start floundering. How often are facilitation partners dividing responsibility instead of sharing it? And then how often is there unspoken blame? And the need to be right?

Good sharing of facilitation would not look like each person running after each ball trying to hit it. It would not look like one person watching while the other took a turn running around. And it would not look like one person taking the showy shots and leaving the tough ones for the other: *Why weren't you there?*

Luckily, it's not even possible in tennis to do what some facilitation

teams do: I make a pithy comment, you make an even pithier one—we start to do all the talking. Basically that involves competing with your own partner—or just forgetting who this is for.

Alan reminds me that the difficulty of developing a truly productive partnership (and I must say, our sang-froid on the tennis court was not an automatic thing when we were first married— you should hear the bridge stories) is that great partnerships take a lot of time and energy and it just is not worth it if you are going to work together once and then “change partners.”

Often we do partner people at meetings/conferences and it is only temporary. I have had a rare instance or two where the experience was truly synergistic. Often, however, it is pleasant, but not necessarily more productive—perhaps just more fun than being alone. Not that that's bad, but it is rather luxurious. The thought crosses my mind: *What's the matter with having fun? Maybe nothing except it's not about my fun*. Participants do, however, enjoy partners who enjoy each other. And it does model collegiality—but it can and should do more than that. Partnering is especially valuable when each member brings a decidedly different perspective to the mix. And this works when it is made clear that there are multiple points of view at play. If we pretend that we are always in sync with one another and don't expose our differences, there is a valuable teaching opportunity lost.

So why do Alan and I play tennis well together? For starters, we know each other's strengths, limitations and preferences well. But that isn't enough. So what else? For one thing, we learned over time that correcting one another's game whilst playing was not at all a wise thing to do. Afterwards—one or two well-placed thoughts, maybe, but during? Never. Only compliments and encouragement. What we find then is that our partnership gains in the momentum department. Opponents start gnawing at each other, or themselves, getting into bad frames of mind. We wink and know that we can win even though they are better players.

When facilitating, I find, to my dismay, that the all-important reflection time is what we tend to skip. Too busy, we assure one another that we did well and if we didn't we even imagine how it would have been different if the participants

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**and make sure things are comfortable?**

We're really trying to have a changed discourse where problems are named and hard truths are heard from all sides. By creating relationships across what have been traditional boundaries I think we've been able to create a new sense of credibility by avoiding the blame game trap while simultaneously staying focused on the real problems. The understanding that "educating every child well means supporting the families who care for them" is at the heart of the social justice platform that is supporting this initiative. As long as we are all committed to that outcome, I think we will continue to trust each other enough to sometimes be uncomfortable in specific conversations.

**Are there any tools you've found especially helpful as a coach in this trust-building process?**

The first thing the staff of the elementary school agreed to do was to form cross-grade Critical Friends Groups (CFGs) that would Look at Student Work in order to deepen their inquiry into effective teaching and learning. The use of CFGs and protocols has spread in light of their effectiveness at the elementary school. We are actively using protocols to change the ways we relate to each other as adults and we hope to begin using these tools as part of our efforts to increase student voice in this work.

**Do you have any closing comments or questions you'd like to share with our readers?**

I'd be remiss if I didn't mention the powerful support I've received from my colleagues in BayCES. As an organization we have made a commitment to leading for equity and we are continually reflecting on our progress toward that end. The opportunity to reflect on my practice with colleagues who share a similar commitment and represent vastly different experiences of the world both fortifies and challenges me as I do this work. Reflecting and questioning in affinity groups of white colleagues

and being vulnerable and taking risks in our larger cross-race group provides me with an extraordinary community of practice. I know that I can't do this work if I'm paralyzed by the fear that I might make a mistake, or if I'm falsely humble and leave the job for the next person. Holding myself accountable to a collaborative where we unpack our assumptions and mistakes in order to move forward with the work is the key to my growth as an aspiring leader for equity.

After my conversation with Tony, I visited the Emeryville Education Network's website ([www.emeryednet.org/publiccontent/get\\_involved.php](http://www.emeryednet.org/publiccontent/get_involved.php)) to look for further insights into this ground breaking initiative. I was impressed with the user-friendly nature of the site and was pleased to read the welcoming invitation to parents and community members. All concerned adults are asked to join in the efforts to support their young people. The site goes on to list seven different ways that adults can mentor students, from acting as tutors to acting as companions, or challengers. This approach is clearly a break from the usual "one size fits all" tutoring model of adult support. I will be following the progress of this project throughout the next period as I think it offers many lessons for all of us as we work to unite our communities in support of our kids. ■

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were different. I want to work on getting past "tag-team" facilitation and put in the hard work that true partnering means. I think that means not short changing our own self-reflections; starting to ask how could we as a team have been more effective, not what either of us separately could have done differently. And not over-planning, but maybe planning differently. The plan needs to be more about *how* we are going to work together, and less about the precise details of the agenda—in fact, ironically, the more detailed and well-timed the agenda, the less the opportunity to imagine that the partners are entitled to "think on their feet." Planning well also means respecting our respective strengths but not falling into the habit of always doing what each of us does well, instead stretching ourselves to a place where our work is more seamless. And finally, it means paying attention to one another—why are they doing what they're doing, and where are they on the court?

Another important aspect of working with a partner is that there is more than one person to keep an eye on what is going on within the group. That can't be useful unless people are able to make use of what they see—in the moment. That requires a high degree of transparency and a high tolerance for change. While it is helpful to know that one member of the team is perhaps the "lead" in an activity, a highly developed partnership would not just tolerate, but would require that either partner could speak up and say, out loud, *Let's take a moment here to take stock of the group/go around/take a break*—something that will allow for course corrections without fear of upstaging/being out of turn/being rude/embarrassing one another.

So what does this all mean? I'm not entirely sure, but in the meantime, I'll keep working on remembering that when Alan says *I've got it*, I still need to be backing him up. ■

*Farewell, Nancy, and thanks.*