

The UVA Young Writers Workshop Alumni Newsletter

Young Writers Workshop, P.O. Box 400273 Charlottesville, VA 22904

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Issue 2

Margo Figgins, Director • Jenny Johnson, Assistant Summer Director • Jessica Matthews, Assistant Director • Leah Woody, Alumni Coordinator



A Letter from Margo

It's been an active six months since our inaugural newsletter. We've heard from many alumni whose credentials in life are impressive by any standards! Please keep the "bios" coming. We're developing a new database that will make exchanging alumni information easier - and, eventually, more interactive.

One sign that the first generation of young writers has come of age is that three alumni have joined our teaching staff this summer: **Henry Perkins ('00, '01)** as screenwriter; **Andrew Gregory ('96, '97, '98)** as songwriter; and **Emma Rathbone ('96, '97)** as fiction writer. We still have yet to have our first legacy walk through the door, but we're hoping we won't have to wait too much longer for that!

Jenny Johnson ('96) and **Leah Woody ('94, '95)** cooked up a modestly subversive alumni reading in March (we promoted ourselves on the shirttails of the Virginia Book Festival - see p. 5). The glass fishbowl at the door filled with donations to benefit our scholarship fund and, in the process, we heard a lot of very fine writing, received by the thunderous applause for which YWW is famous.

Henry Perkins ('00, '01) and **Sarah Merkel's** May 11 wedding (see p. 4) was another mini-reunion that brought together a skein of extended alumni connections - and lots of hats, colorful costumes, and the Gregory Brothers Band tunes. When it was all over, it didn't feel a whole lot different from a weekend at Young Writers: food, music, ceremony, and the challenge to say what we mean in original and honest ways.

And speaking of scholarships, if any of you would like to help out a deserving young writer get here, you can send a contribution (see p. 6). Any size will help! If you'd like to support a specific student, we can provide you with profiles of students hoping to attend - which will show you in spades what a difference you can make!

Enjoy the newsletter! Send it to someone you met at Young Writers as a way to be back in touch!

Margo

A Look at Two Young Writers Workshop Scholarships

The India Mara Stanley Scholarship

India found her voice as a poet at the Young Writers Workshop in the 1980's when the program itself was in its early years as well. She returned later as a counselor and staff member, leaving her signature on the program that had so influenced her. When India died so unexpectedly in 2004, her parents endowed a scholarship in the name of their gifted daughter. Each summer the India Mara Stanley Scholarship enables talented young writers to attend the program who would not otherwise have "the young writers experience."

The 2007 recipients were **Kamaya Philmore ('07)**, a young playwright who was identified for her talent by the Memphis Prep Program, and **Brittany Nettles ('07)**, a young poet who was recommended by her English teacher, alumna **Jessica Simon**, who also returned for a summer as a counselor and teaching assistant in the songwriting workshop.

The Frederica A. Davis Scholarship

2007 welcomed the program's first Frederica A. Davis Scholar, **Jen Surdukowski ('07)**. Dr. John Staige Davis of Charlottesville, along with many relatives and friends, endowed the merit-based scholarship in honor of his late wife, "Freda," beloved Buford Middle School English teacher of twenty years. Jen Surdukowski, who was nominated by a committee of Charlottesville High School English teachers, took the Fiction Workshop by storm. Beth Schrank, teaching fiction writer, wrote of Jen's contributions to the Workshop, saying, "She tried so many new things and with such great accomplishment. She is an impressive writer and human being." Corrie Williamson, Jen's workshop lab instructor, concurred, saying, "Jen possessed a quietly intelligent style that showed an imagination capable of crafting subtle ideas and moments and unfolding them deeply and maturely."

Jen's love of life's less trodden paths, such as hiking the Appalachian Trail during Spring Break, revealed her willingness to step outside life's sundry boxes, a trait exhibited among YWW alumni far and wide. Of her experiences in the woods, she wrote, "When you have the pack on your back, you don't have a face. You dissolve into the wilderness and you feel that everything around you is a mirror image of who you are now. You are the leaves and the dirt and tree bark; you are the clouds and the rain and the thunder."

The Workshop looks forward to many generations of **Frederica A. Davis** scholars eager to veer off life's beaten paths to immerse themselves in a community of talented young writers.

Teachers Passing on the YWW Experience

Jeff Martin teaches English to ninth, eleventh, and twelfth graders at Chestnut Hill Academy in Philadelphia, PA. A graduate from the Curry School of Education ('03), he went into teaching, because, "silly as it sounds, I think I was called to it in the kind of way a priest gets called to a vocation." Instead of taking summer vacation, he likes to spend his summers making YWW happen behind-the-scenes as an Assistant Summer Director (a.k.a. "The King of Things"). Jeff also writes fiction "on the side" - an avocation that is about to become *vocation* as he enters his first year this fall in the UNC-Greensboro MFA program (where, by the way, Michael Parker - former YWW fiction workshop instructor - now teaches fiction writing).

Thus far, two of his students have attended Young Writers, **Eliza Fox ('06)** and **Christian Graham ('07)**. Back at school, Jeff observed of Eliza that "she was happy that she didn't have to call me 'Jeff' anymore, but 'Mr. Martin.'" He also pointed out that, post-Young Writers, both students went on to participate in school literary magazines. Looking back on the experience of encouraging his own students to attend Young Writers, Jeff explained, "I like the feeling that I'm adding some familiar faces to the ones I'll see in the summer, and I like feeling as if I contributed something new and meaningful to their lives."

Marisa Corso ('93), alumna and staff counselor has been teaching English at Interlake High School in Bellevue, WA for six years. When asked what inspired her to go into teaching, she responded, "Honestly, the Young Writers Workshop did. I had never thought about it before the summer I was a counselor there. I had such an amazing time. It was inspirational. I just didn't want to let that feeling go."

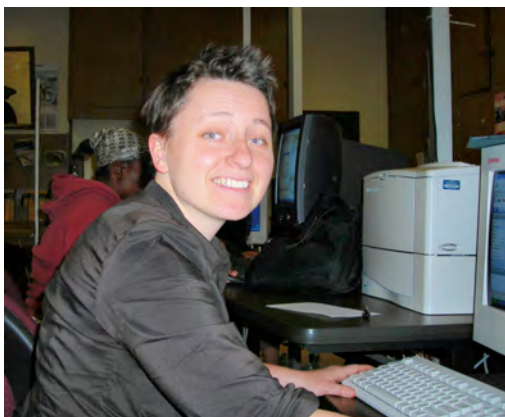
Two of her students have since had "the young writers experience" on her recommendation, **Robin Park ('06, '07)** and **Meredith Bernberg ('07)**. Thinking about them and about what got her connected to

the Workshop when she was in high school, Marisa reminisced, "I am so glad that my sophomore English teacher had his students write a short story... after reading mine out loud, he gave me the YWW application. Will he ever know what he did for me? Mr. Loftin, if you are out there, I know I wasn't the best student for you, but your act of faith in me back in 1993 changed my life forever." On the experience of reconnecting with YWW from the perspective of a staff teacher, Marisa came up with one word, "legacy": "I hope that my students can still find their voices at YWW as I did."



Marisa Corso

Jenny Johnson ('96) has also played the dual role of a YWW staff member in summers and public school teacher during the year. She's been a long-time devotee of the program (former young writer, counselor, head counselor, co-instructor, program consultant and assisting summer director - she's done just about all of it at one time or another). Recently, she moved back to Charlottesville from San Francisco, CA to play a larger role in the future of the program, while plugging away simultaneously at a Low-Residency MFA in Poetry from Warren Wilson College.



When Jenny graduated from the Curry School's BA/MT Program ('02) she moved to the Bay Area to teach public school. In her role as an English teacher and eventual English Department Chair at Mission High School in San Francisco, CA, Jenny recruited 15 students for the "young writers experience:" Sarah Souza ('04, VQR Poetry Scholar), Morgan Campbell ('04, '05), Adeliz Araiza ('04), Erica Benard ('05), Joyce Lam ('05, Teitelbaum-Zwerdling Scholar), Henrietta Wong ('05), Reynaldo Cayetano, Jr. ('05, VQR Poetry Scholar), Melissa Robertson ('06), Heather Montano ('06, '07), Antoinette Osborne ('06, VQR Poetry Scholar), Ann Xiao ('07, Teitelbaum-Zwerdling Scholar), Stephanie Leung ('07), Edwin Poot-Polanco ('07), Andrea Torres ('07, VQR Poetry Scholar), Emelie Tang ('07). Many were awarded scholarships and also supported by ASAP (Academic Scholars Advancement Program), spearheaded by Judy Grossman, ASAP's founder, for the costly plane fare.

Scott Figgins ('83, '84, '85) could not be more connected to Young Writers. A former counselor and administrator as well as student, he is also Margo's son and currently at César Chávez Middle School in Hayward, California, in his 8th year of teaching English and social studies. Scott reminisced about his path toward teaching: "Being the child of an inspiring and innovative, yet overworked and under-appreciated, teacher, I did not initially see myself as up to the challenges of the job." After college and a frustrating six years in the dot-com world, he eventually worked his way back to YWW in 1999. During that summer he learned from the other teachers that teaching could be "a career, an art, and a force for social justice." Scott noted, "Their perspectives and encouragement infused me with added confidence and excitement about taking this turn in my life."

Given his long affiliation with the program, it's easy for Scott to spot a Young Writer. And he did in his 8th grade English class: a vibrant Filipina girl named **Pyxie Castillo**

(**'04 Becky Davis Scholar, '05 VQR Poetry Scholar, '06 Stanley Scholar**). Reflecting on her, he recalled that Pyxie impressed him in many ways: "She writes powerfully and expressively, with a rich vocabulary. She has low tolerance for the mundane, ordinary and conventional" and, he added, "she has a wild imagination and uses every idle moment to engage in creative activity."

In closing, Scott had this to say about being a teacher and YWW alumnus: "I am in awe of the pedagogical richness of the program - the opportunity to work with published writers, the infusion of the student's personal life into their writing, the building of a writing community, the power of learning from and contributing to one's peers. Being a teacher in a poorly funded school with few resources and faced with mounting pressures to abandon any 'enriching' activity in favor of 'interventions' (drill-and-kill programs for those who are already frustrated with and turned off by school), I am renewed in my faith that learning needs to be filled with the creative, the personal, the community that the [Young Writers] program has at its heart."

Announcements

- Congratulations to **Sean Redmond ('84, '85)** a 2008 Pen Translation Recipient for his translation from the medieval Latin of Felix Fabri's 1483 travel memoir, *Another Holy Land: Felix Fabri's Voyage to Medieval Egypt*. To learn more check out this press release: <http://www.pen.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/2073/prmID/1064>
- Each year, 826 Valencia awards three \$10,000 scholarships to college-bound students in the Bay Area who demonstrate interest in the written word. Congratulations to **Andrea Torres (07, VQR Poetry Scholar)** who was a 2008 Scholarship Award Winner! To learn more about 826 Valencia and its opportunities for writers go to: <http://www.826valencia.org/tutoring/scholarships/>
- Congratulations to **Molly Brown ('07)**! She was the 2008 1st Prize winner of the Patricia Grodd Poetry Prize for Young Writers, sponsored by the Kenyon Review. Her poem "Terra Incognita" was selected by Kenyon Review Poetry Editor, David Baker, from more than 900 submissions. Look for her poem in the Fall 2008 issue of The Kenyon Review. Learn more about this competitive contest for young writers: <http://www.kenyonreview.org/programs/ywpp.php>
- If you have not filled out the online **YWW Alumni Survey**, please visit: <http://www.uvawriters.com/alumnisurvey>
- If you would like to **post an announcement** in the next alumni newsletter, please email it to leahwoody@gmail.com

Alumni in their Own Words

Found: **Mack Elder ('99, '00, '01) New York, NY**

It's been a solid eight years and three days since I first set foot inside Tuttle Dorm. It's been nearly twelve since Margo first gazed at me and said that I looked like a writer. How am I supposed to encapsulate everything that's happened since then into one paragraph? There's not enough time to talk about my first experience as a host on live television, nearly breaking down into tears sitting next to a crooning Jill Sobule. Or about my four years in California, sparring with my peers and the occasional film legend about cinema theory at USC. Or about the Autumn of 2001 in Manhattan, a dreadful time which inspired me to exorcise my demons through my writing. I don't even have time to let you know which magazine published my first article. (*Depth of Field*,

Spring 2004, a piece entitled *Singin' in the Rain, South Park, and Willingness to Throw Genre Conventions Out the Window*.) I left Young Writers for the last time in July 2001, and the last six years have been a whirlwind. I've traveled the world, performed at the Globe Theater, met most of my childhood idols, had a film shown at TriBeCa, been published, started my own production company, driven the USA three times over, and been witness to history. And I can still hear myself at sixteen in the back of my head. He's saying, "What? That's it? Where's our number-one box office hit? When were you planning on dating supermodels? Why aren't we in Vegas building a casino right damn now? Get moving!" Well...you heard the overachieving little bastard.

- Mack Elder

Life Long Connections: Congratulations to Henry Perkins ('00, '01) and Sarah Merkel

On May 11, 2008 Henry and Merkel, our beloved 2007 Playwriting Team (07-08), were married. We know it's not the first time two members of the Young Writers Community have found in each other their life-long partners, but it is the first time Margo has officiated at a wedding! Of course, we knew you would want the whole story. Here's what Henry and Merkel had to say in response when we asked them for the scoop.

Let's start at the beginning. How did you meet?

We were introduced in high school by a mutual friend, when Merkel was a freshman and Henry was a sophomore. The following spring we were dared to make out on the back of a bus. The next year Henry proposed backstage during a production of *Twelfth Night*. After a few weeks of wooing and shoplifting, Merkel finally got up the nerve to break off the engagement. We went on our first date that night, ushering *Guys and Dolls* and seeing Henry's lesbian ex-girlfriend play folk music.

Henry, what brought you to YWW as a student? And then, later, as a counselor?

Teachers had been giving me brochures for YWW for years, but I had been spending my summers working as a counselor at an outdoors camp. In my junior year of high school I applied to YWW and was accepted. It was such a welcoming environment, and so inspirational, that I returned the following summer after graduating. It seemed natural that I'd come back someday as a counselor, as the counselors had been so positive about the experience they were having when I was a student. So when my graduation from NYU film school was on the horizon, I enthusiastically applied. It was great to see familiar faces and be welcomed into a staff that I had once admired.

Merkel, what brought you to YWW as a counselor?

I had heard about the workshop for years as many of my high school friends had been campers. I never attended because my wanderlust took me away from Charlottesville every summer. But as a college student in New York, I longed to return to the home of Bodo's Bagels. As a counselor and teacher at YWW, I have been able to eat many bagels, often from Bodo's. Plus the job description perfectly aligned with my interest in education and working with creative young people.

How has YWW affected your relationship over the years, both as counselors and as a teaching team?

Every time we are given the opportunity to collaborate and work as a team it inevitably strengthens our relationship. We are actually very different, so we learn from each other constantly. Although there's always stress and issues to work through, we are totally comfortable being brutally honest and rude to one another, so there's no passive aggression.

Would you characterize Young Writers as a romantic setting?

Absolutely. Three words: lawn at dawn.

What rituals are in the works for your wedding this May?

The ceremony will be fairly simple, but we're writing a good deal of it ourselves and in collaboration with Margo. Also, we discovered the musical talent for our reception at young writers

I heard Margo is officiating; how did that come to happen?

Usually people are married by individuals they consider to be their spiritual leaders; for us Margo is an inspirational figure, and a good friend.

Editors' Note: *If you have had or know of a life long connection that sprang from the romance and synchronicity of a summer at Young Writers, we want to hear about it! Please contact our alumni coordinator, Leah Woody: leahwoody@gmail.com*



Young Writers Becoming Teachers

Joyce Lam ('05) & the Celia Teitelbaum-Zwerdling Scholarship



Joyce Lam, awarded the 2005 Celia Teitelbaum-Zwerdling Scholarship, is now an English Major at UC Berkeley and spent her past summer teaching creative writing in Hong Kong through the prestigious Summerbridge program, which she described as “a free program for low-income (mostly immigrant) rising 10th and 11th graders. They join and must stay with the program for two summers, during which they have five weeks of classes, sports, electives, field trips, etc. The program’s objectives are to help build students’ confidence with speaking and using English and promoting love of learning.”

Joyce, born in Hong Kong where she first learned English, described teaching immigrants as both meaningful and relevant given her own life experience. When asked what she taught her students about creative writing, she said, “I taught them how to write with your five senses, how to have a ‘conversation’ with your imaginary protagonist, how to use simile and metaphor.” Joyce was quick to share a number of her favorite lessons: “I asked students to imagine the character they developed sitting in front of them and ... to interview them in their brains and record the conversation. Another favorite activity we’ve done was I played music clips for my students, and then they used their fingers to draw on paper according to how they felt. Afterwards they all had to write a story based on their drawing.” As imaginative as Joyce is in inventing her curriculum, she also knows when to steal a good activity: “I took the conversation idea directly out of a lab I had in the Young Writers Workshop.”

This June, Joyce returned to Summerbridge to teach a different course involving “reading and writing using the Harry Potter books.” On the subject of career choices, she admitted, “I am actually thinking about teaching in the future...we’ll see.”

Alumni Gatherings

On the “Fringe” in Charlottesville

On Saturday, March 29th, over fifty friends and alumni of YWW gathered at the Twisted Branch Tea Bazaar in Charlottesville, Virginia for The Book & Tea Fringe Festival, a maverick benefit for the Young Writers Scholarship Fund. The event coincided with the Virginia Festival of the Book but, as an unlisted event, occurred on the festival’s fringe - *and* drew its own loyal crowd from the “fringes” of Charlottesville, with some performers traveling all the way from New York, Maryland, and Georgia! Requesting no more than a five dollar suggested donation at the door, the event raised \$204, which has helped a deserving talent get to Charlottesville this summer for Young Writers 2008 (its 27th year)!

“The Fringe Festival was like saying to some of my closest friends, ‘Hey let’s stop, meet, and make connections somewhere before we grow again in different directions,’” remarked former counselor and local Charlottesville High School teacher, **Carly Nicholson**. This event was the first official alumni event in 11 years, since the Sweet 16 Reunion in 1998. The outstanding line-up of faculty, staff, and alumni performers included: **Erik Fredner** ('06, '07), **Christine Bryant-Ryback** ('01), **Kenny Marotta**, **Sarah Graham**, **Molly Brown** ('07), **Ben Johnson** ('02, '03), **Helen Alston** ('07), **Joe Chapman**, **Zach Marotta** ('06, '07), **Jenny Johnson** ('96), **Carly Nicholson**, **Doug Nordfors**, **Caroline Kessler** ('07), **Mickey Betters** ('07), **Claire Epstein**, **Alana Levinson-LaBrosse** ('99) and **Meredith Nnoka** ('06, '07).

Describing the vibe of the event, former counselor ('06, '07) and free lance journalist, **Claire Epstein** remarked, “With half of the audience slated to perform in the reading there was an amazing tension in the teahouse. The audience was radiant. (Was it just me? or was everyone else thinking, ‘I can’t believe we’re here’.) It definitely felt like we were smack dab in the middle of a summer at Young Writers.”

After the event, performers and friends gathered at Guadelajara Restaurant to reminisce and catch up over burritos and quesadillas. One recurring theme in conversation threaded itself down the family-style table of twenty: “When can we do this again?”



Our Needs

Short Term Goals (1-2 years):

- ✂ Discretionary funds to meet immediate program needs (\$1 - \$199)
- ✂ Funds to support visiting artists and writers-in-residence (\$201 - \$499)
- ✂ Equipment for a screenwriting workshop (\$500 - \$1499)
- ✂ Recording equipment and studio space for songwriting workshop (\$1500 and above)
- ✂ Scholarships targeted to increase the diversity of participants (\$2500)

Longer Term Goals:

- ✂ Endowed full scholarships (\$50,000 for each of the 5 workshop genres)
- ✂ Endowment to fund a Summer Directorship (to sustain our quality programming) (\$800,000)

Continuing Thanks to our 2007 Donors

Epic Donors

Alana Levinson-LaBrosse
in collaboration with her parents,
Frank Levinson & Wynnette LaBrosse

The Teitelbaum-Zwerdling Scholarship

By Marti Teitelbaum & Daniel Zwerdling, Celia's parents, Family and Friends

The India Mara Stanley Scholarship

By Kathleen and Darwin Stanley, India's parents

The *Virginia Quarterly Review* Scholarships
by Ted Genoways, Editor, *Virginia Quarterly Review*

The Frederica A. Davis Scholarship

by John Staige Davis, Spouse

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Opportunities to Support the UVA Young Writers Workshop

- Haiku - up to \$199
- Sonnet - \$200 - \$499
- Vignette - \$500 - \$1499
- Ballad - \$1500 and above
- Novella - Sponsor a Student for one Summer (\$2500)
- Epic Endowment - A named gift that would exist in perpetuity

If you are interested in supporting the Young Writers Workshop with a *tax-deductible contribution*, please detach/print out this section and return to: **UVA Curry School Foundation/YWW,**

P.O. Box 200276 Charlottesville, VA 22904

Checks should be made payable to: **Curry School Foundation/YWW**

Or give online at: https://www.virginia.edu/supportuva/giveCC_step1.php
Enter amount in "Curry School of Education Foundation" box and designate "Young Writers Workshop" in the gift instructions box.

If there are other ways you or your business could give to Young Writers, please contact us!

Announcing the Liz Ahl Scholarship!

Musician and songwriter, **Andrew Gregory ('96, '97, '98)**, and poet, **Liz Ahl ('83, '84, '85, '86)** met in the summer of 1996, Andrew's first summer at Young Writers, when he was a 14-year-old poet in Liz's Poetry Writing Workshop. He describes Liz as having an "amazing presence - she had a huge laugh, and used her incredible sense of humor to sweep out the pretensions that serious poetry couldn't be funny and that funny poetry couldn't be serious. She taught class with a zest & zeal & originality that were unmatched. I remember rewriting entire poems from memory, cutting and splicing others back together, writing pantoums & villanelles, & dancing around the classroom to learn meter. She was also kind enough to not only tell me that I really had a chance as a writer - but to point out some things about my writing that I should really reconsider."

After that summer Liz and Andrew were in contact off and on with a few email exchanges. She pursued her MFA and Ph.D; he finished high school and went to college. And, eventually, in 2002 he contacted her for a recommendation to work on the YWW staff - which would be his first experience as a residential counselor and assisting teacher. Fast forward to this past January, their first meeting in 10 years, when the two reunited in New York City on a rainy afternoon interlude from the AWP conference: They hang out in the MOMA, talk and catch up, promise to do it again sometime soon. Later that week, Andrew goes home and writes Liz a letter announcing that he wants to start a Young Writers scholarship in her name.

When Liz, who is now an Associate Professor of English at Plymouth College, teaching Poet, and Chair of Women's Studies, read the letter she admits she was both happy and teary: "I am a writer today because I had the opportunity to attend YWW as a young person. I am a teacher today in large part because of the ideas about teaching I encountered as a student and staff member at YWW. Margo's example of what is possible for students and teachers continues to serve as a touchstone for my teaching and learning. The workshop is one of the most fundamental affiliations of my life; because my dad was in the Navy, we moved every couple of years. From kindergarten to twelfth grade, I attended 8 schools in four different states and in the Philippines (two tours). I went to three different high schools. But from the time I was 13, the workshop was a kind of constant for me -- an anchor, a family. Attending those four summers as a student (and returning later for several years as a staff member, and then as an instructor) was like coming home. A couple of years ago, the workshop was celebrating its 25th birthday, and alumni/former staff had been invited to write Margo letters discussing how the workshop (and Margo) had positively impacted our lives; what the workshop meant to us, that kind of thing. I wrote a letter ... and enclosed a check as well, just a small way of giving something back to a program (and a person -- it is hard sometimes to separate Margo from the workshop) that gave me so much. (That's a cliché. But it's true. I hate that about clichés.) I guess I want other young writers to have the opportunity to experience what I did at the workshop -- I was taken seriously as a writer, I was invited to collaborate in creating a community of writers, I was pushed creatively and personally, I grew in ways I couldn't have anticipated. The notion of being associated by name with a workshop scholarship is the greatest honor I can imagine. Seriously. This is a program connected not only to my identity as a poet, but to my identity as a teacher and to many of my pedagogical beliefs. Like I said, it was home."

When asked what inspired Andrew to give back to the program, he replied, "Well, Liz! but also: Young Writers' has been such a powerful influence on my life. I'm so, so glad that right now it has a chance to become a more sustainable organization, and my hope is that it can also be a program that becomes more accessible to a wider and wider range of students. My dream is that this fund will grow to be a self-sustaining fund for students who could not otherwise attend the workshop. When I decided to give this gift, I wanted to give it in a way that reflected what I see as being the foundation of YWW: dynamic & energetic teaching. Liz embodied this enthusiasm & full-bodied commitment for me."

In the coming months, the program will be contacting all of Liz's former students in the program, asking that they contribute to this fund so that it can become endowed at the level that will make one or more full scholarships possible to students without any other means to attend. Anyone reading this and wishing to help may, with a click of their computer mouse, help make that possible:

https://www.virginia.edu/supportuva/giveCC_step1.php

(Enter amount in "Curry School of Education Foundation" box and designate "Young Writers Workshop - Ahl Scholarship Fund" in the gift instructions box)

