

# Honoring the Past; Looking to the Future

**A**s I check the YES box on my NCTE ballot creating a Middle Level Section, a large, satisfied smile spreads across my face. ‘At last!’ I gleefully shout. . . . No longer will I feel uneasy and different about being a middle school teacher. No longer will I be torn between elementary and secondary sections, not really fitting in either. Finally, my being different will be recognized, sanctioned, and officially approved!”

So said Bill Mollineaux in his September 2000 *Voices from the Middle* column. We all rejoiced because it had been a long journey for so many who had worked diligently on behalf of middle level teachers and students. The creation of a separate section for those like me—teachers who identified not as elementary or as secondary, but as *middle* level teachers—was a long process.

The Junior High/Middle School Assembly was born at the 1974 Annual Convention when five members met to form a special interest group. This was preceded by a series of events cited by Jeff Golub, who joined the group in its second year. Jeff tells the story:

The two educators who came up with the idea of the JH/MS Assembly were Bill Horst and Bob Quackenbush. At the 1974 NCTE convention in New Orleans, they pitched the idea of a new assembly to about four friends in the convention hotel over a plate of French fries. The reason I know about the plate is that it became a symbol of the genesis of the assembly and was passed chair to chair for the first five years of the assembly’s life (minus the French fries, of course; they were thoroughly consumed at

the original meeting) (Golub, personal communication, September 10, 2010).

C. Anne Webb of St. Louis, Teddi Baer from Santa Fe, M. Jerry Weiss from New Jersey, Nancy Pritchard at Headquarters, and Bob Quackenbush from Illinois became the first effective leaders for the group. It was their vision to serve the unique needs of teachers and students by capitalizing on the characteristics of this level.

At the time, according to Golub, Steve Tchudi was the editor of *English Journal*, and he supported the assembly by creating a monthly column in the journal titled “The JH/MS ‘Idea Factory.’” This column was devoted to middle level concerns and was well received. Roy Alin and Keith Wright from Washington State were the first editors of this special column. When Roy and Keith decided to move on after five years, Tchudi invited Bill Horst and Jeff Golub to take over the column, which they did for two years. This column continued to be our most visible presence until *The Idea Factory* was proposed as the newsletter for the assembly in 1983. This newsletter by and for middle level educators was edited for many years by Joel Turvey of Oregon. Because the Junior High/Middle School Assembly was still technically attached to the Secondary Section, we had a column in the *English Journal* from 1980 until 2000, with a single interruption. Kathie Ramsey and Betty Close wrote the last column as we prepared to become our own Section.

I recall clearly my first convention as the one in Baltimore in 1990. Besides being overwhelmed, I was excited at the prospect of seeing Nancie Atwell. Being new, I was not aware that you had to get to the room early if you wanted a seat. There was this guy running around with an orange pith

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helmet, Richard Halle, directing people everywhere as he tried to squeeze yet another attendee into the room. There were all these polite southern accents asking, “Honey, would you just move a little this way?” and “Thank you, darling.” This was the session sponsored by the Junior High/Middle School Assembly. I felt right at home with all these people who had no Section, but who flocked to the JH/MS Assembly for “shelter.” Then Nancie Atwell spoke, also at home with a room of sweaty teachers. (What middle level teacher has never spoken to a group of sweaty listeners!) Right then and there I decided this was so great that I would never miss another NCTE Annual Convention as long as I was teaching. Still, I did not talk with any of these people because I was so awed that they actually talked to Nancie Atwell and ran this entire event.

Dick Halle continued to lurk everywhere with his orange pith helmet and membership cards in hand as other events were beginning to build momentum. In 1993, a subcommittee was appointed to see if there was a real need for a professional journal focusing on middle level educators. At this same time, the board decided that interest was high enough to justify revising the registration and membership forms; members would now be offered the option to designate themselves as middle level educators. Elizabeth Close had been elected to the Secondary Section and was our first pure middle level voice to be heard there. The very next year, they not only accepted the report about the need for a middle level journal, they also mandated that each elementary and secondary group identify one of their members to help develop middle level sessions in the convention program. This first com-

mittee was made up of Elizabeth Close, Cora Lee Five, Debbie Allen, and Alfredo Medina—the first middle level planners for the Annual Convention.

The year 1995 proved to be a major one in our history. This was the first time that staff was directed by the Executive Committee to solicit and explore the acquisition of book-length manuscripts dealing with issues of middle level education. At the very same meeting, they authorized the creation of *Voices from the Middle* as a quarterly publication and authorized the use of specific middle level convention planners and screeners for proposals for the Annual Convention. Linda Rief and Maureen Barbieri were in the right place at the right time to launch *Voices from the Middle*. They carefully crafted themed issues and invited middle level experts to write columns; no middle school teacher with the slightest interest could fail to find relevant and timely support and guidance within those pages. Interest in the middle level was growing by leaps and bounds.

That year’s NCTE Annual Convention was held in San Diego. The presence of middle level members was underestimated by the convention planners. There was a mad scramble when the joint presentation of Linda Rief and Nancie Atwell drew a crowd so large that it could have filled the assigned room twice. To my knowledge, this is the only time a venue was changed on the spot to accommodate an overflow crowd. The other highly important event was the development of guidelines for The Richard Halle Award. Leaders at the business meeting of the JH/MS Assembly decided to recognize his outstanding dedication to the Assembly and to middle level education by establishing an award in his honor. The man in the orange pith helmet was honored at the following convention as the first recipient. To read the list of past Halle Award winners is to revisit those who have made the middle level section what it is today. In addition to Dick are Lanny van Allen, Kathie Ramsey, Linda Rief, Martha Magner, Kyleene Beers (a *Voices* editor and the second middle level NCTE president),

Karen Smith, Sandy Hayes (who will become the third middle level president of NCTE), Kim Ford, Akiko Morimoto, Howard Miller, and one of the current editors of *Voices*, Roxanne Henkin.

At Headquarters, there was a strong presence advocating for the middle level. Karen Smith carried the weight of advising and cajoling through all of the political and technical movements to strengthen the middle level. During the 1996 convention in Chicago, Elizabeth Close (as the middle rep on the Secondary Section committee) chaired a meeting with Martha Magner, Karen Smith, Charlie Suhor, Lanny Van Allen, and Judith Hayn to seek ways to raise the status of the middle. The Middle Level Mosaic began during this conference, although not in the format that so many of us now recognize. Kylene Beers facilitated the Middle Level Mosaic during the 1997 convention.

As Elizabeth Close recalls, “A group of us met at the Spring Conference in Cincinnati and decided it was time to push for section recognition for the middle level. Karen Smith was our cheerleader at headquarters. Kathie [Ramsey] and I presented our desire to the Secondary Section, and committee members voted to support our request at the next Executive Committee meeting. The Executive Committee voted to approve the Middle Level Section.” In 1999, the funding was approved for the first middle level luncheon for the convention. At the same meeting, the Executive Committee affirmed the selection of the awards committee to honor Elizabeth Close with the Edwin Hoey Award. She was the second to receive this award, which was first presented to Rise Painter. Established by *READ* magazine, this award has become synonymous with excellent teaching at the middle level.

So many have contributed so much over the years that it would take a far longer article than this to cite all for their contributions. Most of those involved were classroom teachers when it started. Some were at the college level; in fact, Kylene was still working as a doctoral student. Some have retired and two of us are “retirement dropouts” because we have returned to the class-

room. When I asked contributors what they remember most, they mentioned the people and the good times shared. Paul Putnoki has the most poignant memory. “If it were not for the JH/MS Assembly, meeting Jeff Golub, and attending his wedding in Tampa in September of 1997, I would never have met the lady who was a friend of his wife”; as you may have surmised, they were eventually married. Kathie Ramsey recalls, “The camaraderie and genuine interest we all had in building a community of teachers and students in the middle made a big difference in my life and in my classroom.” Kim Ford recalls, “What I remember most about our middle level is the people—so many folks who are my friends now—and the fun we have whenever we get together.” Kylene responds, “My fondest memories are of the friendships that were formed. Put a small group of people in a room and give them a lot to do with not a lot of structure and you quickly learn to work together. When folks work together, they either quickly become friends or they figure excuses to get out of the room!”

My gift from the middle level group is the way it reached one particular student. Mariano was a fourth-grade student who, at best, might be considered one of our pedestrian scholars as he plodded through his daily routine in our urban school. He found his way into my reading group where we studied the biography of Jackie Robinson. The next November, while I was in New York for the NCTE Annual Convention, I got the chance to meet Sharon Robinson, who was promoting her books. As I listened to her, I knew in my heart who was going to get the book about baseball written by Jackie Robinson’s daughter and just what I was going to expect him to do.

Within ten days, he had read the book and written his first draft of a review for the Student to Student column in *Voices from the Middle*.

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When his submission was published, doors opened for him, all stemming from a new belief in himself as a reader and writer. He wrote an essay that was published by Creative Communications in a bound volume. He wrote an article with me that appeared in the March 2011 issue of *Voices*. He also was my co-presenter at the Literacy Essentials Conference in Connecticut. Little did I know that he had repeated kindergarten because he was so shy. He had not said a single word in the classroom for the entire year. Thanks to NCTE's Middle Level Assembly, he stood before the audience and clearly and succinctly told them about his journey to become a writer as a seventh grader. Doors opened for me

through the extreme pleasure of watching the doors to the future open for my students. For that, I thank you.

Maybe this is the time for you to get involved with the Middle Level Section. It is easy to find any of the people mentioned in this article or the many more who are serving in various committees and Section leadership positions. We are all happy to bring new members to a more active role in this Section. It is your new ideas that will help us grow into the future. We look forward to working with you and watching you transform the Middle Level Section during NCTE's second hundred years!

**Author's Note:** The author wishes to thank all who helped in compiling the information for this article, especially Kylene Beers, Betty Close, Kim Ford, Jeff Golub, Richard Halle, Teri Lesene, Martha Magner, Paul Putnoki, Kathie Ramsey, Linda Rief, and Lanny van Allen.

**Jim Johnston**, 2010 Halle Award winner, is a retired middle school teacher who teaches courses at Central Connecticut State University.