

NCTE Outstanding Middle Level Educator in the English Language Arts Award Nominee Essay: Sandra Kowalczyk

I am deeply honored to be nominated by a treasured colleague for the NCTE 2015 Outstanding Middle Level Educator in the English Language Arts Award.

While growing up, I attended an impoverished, Chicago neighborhood elementary school with paint peeling walls and bathroom stalls without doors. In each classroom, one teacher single handedly taught 40 students. Over-crowded conditions necessitated 36 portable classrooms taking over the playground where during recess I loved to jump rope Double-Dutch with my pigtails flying. I was heartbroken when the dear-to-my-heart library was dismantled with books relegated to rolling carts. With age came a realization that empowerment through education was the answer to the challenges caused by disparity. Recognizing the need for equity and quality in education ignited my desire to not only become a teacher, but to become the best teacher I could be. Graduating from high school a year early, I became the first in my family to graduate from college. I went on to earn a Masters Degree in Education and attain National Board Teacher Certification in Literacy- Language Arts and Reading. Providing quality education for all children is my ongoing mission, My every waking moment is devoted to devising innovative ways to reach students; Admittedly, it even consumes my dreams. *Breakfast with Books*, was a highly-successful before-school program I dreamt up, targeting reading achievement of at-risk students by involving them in literacy activities while enjoying nutritious breakfasts. Throughout my almost 25 years as a middle level literacy educator, I have been a proud member of NCTE, an organization sharing my strong commitment to the principles of diversity and inclusion. I was honored that NCTE's award-winning English Journal published an essay I co-wrote on my teaching philosophy and practice. *Peace by Piece: The Freeing Power of Language and Literature through the Arts*. My article illustrated ways I delve into the arts by employing poetry, music, dance, drama, and visual arts to help my students hear, read, think, and feel the message of peace in the world. Knowing that we learn best when we can use all of our senses in the process, my classroom taps that potential. Students learn about the importance of cultural identity, using their minds, hands, and bodies in the learning process. As young people do not soon forget what they experience, I utilize creative and performing arts as a means of understanding to help build bridges between and among cultures. My article was reprinted in, *A Curriculum of Peace: Selected Essays from English Journal*, an NCTE book widely referenced for inspiration on infusing art and culture, social justice and global issues and themes into teaching in the English classroom, passions that are dear to me. We live in a global age, and yet, students know far too little about the 90% of the world outside our borders. We must prepare students for a

world where the challenges and opportunities for success require the ability to compete and cooperate on a global scale. My aim is to develop students who understand multiple aspects of societies and cultures and are able to view the world through a global lens. I connect with and use ethnic and minority communities as part of the curricula and seek learning activities that are relevant to my students' cultural experiences, while at the same time, encouraging them, as well as myself, to stretch beyond the familiar. I participated in myriad of global educator programs recognizing teachers who build awareness of cultural diversity by funding curricula enriching travel. As part of three Fulbright-Hays Group Projects Abroad Awards, I collaborated on International Curriculum Development Teams as we travelled through China (2014) Morocco (2007) and India (2003). As part of a U.S.-Eurasian Teacher Excellence Award Program in Uzbekistan (2005) I initiated a culture bag exchange project between middle school students in Wisconsin and Bukhara, Uzbekistan. In 2010, four weeks as a National Endowment for Humanities Summer Scholar in Oaxaca, Mexico provided me with a solid foundation to create language arts units featuring two young adult novels set in part in Oaxaca. The protagonist in *Becoming Naomi Leon*, by Pam Munoz Ryan, travels to Oaxaca in search of her woodcarver father. A journey to Oaxaca, as well as Guatemala, also features largely in *Red Glass* by Laura Resau. The English language arts units increased students' background knowledge by incorporating artifact toolkits, photographs, videos and Google Earth and led to more in-depth studies of the history, culture, art, languages and diversity of Oaxaca. While in Oaxaca I became acquainted with many artists, weavers, potters, and woodcarvers, including the acclaimed, Zapotec Indian, woodcarving family of Armando Jimenez. To further engage students in the units I designed, I invited Armando and his wife to travel from Mexico to Wisconsin to demonstrate *alebrijes* woodcarving and painting techniques. Armando explained how his art is largely intuitive as the wood tells him what animal it wants to be. Students were mesmerized watching Armando "read" the copal wood to determine what form to create. Another year I arranged for author Laura Resau to visit my school to discuss researching and writing *Red Glass* and to share personal stories about issues faced by immigrants, refugees, and indigenous people in Mexico and Central America. Inspired by woven textiles and carpets from Mexico and Guatemala, my students collaboratively created a large literary weaving created from paper strips of repeated symbols, colors, and quotes from the novel to capture significant images and themes from her book. To increase cross-cultural experiences, I frequently invite people from our local and world community into classrooms. Modesto Rivera Lemus, a Huichol Indian Shaman, traveled to Wisconsin from , Nayarit, Mexico, to share storytelling, art, music, beadwork, weaving, and beliefs. Students were awed

learning to decode his pictorial bee's wax and yarn painting. Students gained insights into Huichol cultural views expressed in his stories that were translated by my bilingual students born in Guatemala and Mexico. I incorporate literature of minority writers of color and from diverse cultures and with diverse points of view into my teaching to help students develop global perspectives. My students read every fiction and non-fiction book they could get their hands by Yona Zeldis McDonough before the award-winning author visited my classroom. Immigrant author Kashmira Sheth read from, *Blue Jasmine*, a novel inspired by her life in India, as my students sniffed vials of jasmine oil and sandalwood paste, fragrances described in the book. They went on to read, *Boys without Names*, her novel taking readers into the world of child labor. I initiated school visits by illustrator, Kanyika Kina (*The Rumor*) and author Padma Venkatraman (*Island's End; A Time to Dance; Climbing the Stairs*) after their books were honored with the South Asia Book Award. Last summer, I experienced the landscape of Malaysian literature by designing an award-winning Hilton Teacher Trek itinerary that literally took me to destinations throughout Peninsular and East Malaysia (Borneo) and Singapore serving as cultural and historical backdrops in books penned by British Colonial and Malaysian authors. I have long promoted reading as a powerful and accessible way for students to travel and expand their worlds. Like all world travelers, students receive passports entitling them to "book" trips and document their reading. Student enter a "departure lounge" complete with in-flight magazines and international newspapers. Boarding passes contain country by country itineraries of suggested books. Reading centers simulate global locations as students read their way from Azerbaijan to Zimbabwe, writing travel blogs describing people, places, and experiences in their books. Attaining a global perspective empowers students to look at the bigger picture and raise their aspirations. My original classroom action research project, "Entering the Story World through Shadow Puppetry: An Interaction of Literature, Art, Music, and Drama," examined the relationship between arts immersion and reading engagement. Students experienced world literature, including the Hindu epic, Ramayana, through shadow puppet creation and performance within a reader/writer/artist workshop environment. Building on my experiences in China, I've added the epic, *Monkey King: The Journey to the West* and will add another layer after first-hand experiences with Karagöz shadow puppet theater, an important part of Turkey's literary and cultural heritage, during my upcoming NEH Summer Institute in Istanbul.

On my desk sits a statue of a woman sitting on a suitcase, an open book in her hand. Cradling it in his hands, a student looked up and smiled, as he excitedly whispered, "Books really can take you places!"