

Jean Donovan Sanborn Wins 2003 Maxwell Distinguished Leadership Award

By Jon Olson, Director, Center for Excellence in Writing, Penn State University

Jean Donovan Sanborn, Professor of English and the recently retired Director of the Farnham Writers' Center at Colby College, has won the 2003 NCPTW Ron Maxwell Award for Distinguished Leadership in Promoting the Collaborative Learning Practices of Peer Tutors in Writing. The award recognizes dedication to and leadership in collaborative learning in writing centers, for aiding students in together taking on more responsibility for their learning, and, thus, for promoting the work of peer tutors. The award also denotes extraordinary service to the evolution of the conference organization.

A plaque and cash prize, presented October 24, 2003, at the 20th Annual National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing held jointly with the International Writing Centers Association conference in Hershey, PA, were funded by an endowment from Ron and Mary Maxwell.

Professor Sanborn's nominators praised the "intelligence, enthusiasm, and savvy" of her leadership, noting that "she models the kind of relationship one hopes to find between writing center directors and peer writing tutors: respectful but relaxed, serious and light hearted, scholarly but not at all pedantic."

Another nominator wrote, "Jean, as much as any other director I can think of, knows that [the NCPTW] is one conference that's for the tutors, not the directors. It's what makes the conference a favorite for many of us, and it's why Jean has worked hard to make sure the conference continues."

Sanborn has helped her peer tutors develop presentations that have been highlights of the conference, as the following writer noted: "Jean and her Colby College writing center tutors have been a model of how to get the most from the NCPTW and how to give the most back to the conference. I have often overheard people at NCPTW going through their conference programs say something like, 'Oh, this one will be good. It's the Colby College tutors.'"

When asked what inspires her in her work, Sanborn first mentioned three individuals who have been particularly important to her: Ron Maxwell ("I'm totally sincere and not kissing up"), whose example—"he struck sparks among the tutors and then just got out of the way"—encouraged her "to make the national and regional and local conferences a central part of our Writers' Center life"; Muriel Harris, who inspired her "not only through WLN all these years but also by her ability to rise above the clutter . . . of the administrative stuff and keep her focus on the heart of tutoring work"; and Shirley Brice Heath, her "mentor-inspirer" with whom Sanborn "took part in a seminar she taught at Stanford and watched an astonishing collaboration evolve among her and the students. She had to work to undercut her own authority. She even did the meta-work of making us aware of how each of us was operating in the collaboration."

Sanborn also listed a number of inspirational authors who have written on collaboration, including Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede, Paolo Freire, Ann Berthoff (especially when she takes

on “killer dichotomies”), and Peter Elbow (especially when he embraces contraries). She noted in particular “[t]hose who inspire and support my desire to value play as essential to the process of setting language in motion”: “Hans Ostrom with his notion of ‘plerk’; ‘Myka’—the collaborative team of Kathleen Yancey and Michael Spooner, who break down old structural barriers; Wendy Bishop; and most recently and deeply Beth Boquet. These are among the people who make challenging the status quo a constant enterprise and writing centers spirited places.”