

2009 Caldwell Award Acceptance Speech

Marsha White Warren, Public Humanities Advocate

IN 1961, my husband Dave and I, having driven 3,000 miles across the country, pulled into North Carolina in a 1960 Volkswagen Bug with a three-month-old baby lying free to move around unattached in a car bed — remember those wonderful car beds that conveniently just hooked right over the back seat?



Marsha White Warren and Reginald F. Hildebrand. Photo by Mario Gallucci.

I was twenty-two and Dave had just finished his Navy duty in San Francisco, so, along with our baby, Douglas Grant, we were moving to Durham for Dave to enter Duke Law School. I was to be the breadwinner by teaching school — thirty-seven first graders with no aide, and no water in the room — at George Watts Elementary School.

It must have been a foreshadowing of my literary work to come, and I was to learn it thirty years later, from the author herself, that my principal, Mrs. Pritchard, a serious no-nonsense tall and strong woman, was the person upon whom Frances Gray Patton had created her protagonist for the famous *Good Morning, Miss Dove*.

Dave and I knew no one in North Carolina except his parents who had moved, four years before from Ohio, to live in what was then the small city of Charlotte! Being new people in the state in 1961 from the North with a name like Warren wasn't exactly popular and referring to the Chief Justice, they'd ask — "You Earl's kids?" And to show you just *how* new we were in the state — on my first day of teaching I asked the children what they'd done over the summer vacation. One child said, "We went to Nags Head." And I replied, "Oh, I like to go to the mountains, too."

The next year — 1962 — George Watts School enrolled the first two African American children, and they were placed in my first-grade class. They were a girl Constance and a boy Robin. Their stories would make you sad — such a struggle for these little children, and, for so many reasons, I dedicate this evening to Constance and to Robin — they would be fifty-

three now, and I wish I knew where they were and that they're all right.

And I further dedicate the evening to the memory of Paul Green who had the courage to have the black writer Richard Wright in his home here in Chapel Hill in 1941, at the shock and disdain of others, as they worked on [the dramatic version of] *Native Son*. It was the same Paul Green, who at the age of three in Harnett County, became best pals with the black tenant farmer's little son Rassie on his family's cotton and tobacco farm. And Paul said in his adult years that what he learned from that child informed the rest of his writing life as he strove to show that the Negro's hopes were the same as white folks', that their voices were real and true and needed to be heard, and in 1927, Paul Green won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama with his play about a young African American man who believed that education was the key to freedom.

It's been twenty-two years now since the Writers' Network's cardboard box of files first came to my house office. Along with the box was a computer that puffed out second-hand smoke whenever I turned it on, and there was also a, now extinct, daisy wheel printer.

I'm here tonight because of others. When I became the director of the Writers' Network, I was young and inexperienced, a first-grade teacher out of her field trying to be an arts administrator. And I need to tell you that each project started and ended with the participation of my husband Dave, because I would not have been able to do the work without his constant encouragement, willing spirit,



Storyteller Joyce Gear in a dramatic interpretation of Harriet “Moses” Tubman at the Caldwell celebration. Photo by Mario Gallucci.

and, for moving filing cabinets and boxes of books, his strong muscles. But he would tell me all the time that *he* was the one who benefited because he much preferred being around my colleagues, the writers, far better than his own, the lawyers!

It was when I began writing grant applications to the North Carolina Arts Council, in the 80s, that I learned the lessons and the wisdom of diversity and inclusiveness.

How many people of color do you have in your organization?

How many on staff?

How many people of color do you serve in your programming?

What accommodations are you making for people with physical challenges?

Thanks to the Arts Council, for showing us how and why to be inclusive. And special thanks to them for that grant many years ago to build a ramp at White Cross School so my board member Marty Silverthorne could get in the building to attend meetings!

When we discovered at the Writers’ Network that there were only eleven black writers on our database, we approached the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation and they funded the Black Writers Identification Program. By the end of the project we had 350 writers identified in North Carolina — some we knew who only had that one hand-written poem in the pocket of her apron that she was anxious to share. And the next year, we went back to ZSR with a program to identify the Native American voices in our state, and they funded that one, too. You may not know that North Carolina has more Native Americans than any state east of the Mississippi — with our eight tribes including Halawi-Saponi like Dreamweaver — a Woodland Indian.

Because of The Paul Green Foundation and the Mary Duke Biddle Foundation, we [at the Writers’ Network] were able to develop writing programs in prisons, shelters, retirement homes, and hospital settings. We had five programs going simultaneously in Central Prison including one for Death Row prisoners. All participants at the prison were complimentary members of the Network, and one of our most troubled members worked with his Network instructor right up until the time he was executed. Thanks sincerely to the Green and Biddle Foundations for continuing to provide grants each year for projects that enrich the lives of so many.

Special recognition and thanks to the Department of Cultural Resources and then-secretary Betty Ray McCain for granting funds for the establishment of the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame in 1996.

And throughout my tenure with these organizations and still today, for me with Weymouth Center programs,

always and always the North Carolina Humanities Council provides financial and *invaluable* hands-on support from the dedicated and bright staff for numerous programs to numerous organizations.

The point is that these foundations and agencies don’t just provide funding. They offer opportunities for organizations to *mature* in their understanding of the importance of reaching out — to serve all the people. All of them.

Individuals and corporations are also vital to the well-being of nonprofits. I remember the time when we had no money to do the newsletter, I went over to visit Frank Daniels, and the *News & Observer* sponsored the *Network News* [the newsletter of the Writers’ Network] for three years — then Frank handed us off to Rolfe Neill at the *Charlotte Observer* for three years and then we were handed off to the *Winston-Salem Journal*.

*With each poem we recite,
each child we teach, each
ramp we install, each
audience we build, each
person we empower to tell
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desert with our language
and literature....*

And now, I’ve embarked on a new journey with extraordinary North Carolinians to build a monument to freedom in our state capital that honors the African American experience and their struggle for freedom. And, as you would expect, this project

is funded generously, again by all these foundations and agencies I've mentioned: the North Carolina Humanities Council, ZSR, Green and Biddle Foundations, Arts Council, and the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources.

It seems this freedom journey began for me when, as a high school girl in Dayton, Ohio, in the early 50s, I was named president of the Y-Teens and, together with another officer, a black girl named Beverly, we would be sent that summer to an Ohio college campus for leadership training. "How about if we have a picnic along the way," said my mother, who would drive Beverly and me to the college to stay for the week. And, as a sheltered girl, I didn't figure it out until years later that my mother was worried that Beverly might not be served in a restaurant along the route.

I wouldn't really understand until 1963 when my husband Dave, with two-year-old Doug on his shoulders, and I walked in a silent march down the middle of Franklin Street in Chapel Hill as we pointed our fingers toward restaurants that would not serve blacks.

This summer in Southern Pines, the Weymouth Center for the Arts & Humanities, on whose board I serve, offered a writing camp for children. Knowing that there would be kids whose families couldn't afford the \$30 tuition, scholarships were made available. Listen to excerpts from the poems of these two little girls — listen to their clarion call, their claim of the human spirit.

*I have a memory of my Grandma.
She taught me how to read.
We practiced every day.
My name is Destiny Sumon Griffin.
It means I believe in being a writer one day.*

My Name by Antoinette McGee

*Antoinette means beautiful, wonderful and thoughtful.
It is like the sky. It is like when I talk to my daddy.
It is the memory of my Grandpa Georgie who taught
me how to be honest and how to joke; when he taught
me how to be brave and to face my fears.
My name is Antoinette McGee. It means if I want
something, I will go for it.
If I can't get it, I will keep trying.*

Veronique Vienne, in *The Art of Doing Nothing*, writes, "Apparently one of our functions on this earth is to be gardeners — unwilling caretakers of a fragile ecosystem. We may be detrimental to the environment in other ways, but when we empty our lungs, we help make the grass grow



Marsha and David Warren with son Doug at a protest march in Chapel Hill, 1963. Photo courtesy of the North Carolina Collection, UNC Chapel Hill.

greener. With our breath, we keep the planet from becoming a desert."

The metaphor is resounding. With each poem we recite, each child we teach, each ramp we install, each audience we build, each person we empower to tell their story, we keep the planet from becoming a desert with our language and literature; our art and culture, our humanities, our human experience and our absolutely vital requirement for freedom.

I can't imagine any state I'd rather have pulled into in 1961 in my Volkswagen Bug than North Carolina.