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## READING: THE CONFERENCES

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# **READING: THE CONFERENCES**

**Jeanne M. Jacobson**

***In the Winner's Circle:  
Middle Level Education***

**National Middle School Association  
18th Annual Convention, November 1991**

A substantial number of presentations at the annual convention of the National Middle School Association, held in Louisville Kentucky in November, were concerned with literature and the language arts. Three sessions were cosponsored by the National Council of Teachers of English. "Research Writing in the Middle School," one of the NCTE cosponsored presentations, was led by Kim Wilson and Sharon ShROUT, colleagues from Jefferson County Public Schools, Louisville Kentucky, where Wilson teaches seventh grade at Noe Middle School and ShROUT teaches fifth grade at Byck Elementary School. Their presentation illustrated several conference themes: the importance of language arts in middle level education, the richness of collegial interaction among teachers, and the empowerment of teachers in devising and developing curriculum.

Wilson and ShROUT alternated in presenting a chronology of their collaboration and the work of their students,

which resulted in a locally published book, *Circles: Will There Ever Be Peace?*, written by seventh graders taught by Wilson, and prepared using desktop publishing software by fifth graders in Shroul's classroom. When it comes to collaboration, said Shroul, "technology is the answer."

The original writing project stemmed from seventh graders' interest in the events of World War II, aroused by reading *Night*, by Elie Wiesel (New York, Bantam Books, 1960), an account of a boy's survival in a Nazi death camp. Wilson provided conference participants with extensive lists of methods her students used in research writing (e.g., double-entry journals, interviewing, learning logs, reaction journals, webbing), and the genres they chose for report writing (e.g., biographies, calendars, essays, interviews, letters, maps, mobiles, murals, plays, poems, short stories, time lines, travel guides). During the research process, the seventh graders discovered a wealth of resources within the community, including relatives who served in the armed forces during the war. The gulf war inspired essays and poems on the theme of recurring wars. (Excerpts from poems and interviews are shown here, and on the next page.)

### Excerpts from a seventh grader's poem

#### *CIRCLES*

by Ruben Gerding

*Going in circles, again and again  
War after war, it doesn't seem to end...  
The death of the innocent, the casualties of war  
Fighting a battle forever more.  
We're back where we started, no ground has been gained  
In circles we travel, in which peace has been slain*

*from "OPINION POEMS: From WWII to War in the Gulf," chapter 3 of  
Circles: Will There Ever Be Peace? written and produced by Jefferson  
County public school students; shared at the NMSA Conference, November 9, 1991.*

## Excerpts from interviews by seventh graders

### INTERVIEW OF ERNIE MARX

by Stephanie Wright

Ernie Marx was born on November 8, 1925 near Frankfurt, Germany. He was the son of a rabbi and in November of 1938 was looking forward to celebrating his bar mitzvah, a ceremony which marks the time when a young Jewish boy takes on the responsibilities of a Jewish man. He was to receive gifts, the most precious being a bicycle. He never got it. On November 9, Hitler order every synagogue in Germany (180) burned and all Jewish businesses destroyed. This was known as Kristallnacht or Crystal Night, night of the broken glass. ...1942 was the last time he saw his father. His father had been sent to Auschwitz. Seventeen members of Ernie's family perished at Auschwitz, or "disappeared." ...Mr. Marx said, "The greatest gift is for a person to bury his own, and 6,000,000 did not get buried."

Ernie survived the war and miraculously found his mother alive. He then moved to the United States. He is now a resident of Louisville, Kentucky. His message to all, "This should never happen again."

### INTERVIEW OF WES ROBERTS

reported by Elizabeth Brady

Q: Did you or anyone in your family fight or participate in World War II?

A: Yes, I did; I made maps for invasions.

Q: Where were you living between 1941-1945?

A: New Guinea, Japan, Philippines, and army bases in the United States.

Q: What changes in your life took place during the war?

A: I grew up.

Q: What was public reaction to the activities of World War II?

A: They supported the government.

Q: What was your opinion of Hitler?

A: He was too low for words.

Q: What were your forms of entertainment?

A: U.S.O. shows, radio, swim across a bay to see Bob Hope, movies. They sent over good movies.

### INTERVIEW OF MELVIN JONES

reported by Shaun Conley

My interview was with my uncle Melvin Jones. He joined the U.S. Navy in 1937 at the age of 21. His job was to ready supplies, ammunition and weapons. He got out after three years but volunteered to re-enlist in 1942 when the war got worse. He was stationed in the South Pacific islands and involved in two combat battles. Many of his friends lost their lives and he was seriously wounded, but continued to stay in the service and fight. He felt that it was his duty to defend his country and do what had to be done. ...When asked how he felt when the war was over, he laughed and said: "Happy! Very Happy!"

*from "EXPERIENCES: The Way Life Felt," chapter 2 of*

*Circles: Will There Ever Be Peace? written and produced by Jefferson County public school students; shared at the NMSA Conference, November 9, 1991.*

When Wilson shared her enthusiasm about the students' work with her friend, ShROUT suggested that the writing be published. She planned a curriculum for her fifth grade students which engaged them in using word processing software with Macintosh computers — learning to place text, select fonts and design pages. Language arts learning was enhanced by studying the writing of the older students, which also gave the fifth graders a view of the work expected of middle school students. Collaboration between the two grade levels was fostered by visits from the seventh graders as the text was prepared for publication. The book's title was drawn from two poems, a compromise devised by a fifth grader who asked, "Why couldn't we put *Circles*, and then some of those dots, and then *Will There Ever Be Peace?*"

To conclude the project, the middle school principal suggested a field trip for middle school students to teach the information they had learned to all five fifth grade classrooms. The seventh graders prepared and taught their curriculum through five programs, including a panel discussion and a play. Each of the 125 fifth graders were given a copy of the book — which includes three chapters and a glossary — to use as a textbook supplement in their study of this period in history.

"Teachers can invent curriculum," Wilson and ShROUT told their audience. Their collaboration resulted in a product-based curriculum emphasizing student as worker, within an extended learning community in which teachers learn as well as teach, and students teach as well as learn.

*The 1992 NMSA conference will be held in San Antonio, Texas, from November 5-8. Proposals for presentations must be made on NMSA forms, available from NMSA (Phone: 616-848-8211) and postmarked no later than Monday, February 3, 1992.*