



## Teacher Testimonial (Seventh Grade)

By Meredith Cortes (2005)

Last year, when I told fifty 7th grade students that I was participating in NaNoWriMo for the month of November, and that I'd be requiring their participation as well, they looked at me as if I'd just suggested that we all run down to the beach and jump in the freezing cold surf – although they might have looked forward to the frigid jump with more anticipation. My husband thought I was nuts, too...My poor husband. The computer teacher thought I was off my rocker when I signed up for 18 straight days in a row (the number of school days last November in which the students would be working on their novels). She practically nailed the doors shut after my departure and put up a closed sign. The other teachers shook their heads in the faculty room over their microwaved leftovers. One parent asked how I could “justify that much time spent on this project”. Did I mention my poor husband? He thought I'd lost it.

But we did it. For the whole month of November, I held class in the computer lab, starting with a mini-lesson on some aspect of writing from plot, character, setting, body language, show-not-tell, and other details of craft to commas, semicolons, paragraphs, quotation marks, and other minutia of conventions and grammar. Each day I asked five kids to print out what they had so far, and I read them and took notes after school (before starting my own frenetic writing session). The next day in class after my mini-lesson, I'd conference with the five students about their work, drifting to peer over the shoulders of others if by chance I'd finished conferencing. Did I mention my poor husband? He got precious little conference time.

When we were finished, I had words for the doubters, words to justify taking over the computer room, words to justify taking over my students' lives, to justify leaving my poor husband companionless, to “justify that much time spent on this project.”

My students had become writers – they actually saw themselves as writers after NaNo. In her debriefing letter to me, one student wrote “every time I see something that triggers or interests me, I write it down in my writer's notebook, which has become one of the greatest friends I have ever had. It has traveled on the side of my hip this past month, but I certainly do not intend to put it aside.” Another student wrote that “during my novel writing, my habits for writing have changed, it gets very detailed and even more interesting. Yes, my perception about myself as a writer has changed.”

But it wasn't only the students' writing that changed; they actually became different readers as well. They became readers who noticed craft. They became readers who

noticed the choices authors make in motivation and plot. They learned to read as writers. One student said that NaNo “changed the way I read fiction because I know it is hard to write a novel and that the book might not always end the way you want it to, but there is a purpose behind that.”

Although one student completed the “official NaNo count” of 50,000 words (and lorded over me the fact that she beat me by two words), most of the students hit their student goal of 10,000. Just realizing that they could accomplish such a task was a tremendous stride. One student wrote to me afterwards that “I thought I was never going to make 10,000 words, but I learned never to doubt myself, because I now know that I can write anything, even a novel.” Isn’t self-confidence the ultimate gift a teacher can give a student? Actually, perhaps it’s the ultimate gift a student can give a teacher.

And for that parent who wanted justification: Students told me that they “learned how to use and when to put commas.” They wrote that they “also learned the difference between their and there and what there or their to put.” They said they “improved on personification and learned how to use it properly.” They learned where to put paragraphs and where to start chapters. They learned how to use dialogue, how to put something in quotes, putting the punctuation in, and starting a new paragraph every time someone new is talking. These are things students told me they learned, not things I hoped they might learn.

I think one of my students put it well when she said that NaNoWriMo helped her to realize “that I have the power to become a writer. I have a voice inside of me that speaks for me in writing. I have found a gift inside of me. To let people feel and see things with a pen and paper...it amazes me to know that we as kids can do something that some adults can’t: Write a book..”

I intend to bring more students into the fold in 2005, and I intend to write alongside them every step of the way. My poor husband!