

In Our Own Back Yard : a Reflection on the NCSS Conference In Washington DC 2011 by Tracy Dussia, Churchland High School VCSS Treasurer

The Dimensions of Diversity Conference was the 91st annual meeting held by the NCSS, this year in the nation's capital, Washington, DC December 2-4. Many of Virginia's best and brightest teachers attended this event since the VCSS along with the Maryland and DC councils helped the host the affair. Volunteers could be seen in numerous venues, like the registration area, the hospitality table, facilitating sessions and generally setting the stage for a smooth operation. The VCSS Board in partnership with the Consortium of College Professors and Supervisors decided to cancel our annual conference in order to maximize turnout. After attending the conference, I wish to submit a summary to you so that you can see the enormous, complex and thrilling program it was. Numerous highlights come to mind.

Before the national conference opens, two years in advance a team of Program Planners not only select the venue, but determine the theme and the focus of the meeting. Keynote speakers are selected, calls for proposals go out in the spring, and many of our Virginia educators submit proposals. I was one of the program reviewers, and our task was to select the 400 or so workshops that would make the program out of about 900 submitted. This is an online process, and each submission is carefully scrutinized by several reviewers before it is chosen for presentation.

Next, delegates to the NCSS House of Delegates had to be selected from the 50 state councils and affiliate organizations. Craig Blackman, the VCSS President from Chesapeake, VA. led a delegation of four – along with Matt Atkinson from Richmond, Bill O'Sick from Danville, and Rick Zano from Virginia Beach. This is always a dynamic process, since this deliberative body advises the NCSS Board of Directors on the direction the board should take on numerous policy issues. For our outstanding efforts throughout the year, the VCSS received the Silver Star Recognition, which was a huge credit to everyone who helped make the VCSS the leader in promoting social studies in the commonwealth.

The offsite events were tremendous opportunities to take part in exclusive private visits to popular sites in and around DC – the Newseum, and the National Archives both hosted evening tours of their facilities, Mt. Vernon hosted an evening Candlelight event, Gettysburg hosted a bus trip to the battlefield, just to name a few. These sponsors opened their venues to the teachers and truly rolled out the red carpet to host the teachers who attended.

The annual dance, sponsored by Herff Jones/ Nystrom was the final event Friday and is eagerly awaited by teachers who traveled from all over the nation to get some much needed Socializing and Studying together. I spoke to folks from Alaska, Hawaii, Texas, Florida and many other places as we mingled to compare stories and ideas.

Keynote speakers also were a big draw. Arne Duncan, the US Secretary of Education, drew a standing room only crowd at the President's Breakfast Friday morning. Our

Teacher of the Year from Virginia, Rick Zano had his photo taken with Secretary Duncan after he was presented with our TOY award of \$500 and the thanks of a grateful organization for his teaching in Virginia Beach. Rex Ellis took time to speak to our session about his role in establishing the new Smithsonian Institute's Museum of African American History and Culture, currently being constructed on 14th and Constitution Avenue. Virginia was already well aware of the reputation of Dr. Ellis as he also served as the VP of Colonial Williamsburg Foundation's Historic Area programs previously. Judy Woodruff, journalist for the Newshour on PBS ended the conference Sunday morning with remarks about the state of the nation, the media, and the task that teachers have promoting civic education.

In terms of future leadership, I am proud to report that my own student teacher from years gone by India Meissel spoke to the HOD along with the other candidates for the Board of Directors for NCSS. She is running as the K-12 Delegate at large, and I hope you will all take the time to vote this spring for India, as she has participated in numerous programs, earning the National Social Studies Teacher of the Year previously. She also presented a session on Digital Technology for the American History Learner.

Virginia presenters included Laura Lay, who serves on the VCSS Board and has been instrumental in coordinating the state conference, especially the exhibit hall. Laura and Zak McNamara did a session entitled Teacher in Pajamas which described how to manage online courses and develop its potential. Rich Zano also was scheduled to give a presentation on Saturday on Supporting student literacy needs using assessment and research based strategies. Old friends popped up and I was thrilled to run into Bill Obrokta from the VHS as well as a former teacher Jim Obrachta who is now at Liberty High School.

As I mentioned, there were hundreds of workshops, poster sessions, and sessions, each geared to every conceivable discipline and grade level. My favorites were the session on Street Law, as well as the the Library of Congress sessions. The national archives did a spectacular job on the Civil Rights Unit using primary documents from their collections and presidential libraries. And I was very excited to hear about NBCLearn, a new resource for teachers of civics, government and even history by making available original video clips of their news broadcasts from their own archives. I can't wait to discuss this exciting opportunity with them further.

Now, to everybody's favorite venue, the Exhibit Hall. About 600 vendors brought everything imaginable for the conference attendees to experience – from the actual C-Span Bus, parked in the Exhibit hall, to the publishers wishing us to take samples, raffles, posters, pins, flash drives, and every bit of teacher bling under the sun. My friends at YLI, the Center for Politics program which promotes civic ed was more than happy to share the pocket Bill of Rights handouts for students, stickers, and most importantly the Lesson Plans which are easy to adapt to any classroom, and did I mention once again that these are still provided to educators FREE. There is a notion that is becoming increasingly rare. I personally bought a cashmere scarf from Scotland, bumper stickers

from Donnelly Colt and calendars from the Gilder Lehrman Institute, while learning about their new summer programs which are open to applicants now.

After all of this, I have returned to class, recharged, exuberant and proud of my chosen profession. I hope that someday each of you will attend the national conference in the destination of your choice – next year in Seattle - so that you can see for yourself why I return raving about the new ideas in social studies education for all of us to use, if only we had known they were right in our own back yard (or internet)! td