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# Summer Institute 2011

The Connecticut Writing Project at Storrs is pleased to introduce twelve new members to their community. This year’s participants are from places as far as Germany, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Turkey and as close as Glastonbury and Lebanon, CT.

Although all twelve teachers come from different backgrounds, teach different subjects to different age groups, and are at different points in their careers, they all share the same devotion to bettering their skills and exploring new teaching methods for the sake of their students.

This passion has already allowed them to accomplish impressive things in their careers, and will no doubt lead them to more great endeavors in the future.

Take a few minutes to meet this year’s participants!



## CWP Grad Assistants

The CWP’s current Grad Assistant, **Sean Forbes**, has spent a portion of the summer training **Laila Khan**, who will be taking over the role for this upcoming year . Both Sean and Laila were asked about things they have done in the past, things they are working on now, and plans they have for the future.

CWP
Grad Assistants
Sean Forbes: 9
Laila Khan: 9



## Alexa Mannheim

Alexa is a Connecticut native who feels like she has “won the lottery” by working as a teacher. While attending the University of Connecticut, for both a B.A. in English and a M.A. in Curriculum and Instruction, she co-authored an action-based research paper on how to address homophobia in the public school system entitled, “I didn’t know what to say...’ – Four Archetypal Responses to Homophobic Rhetoric in the Classroom.” Since then she has been writing in “sporadic bursts,” but teaching constantly. She currently teaches Developmental English at Capital Community College in Hartford, as well as a Business writing course to international employees in corporate settings. One for versatility, Alexa built a curriculum for the Congregation Beth Israel in West Hartford from scratch. The program, which won her **the award for the most innovative program**, was called “Jews Around the World” and focused on Jewish diversity. In her teaching, Alexa tries to respect the diverse needs of every student and has noticed that they have helped her see differently as well: **“Each individual student has taught me something that has helped shape my worldview, and made me a better person for having known them.”**

Alexa, having found out about the CWP through a friend that completed the program, feels that it has given her a renewed desire to write. She enjoys the feedback she has received from teachers from all around the country and hopes that by sharing the same kind of feedback, **she will encourage students to take ownership over their own composition**, rather than simply telling them how she feels it should be done.

## Stephen Carey

Stephen has always had a **deep interest in railroads and railroad history**. His interest was the driving force that brought him to eventually choose History as one of the subjects he wanted to teach. While growing up and attending school in New Britain, Stephen felt as though he was in the “middle of the pack,” and he wanted to go into **teaching so that he could give extra help and attention to students who might need it**. He became certified to teach History and English to grades seven through twelve at Central Connecticut State University. Although he has not practiced writing extensively since finishing college, he recognizes the importance of writing and hopes that his “enthusiasm for the topics can inspire [students] to write.” He believes that **“teaching writing is one of the most important things a teacher can do,”** so he wanted use the Summer Institute as a chance to improve his skills and teach English in the best way possible. He has thoroughly enjoyed his time at the Summer Institute, and has even called it the **“best academic experience of [his] career.”** Through the work he has done, Stephen has learned different styles of writing and has even found a new interest in writing poetry. He says that he cannot wait to take the skills he has acquired back to Martin Kellogg Middle School in Newington where he works as a **learning tutor**. Stephen currently lives in South Windsor, CT.

## Eric Maroney

In high school, Eric was given the opportunity to attend an extended day arts program called Educational Center for the Arts (ECA). He remembers his instructors **utilizing their creativity and language to tell works of fiction** in a way that was different from any previous English classes he had taken. It was during this time Eric spent studying at ECA that he realized he wanted to teach writing. He worked towards this by attending **Southern Connecticut State University in the honors program** for a B.A. in English with a concentration in Creative Writing and a minor in Women's Studies. While at Southern, Eric had an essay published in the graduate Women's Studies journal ("A Woman in Mind") and two short stories published in different anthologies. Following graduation, Eric attended Sarah Lawrence College to earn a M.F.A. in fiction. After **participating in Teach for America** for the city of New Haven in 2009, he began working at the L.W. Beecher Museum Magnet School (also in New Haven), where he is a language arts instructor for the eighth grade.

Eric has always been an avid writer, but felt he needed some new ideas for himself and for teaching his students. He was happy when a friend told him about the Connecticut Writing Project because he was looking for a summer writer's retreat, and the CWP allowed him to develop his own writing alongside his approach to students' writing. He describes his experience as having **allowed him to see what areas of his classroom need variety**, that there are times where students need more structure, but also times when they should be given more freedom. Through his work he has **"blended the study of pedagogy, practical classroom applications and a space to work on [his] own craft"** and he is excited to put these skills into effect in September.

## Jena DeMaio

Jena is a high school English teacher from Glastonbury, CT who credits her mother for her inspiration to teach. She feels that her mom always made it possible for her to celebrate her interests in reading and writing and always supported her while she explored making a career out of it. Throughout high school Jena always favored English classes, but it was during her undergrad at the University of Connecticut that she noticed she had a **special interest in Medieval Literature and the parallel that it has with medieval art**. It was during these Medieval Studies courses that she developed a skill for academic writing, and she credits one of her best pieces to be "The Validation of Voice in *The Second Shepherds' Play*," which focused on women's voices in Medieval literature, as well as the crisis of faith in the Middle Ages.

Jena received her M.A. from the Neag School of Education and now teaches both honors and college prep English to Coventry High School's tenth grade students. She heard about the CWP from one of her colleagues and was drawn to it for the camaraderie of shared passions: **"I knew I would be working with teachers who are truly committed to student achievement and success. We all want our students to not only become better writers, but to enjoy the art of writing."** Since participating in the Summer Institute, Jena has enjoyed the "combination of research, personal writing, and academic reading" and has become inspired by ways to get her students to become more enthusiastic about creative writing.

While not in the classroom, Jena **puts her passion into her love of gardening**. She sees similarities between her job and her hobby, as she explains: "Just as I plant my flower garden and help my plants to grow, the same can be said for my teaching. **I am helping my students to cultivate their own beliefs and ideas, so that they become strong readers and writers."**

## Alice Kuzel

Alice is a writing and language arts teacher who feels that her “passions about writing influence her students in a positive fashion.” Growing up in Alaska, Alice always had an interest in history, social sciences, and reading, but did not pursue completing her B.A. until after her youngest daughter was enrolled in kindergarten. During the time she spent tutoring for the Eastern Connecticut State University department she realized how much she enjoyed working with students, and then went on to obtain her M.A. in teaching from Sacred Heart University. Alice has taught students of all ages, but currently teaches language arts and writing to grades four through six at the Oak Grove Montessori School in Mansfield. She feels that her background as both a tutor and a student of creative writing and composition prepared her for different teaching careers, as has her enjoyment of writing inside and outside of the classroom.

While working at Lebanon Middle School three years ago, Alice became acquainted with the CWP. She was interested at the time and unable to attend, but is very pleased with her decision to apply this year. The work she has done with the CWP strengthened and enhanced the skills she began acquiring through her education and helped her gain more confidence through the research she has completed.

Alice lives in Lebanon with her husband and three daughters. In 2003 she was presented the Lifelong Learning Award from the Eastern Connecticut State University English department and she is proud to say that in the Fall of 2010, five of her students submitted work and were published in a poetry anthology entitled *Creative Communications: A Celebration of Poetry* (Northeast).

## Ray Kasper

Ray developed an interest in education after substitute teaching in his children’s school and learning how much he enjoyed interacting with both students and teachers. He was born and raised in Cleveland, Ohio and enjoyed both reading and math. Although he says that his interest in math wore off once he began taking calculus, he continued to enjoy reading. When he began substitute teaching, he was approached by a few teachers that encouraged him to return to school to pursue his M.A. in Education. He says that they saw “natural ability in [his] style in the classroom and it reflected in the students and their behavior in school.” He earned his M.A. in Education from the University of St. Francis in Joliet, IL and since then has been subbing in the Hartford area, where he says he has taught “every grade and subject except for high school.”

Before a friend told Ray about the Connecticut Writing Project and the Summer Institute, he viewed writing as a “necessary evil; a way to get the students ready for the standardized test or another way of assessing them.” However, he now insists that his perspective has done a “180 degree turn,” and he sees writing as not only enjoyable, but also as having a purpose in the classroom as another form of expression for students that may have a difficult time communicating with others. He has enjoyed the challenge brought about by the Summer Institute and wants to continue with the momentum he has gained through sharing his writing and improving his own work, as well as the work of his students. He currently lives in Glastonbury, CT.

## Max Echevarria

While attending Eastern Connecticut State University for his undergrad, Max felt that he wanted to explore a career in Political Economics and saw himself living in Washington, D.C. After realizing he would not want to be so far away from his family, he decided to revisit his interest in Social Studies and worked towards a B.A. in both Middle School Education and History/Social Sciences. In 2002, Max returned to school, this time at UConn, to complete his M.A. in Curriculum and Instruction with a concentration in Bilingual Education. In 2008, Max returned to UConn for his Sixth Year degree, which he completed in 2010.

For the past ten years Max has been working as a both fifth and sixth grade teacher at Windham middle school in a dual language program called *Compañeros*. Besides the work he does teaching language, Max also has an interest in bringing technology into the classroom since he feels that it gives students “opportunities to write and to learn new tools.” Max was invited to present at two technology conferences, alongside Jane Cook, at the RESC Alliance, as well as to present at a conference on Multicultural Education where he and his teaching partner were able to “showcase how we worked together to create a multicultural curriculum and implement using technology as a means for students to empower themselves.” He is proud of those accomplishments because he is passionate about both topics and enjoys sharing the work he has done with others.

Max originally heard about the CWP through Jane and applied for it once he had finished his Sixth Year Degree because he felt that he needed more knowledge in the area of writing. He describes the experience as “phenomenal” and shares that he has learned “so much about the reasoning behind creative writing” as well as on “how we teach and why we should teach creative writing.”

## Jenna Senft

As a student enrolled in Mr. Zingarella’s High School Social Studies class, Jenna noticed his enthusiasm towards the subject and his lessons. She saw that his attitude was contagious when she felt herself wanting to learn as much about the topics as possible, and Jenna took this as inspiration to become a teacher who had as much passion as he did. Because of an early interest in both English and History, Jenna graduated with a B.A. in English from UConn in 2008 and then continued with graduate school at the University of New Haven, where she received her M.A. in 2010. Jenna spent her first year teaching third grade at Conte West Hills in New Haven. She is proud to share that under her instruction, her class won the school science fair with a project titled “Freaky French Fries” where they re-created the experiment from the documentary *Supersize Me*.

From her experience as a primary school teacher, Jenna finds that her students will write on a wide variety of topics with enthusiasm, and she adds, “They also enjoy sharing their work with one another, and publishing ‘final pieces’ that they can share with their families.” Jenna was nominated for the Summer Institute in 2010, but waited until she was hired at her current job before she accepted. This summer she is taking a cue from her students and enhancing her creative writing skills. She is also enjoying how the assigned readings offer answers on how to teach writing in a way that is best for students. As Jenna puts it herself, “it is so true that if you do not actually WRITE, you are never going to become a better writer. Even though coming up with topics can be difficult, it is always better to get a sloppy first draft on the page and go back and clean it up later.”

Jenna currently resides in Cheshire, CT. She is looking forward to another year at Conte West Hills, where she will now be taking on the writers of the first grade.

## Violet Sims

While growing up in Higüey, Dominican Republic, New York City, and eventually New Britain, Violet did not think that her future would lead to a career in teaching. However, after graduating with a B.A. in Theater from UConn and getting work experience in the Dean of Student's office, Violet discovered she was interested in higher education. She went on to receive her M.A. in Student Affairs and to work as an academic advisor at the college level. But after realizing **she would make more of an impact teaching at the K-12 level**, she took the Alternative Route to Certification.

Violet has been teaching Spanish and ESL at New Britain High School for over four years to grades nine through twelve. She has always enjoyed writing in both English and Spanish but notices that sometimes her students are hesitant to write in a language that is different than their own. For this reason she is happy to see that when they give it a chance, they are pleasantly surprised by their own capabilities. Violet found out about the CWP when Jason **contacted her based on an interest in bilingual teachers**, and she was enthusiastic to volunteer her experience in the field. She describes the work she has done in the Summer Institute as "challenging in a great way." By participating in the program she has learned how to **enhance her own writing skills, as well as to come up with new strategies she can use in the classroom**. She also adds that her experience has helped her have "a better understanding of how creative writing can support academic writing, and help make writing in general more enjoyable for students."

It goes without saying that Violet enjoys the time she spends in the classroom, but she also takes her skills outside of the classroom to her work as **co-advisor of the African American Club at New Britain High School**. She describes it as the "**most active, student driven club**" and she is proud of the thousands of dollars awarded in yearly scholarships that give urban students a chance at opportunities they would not have otherwise had.

## Jessica Mueller

Jessica grew up in Southbury, CT, and realized through the inspiration of a high school English teacher that she wanted to make teaching a part of her future. She always enjoyed studying English and found herself writing a lot when she was younger, but it was in her first year of college that she noticed it was a definite passion of hers. This upcoming year, she will be working to get her M.A. through the Neag School of Education, and she will be **taking on the role of Grad Assistant for the UConn Writing Center outreach program**.

Jessica found out about the CWP while she was applying for the position at the Writing Center, and it caught her attention immediately: "I wanted to become involved because it seemed like a really great opportunity for professional development and a great challenge because it would force me to write often and share my writing." Jessica admits that she had a bit of anxiety about being the youngest participant, but it disappeared after the very first day because "**Everyone was supportive and I felt like the workshops really jump-started my creativity and therefore boosted my confidence**." Through her work with the Summer Institute, Jessica has come to learn that it's okay if first and second drafts are not perfect; in fact, they are not supposed to be. What is more important is the general act of writing, and writing as often as possible.

## Rose Clack

While growing up, Rose often spent summers helping her aunt Mary Ellen set up her classroom for the upcoming school years. It was one of many experiences in her past that made her realize she wanted to be a teacher. Although Rose was not always interested in school, she was always interested in writing. *She used it as an outlet for her thoughts, emotions, and ideas*, and she found that writing helped her overcome any troubles going on in her life. A few years later, her aunt asked her to work as an assistant in her classroom, which helped confirm her decision to teach. While attending Three Rivers Community College, Rose was *recognized by the humanities department for her commitment to excellence in writing due to the work she did writing creative nonfiction*. She received her B.A. in English from Eastern Connecticut State University, chose to do the Alternative Route to Certification, and got her M.A. in Secondary English from Eastern as well.

Rose now works at Interdistrict School for the Arts and Communication where she teaches literacy and journalism to grades six, seven, and eight. She initially heard about the Connecticut Writing Project in 2005 while participating in a summer workshop through the program at Fairfield. She was incredibly *inspired by all the different writing techniques and teaching models that she acquired during this time*. When the director of her school, Dr. Lloyd Johnson, asked her about attending this year's Summer Institute she replied that she was definitely interested. She describes her experience as an *"intense, yet amazing, experience."* One thing she appreciated was being able to work with the other teachers. As she puts it, "It has been valuable sharing and learning from teachers across the state. While at times I feel very intimidated, I am encouraged by the common respect and value that we all have for one another." She is excited to share all of the lessons she has learned with her students and colleagues during the upcoming school year.



## Bernie Schriber

As the only retiree participating in this year's Summer Institute, Bernie came to the CWP looking for his next academic challenge. He was born in Germany in 1948, and spent the next 12 years moving between Israel, Sweden, and Germany. In 1960 when Bernie was 12 years old, his family came to Hartford, CT and he went to UConn for a B.A. in English and a minor in Theater. Following graduation in 1972, Bernie tried out a few different jobs, but in 1975 he began substitute teaching and discovered that he "had found his passion." He pursued this passion by going back to ECSU for both his teaching certificate and his M.A., which he completed in 1983. Bernie began teaching at the Ashford School in 1978 and was there for 32 years until he retired in 2010. He taught Language Arts to grades six, seven, and eight, and was a fifth grade teacher as well. Throughout the years, Bernie used his interest in writing poetry by modeling many types of poetic forms in the classroom for his students and by writing when he asked them to write.

Bernie found out about the Summer Institute through his colleague, was intrigued by the inspiring experience she had, and was also interested in finding "ways [he] could continue to be involved in helping others to improve their writing skills as well as to explore [his] own creative thoughts." He feels "grateful and honored" to be a part of this program, and has enjoyed "the opportunity to try out a variety of writing genres for ourselves as we try to find our writing voices." Although he admits the program was a demanding, it was also one of the most rewarding experiences he has had.

Throughout his career, Bernie has had quite a few accomplishments, including being a member of the CT Advisory Council for Teacher Professional Standards for six years, being named Ashford's Teacher of the Year in 2004, serving on both the Language Arts Curriculum Committee and Health and Safety Committee, and being chairperson of the Ashford Education Association Negotiating Team for many years. Still, what he finds most rewarding is the feedback he receives from his students: "There's nothing like a parent or student giving me a letter at the end of the year telling me that I made a positive difference in the life of their child or that student during that school year. That's what makes teaching worthwhile for me."

For his next adventure, Bernie is spending his time exploring his own writing, playing his violin, and contemplating teaching part-time at a local community college.



## Laila Khan

*(Incoming Grad Assistant)*

Laila was born and raised in Staten Island, New York. In her early years, she remembers having an interest in literature because of teachers that made learning interesting and engaging. Whereas most courses made her feel restricted because of the need to follow a particular curriculum, certain teachers allowed her to **form her own opinions on the material they were covering and explore her own voice**. Throughout middle school and high school Laila continued working on her writing, but she mostly remembers the inspiration she felt to teach in a way that gave students more freedom than they were used to.

Laila attended Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, MA, where, after studying with a few “great teachers,” she decided to **major in Literature with a minor in Religion**. She eventually ended up at the University of Connecticut for her PhD, and has developed an interest in Irish literature, War and Trauma studies, and Romanticism through her work with professors like Charles Mahoney, Gregory Semenza, Mary Burke, and Rachel Lynch. She has also taught for Freshman English and Upward Bound, tutored for the CAP/SSS program, and became involved with the **Early College Experience (ECE), which allows students to take college level courses while still attending High School**.

Throughout her time with ECE, as well as simply being involved in the English department, Laila was always aware of the CWP and describes it as a “very inviting organization.” Sean informed her of the position of grad assistant because he knew that she would enjoy the aspect of the **“other side of teaching that goes beyond just classroom development and allows students to think outside of the box.”**

## Sean Forbes

*(Outgoing Grad Assistant)*

Sean was born in Heidelberg, Germany but grew up in Queens, New York. He developed an early interest in writing, which he somewhat credits to the programs that were implemented through his high school. He attended John Bowne High School, a magnet school with a **strong writing program, and while there he wrote for the school newspaper and literary magazine**.

When he first started his undergrad at Queens College he was an accounting major, and though he was good at it, he realized that he did not enjoy it as much as he enjoyed other things. During his sophomore year of college Sean rediscovered his interest for English thanks to one professor who “took him under her wing.” Ever since then he has had an interest in the discipline with a specific interest in Africana studies.

For his graduate degree, Sean came to the University of Connecticut because of its English program, location, and for the chance to work with such professors as Jerry Phillips, Eleni Coundouriotis, and Penelope Pelizzon. He really began writing professionally in 2003 after taking a class with Pelizzon and understanding that it is **more than the act of simple writing, it is also about the method of understanding the critical and analytical approaches**. Sean has taught freshman English, Intro to Creative Writing, and the Long River Review course at UConn.

Previously, he has held positions as both the assistant director of Creative Writing Program and the director of Poetic Journeys. With the responsibilities he faced with both opportunities **he experienced a different side of writing where he was able to work on a type of literary business**. His position as assistant director of the Creative Writing Program introduced him to such duties as intergrading technology into the classroom setting, keeping teachers up to date on their certification, and working on the CT Student Writer’s magazine.

Sean is currently working to get his **full-length book of poetry, *Providencia*, published**. He will also continue teaching in the fall. Before that, however, he is taking some time to read plenty of fiction, as his next aspiration is to be a fiction writer.

# cwrp



All interviews were conducted by Undergraduate Writing Intern Shauna Cassell through the help of Jason Courtmanche, Kelly Andrews-Babcock, Jane Cook, Sean Forbes, Laila Khan, and, of course, the participants of the 2011 Summer Institute.