TC discovers past connection with WMWP
by Nikki Crosby

2014 SI participant Nikki Crosby discovered that WMWP was responsible for publishing her work when she was a 6th grade student. She reflects on the impact it had on her life.

There I stood: a bottomless reservoir of shuffling, self-conscious adolescent energy. Tweens, teens, and teachers stood around the UMass Amherst campus auditorium, talking and laughing as confidently as stockbrokers at a cocktail party.

“Why don’t you grab yourself a cookie?” asked my elementary school librarian. Where did she come from, and what was she playing at? “Because they’re for you!” I blurted out. She chuckled, shaking her head. “Why would they put out cookies for us? Of course they’re for you kids!” Her cajoling fell on deaf ears, for I accepted neither cookies nor lawful admittance into that ceremony hall. Those were privileges intended for the college-bound, I reasoned—not hill town kids like me.

The chatter subsided. Middle and high schoolers began to line up beside a stage. One by one, and after a brief introduction, they were called up to the podium to share their work, and while I do not remember what those students wrote, these young authors made quite an impression on me—they were passionate about writing, and they were up there belting it out like pros. Poetry, memoir, short story, essay, and nearly every genre my then 6th grade self could conceive of was represented. After I got over these students’ stage presence and strength of delivery, there were just words. And words I knew I could write; they were the reason I was here.

That day, when the Western Massachusetts Writing Project award ceremony commenced, I was a pretty good writer—for a country girl. Upon conclusion, I was a good writer period, and I returned home with a deep sense of empowerment. The world of academia was not that hostile, elitist, and impossibly difficult to penetrate place I imagined it to be. I had been there and, as you may have concluded, lived to tell about it.

One year later I distinguished myself by writing zealously in 7th grade English class, tearing through a new journal booklet every week. It was almost as if, as a published author, I held my written work to higher standards. Being a writer had become part of my identity, and I owned it throughout my career as a student.

I am now a high school English teacher after taking the path of greatest resistance, becoming the college educated person that I was never raised to be. I chose this path to change the minds of talented students who fashion themselves as rural, or poor, or minority, or otherwise an “other,” and therefore, unfit to hold the keys to the educational kingdom. I want for them what WMWP did for me. Without the WMWP student anthology and award ceremony, I would have been oblivious to avenues before me. And while I can do my best to open those doors for students, being recognized, published, and honored by the ambassadors of an academic realm that may as well neighbor Mordor—that is irreplaceable.