

NNELL
at

25

and its
founding
mothers

by Janet Glass

On the occasion of NNELL's 25th anniversary, I looked into a bit of its past and sent interview questions to those early leaders that could be reached.

The Founding

It was November 1986. An ACTFL Conference in Dallas brought them together at a networking session for early language programs. These professionals were lamenting: elementary schools interested in foreign language programs had no network for support. So our Founding Mothers decided to do something about it.

Nancy Rhodes said, "The Center for Applied Linguistics orga-

nized and hosted the planning meeting in January, 1987 at CAL's offices in Washington, D.C. Twenty-five educators from 16 states met, most of whom came from out of town at their own expense.

"It was like a pajama party at my house,"

Mimi Met said, "and the excitement was palpable."

At the end of the two-day meeting, the National Network for Early Language Learning was born. The Executive Committee that came out of that meeting included Carolyn Andrade, Diane Ging, Mari Haas, Nancy Hess, Melanie Klutts, Gladys Lipton, Kathleen Riordan, Nancy Rhodes and Marcia Rosenbusch. Marcia

said, "I had just finished my Ph.D in 1986 and had focused my dis-

sertation on the topic of second language learning in young children. I presented my findings at the ACTFL Conference in Dallas, Texas, in November 1986 at which we decided that an organization such as NNELL was needed."

The Early Days

Kathy Riordan looked back on those early days: "I think that the concept of a network encouraged teachers, usually with little administrative support, to be changemakers."

Carol Ann (Pesola) Dahlberg, co-author of *Languages and Children: Making the Match*, said, "Visibility for early language programs was relatively low. NNELL gave us a focal point for the passion we shared for early languages in the early years."

At that time, Nancy Rhodes, Mimi Met, Carol Ann (Pesola)

Dahlberg, Helena Curtain and others were instrumental in providing professional development opportunities for districts across North Carolina. "That helped us establish strong programs," Mary Lynn Redmond recalled. As more and more states were included in the network, NNELL also began to sponsor networking sessions at conferences across the country.

Mary Lynn said, "NNELL began as a grassroots organization and I think this is the beauty of the organization."

Mimi Met recalled that "when ACTFL first scheduled sessions for us to share materials or information, about seven or eight of us showed up. One way we knew NNELL was a success was when the annual Swap Shop breakfast at ACTFL sold out at 250 tickets."

Publications Emerge



Celebrating NNELL's 20 year anniversary at ACTFL 2007 in San Antonio. NNELL past presidents from left to right: Lori Langer de Ramirez, Nancy Rhodes (past Executive Secretary), Susan Walker, Janis Jensen, Myriam Met, Martie Semmer, Marcia Rosenbusch, Carol Ann Dahlberg, Eileen Lorenz, Kathleen Riordan, Mary Lynn Redmond, Christine Brown, Mari Haas, Terry Caccavale



In the spring of 1989, NNELL produced the first volume of a publication, *FLES News*. This newsletter helped to create cohesion among participants. It also served to disseminate information to a growing body of NNELL members. In the fall of 1995, NNELL transitioned from a newsletter to a referred journal entitled, *Learning Languages*. One of our Founding Mothers, Marcia Rosenbusch, was the first editor of *FLES News*. She then became the founding editor of the journal.

Marcia remarked, "I think having a journal was a strong visible reminder of the organization and its work."

Carol Ann said, "Planning for a journal, and eventually for a referred portion of the journal, helped to include pre-kindergarten through university participation."

A More Formal NNELL

Then, in the fall of 1991, NNELL elected their first officers and approved the constitution. Many of the founders continued to help shape the organization. The elected officers included Carol Ann (Pesola) Dahlberg, Carolyn Andrade and Audrey Heining-Boynton. Nancy Rhodes was appointed executive secretary and Marcia Rosenbusch, editor. Among the accomplishments in the subsequent years were becoming a voting member of JNCL, dividing NNELL into five geographical regions with regional representatives, and establishing the NNELL Swapshop breakfast at ACTFL in 1992.

Kathy Riordan reflected that her favorite NNELL memory is the Swapshop breakfasts. She called it "a lively member-directed event where sharing is the most important thing."

During the more formal years, NNELL also became partners with ERIC-CLL, working with the ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics at CAL. Under the presidencies of Mari Haas, Eileen Lorenz and Mary Lynn Redmond, political action and advocacy grew widely along with strong networking. In 1997, Mary Lynn organized an Invitational Institute that brought 58 NNELL members to Wake Forest University. Participants created lessons to reflect the reforms in K-8 language education that were brought on by the new National Standards.

Later, NNELL Institutes were held at Iowa State University for

several consecutive summers. This is a favorite memory of Marcia's: "The NNELL workshops we were able to hold at Iowa State University through the National K-12 Foreign Language Resource Center were great. They helped teachers from across the country have time to get to know each other and talk about mutual concerns."

As noted by Carol Ann, "We set up a formal structure that ensured that many voices could contribute to the development of the organization." NNELL's structure in more recent years has also benefitted from the fine leadership of some who may not have been previously mentioned. They include presidents Susan Walker, Christine Brown, Myriam Met, Carine Feyton, Martie Semmer, Lori Langer de Ramirez, Janis Jensen, Terry Caccavale, Paula Patrick, Jacque Van Houten and Rita A. Oleksak.

The Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century

In addition to networking, supporting programs, and advocacy, NNELL has also been a force in national foreign language goals. Marcia Rosenbusch relates an anecdote that changed the face of the ACTFL National Standards.

In 1993, I ran into members of the Standards Task Force Committee as we overlapped at a meeting on the East Coast. I learned that they were not thinking of including the elementary level in the standards document since there were few elementary programs at that time. When I got back home, I wrote a position paper that expressed the idea that "establishing standards for eighth and twelfth grade, but not fourth grade, limits the future of the profession" and sent it to the NNELL Executive Board for approval. They backed it, and with this statement from the NNELL Executive Board, Christine Brown, Chair of the Standards Task Force, later said she was able to get the task force to visit K-12 schools in Florida. After that they decided to make the Standards K-12.

The National Standards Task Force attributed NNELL's strong push for a K-12 framework as the impetus that broadened the scope and long-term impact of the standards.

Other Impacts on the Profession

Just for Fun

Other names proposed before NNELL was chosen for this organization:

- NNELE: National Network for Early Language Educators
- NESFLE: Network of Elementary School Foreign Language Educators
- FLIC: Foreign Language Instruction for Children
- NELL: Network for Early Language Learning
- EFLL: Early Foreign Language Learning
- EAL: Early Additional Languages

According to some of our early leaders, the impact NNELL has had on the profession extends not only to teachers, but also to the public and other organizations. Kathy Riordan stated, "I think NNELL has given members a power base from which to learn and with whom one can advocate for change."

Carol Ann Dahlberg said, "It brought visibility to the needs of language education at this level."

Marcia offered, "I think, through the years, it has made other organizations, such as ACTFL, more aware of the elementary school level of world language teaching."

Nancy went even further: "One of the most exciting things has been seeing how a small grass-roots, low budget effort—of teachers, administrators, teacher trainers, and researchers—has been able, by working collaboratively, to make a huge impact on the teaching of languages to young children. Over the last 25 years NNELL has moved the field of K-8 language education into the forefront of K-16 language education."

Advice for Current and Future Early Language Teachers

Our NNELL Founding Mothers have seen the organization grow and the profession change. They are eager to impart their wisdom to those who will follow. One strongly stated, "Stay in the target language in your classroom." Research confirms that this very simple premise leads to higher student proficiency levels.

Another encourages us to join organizations to keep developing professionally. She advises new and veteran teacher alike to become active in those organizations and share with colleagues. World language teachers, especially in the elementary school, can be in a lonely, isolated position.

One of the Founding Mothers asks teachers to volunteer to be that support that colleagues in other schools may need. Another said, "Follow in the footsteps of those trailblazers who never gave

A tribute to Mari Haas (in absentia), one of the Founding Mothers and a NNELL past president, at the 2010 ACTFL Conference Swapshop Breakfast in Boston. From left: Helena Curtain, Terry Caccavale, Janet Glass, Pamela Valdez, Josie O'Neill, Nancy Rhodes, Marcia Rosenbusch, Alicia Vinson.



up. Love your work, and work for the best possible programs in every school. "

NNELL's Role Today and in the Future

"NNELL is poised to play a very important role in the future of language education in the United States," Nancy Rhodes suggested. "Because of the economic recession, many schools and districts have cut their language programs. Compounding this, No Child Left Behind has hurt languages as math and reading have dominated the resources. This has also cut into NNELL membership. But NNELL can play a critical role in collaborating with other organizations to ensure that a strong language component is part of a world-class education."

Mary Lynn Redmond agreed, "It is important that we show that the development of students' global competence cannot become a reality without serious attention to language study that begins early."

Marcia Rosenbusch agreed but warned, "For NNELL to be effective, the NNELL leaders need to have regular, quality communication with their members and to work to have a presence at the national level."

Looking ahead, there is no end to the challenges we still face. Yet, as NNELL looks back at the past 25 years, we find a great deal to be proud of. We insisted that early language learning and long sequences were important. Over the past two and a half decades, more and more research has supported this position, and we were right there to spread the word. Although the future is never certain, we do know one thing for sure: The vision and courage of our Founding Mothers has served us well.

Carol Ann Dahlberg ends on a high note: "It was a privilege to be one of the Founding Mothers of NNELL. We had high hopes and they were fulfilled beyond all expectations."