



Pat Groves, Cindy Wells, and Bob Thorn meet with Emily Eveleth prior to her keynote last year in Rochester.

A Candid Conversation With the NYSATA Conference Coordinators

By Jennifer Childress

I had a chance to sit down with the NYSATA Conference Coordinators, Pat Groves and Cindy Wells recently. I asked them about the upcoming conference in Albany this November.

JC: *You two have been working on the NYSATA Conferences in many capacities for quite some time. How did you get involved in doing this?*

CW: Oh, my! I have worked on so many conferences I don't remember when I first became involved – way back before many current conference attendees were born. I do know that first volunteering to “just help out” in such things as hospitality and registration introduced me to a wonderful network of art educators. I thought I would “take a break” in the late 1990s but asked Pat Groves if they needed registration help at the Long Island Conference and the rest is history.

PG: When Lisa Lawson was President of NYSATA she asked me to help her with selling NYSATA merchandise. Foolishly, I said yes. While at that conference Harry Posnanski suggested to Jessica Bayer that she ask me to run registration the next year when the conference would be on Long Island. To make a long story short, again I foolishly said yes. I ran registration for several years, became NYSATA President, and then took on my present role after I was President. In retirement I've had more time to devote to this stuff and I love planning a party.

JC: *Who else works on making the conference happen?*

CW: There are many people who work tirelessly all year long. Besides Terri Konu who is the Registrar and Cindy Henry who coordinates the info on the website, we have a committee of about ten members that meets throughout the year. At the risk of missing anyone, I won't name them here, but it's a real

team effort. Each committee member takes on a variety of responsibilities. It's a very big job.

PG: There are many others who come back year after year, including my husband, who agree to help before and when we are on-site. We couldn't do this without all of them. Also having the pre-service students helping has really made a huge difference as well. They get to attend, network, and we get the additional help we need. It's win-win for everyone.

JC: *What's the most challenging part of the job?*

PG: Negotiating the contract with the hotel is probably the most difficult but arranging for the keynotes is pretty challenging as well. We can't offer big honorariums like other organizations and the biggest names often want thousands of dollars to speak. We have been very fortunate throughout the years, as some of the biggest names have taken less because they believe in what we are doing.

JC: *Speaking of contracts, many art educators wonder why NYSATA doesn't just use a college, school, or convention center.*

CW: Colleges are in session during the school year so their space is limited and they charge usage fees that are not inexpensive; and they require a big insurance liability policy. Convention centers charge big fees as well. For instance we looked at using space for the keynotes at the convention center in Rochester and they wanted \$1500 for one hour to rent just one space. There are many things that factor into it. Believe me, we've looked at all of them.

JC: *What are the advantages offered by using a hotel?*

PG: The big hotels let you use their breakout space without

additional charge if you can meet certain thresholds for room nights and food and beverage costs. It's called "performance." It's usually around \$35,000 in food and beverage and 350 room nights. Those are minimums. The expectation is for more than that.

CW: If we didn't sell the meals then we would have to pay to use the space. Hotels charge big bucks- \$3000 a day or more for an exhibit hall. By agreeing to sell food to the attendees rather than pay rent, we think it's better for the attendees. It's more convenient for them and it allows us to keep the registration fee reasonable.

JC: How do you choose the hotels?

PG: We recently started using a service that works with non-profits to negotiate the contract. It's been a big plus and doesn't cost NYSATA any additional fees. They know more about what's important to have in the "fine print" than we do. We've had some situations where we had issues because we didn't have things spelled out precisely in the contract.

JC: Are there lots of hotels to choose from?

CW: Our conference is space intense, which means we need a lot of breakout rooms and exhibit space. We also prefer to have people in one location, not spread out all over so we need a hotel that has 10 or more breakout rooms, a big exhibit hall, and over 200 guest rooms available on both Friday and Saturday nights. That means we are very limited by which hotels are big enough to accommodate our needs. We have been trying to move the conference around the state. However, that's getting harder to do as prices keep going up. Downstate is always more expensive. We can't afford New York City at all because of the unions and how expensive NYC is in general. The biggest considerations are how affordable the hotel is, location, and how convenient it is for the membership to get there.

PG: Here's one example of the difference in costs; in Rochester the bartender costs \$75 per 3 hours, downstate in Westchester the bartender costs \$125 per 3 hours and you have to pay another \$125 for a cashier because the bartenders aren't permitted to take the money!

JC: You mentioned the meals. Why are they so expensive?

CW: Hotel meals are in general more expensive than going to a regular restaurant. If you've ever arranged a wedding or event at a hotel you know what I'm talking about. The hotel also tacks on an automatic 22% service charge to everything. You don't get to decide how much you want to tip like you would in a regular restaurant. That makes a \$45 dinner \$54. NYSATA makes no money on the meals we offer. Offering them offsets the performance requirement and attendees have the convenience.

JC: It always looks like it runs so smoothly. Does it ever get really crazy?

PG: We're glad it looks like it's going smoothly because there are always glitches and things we couldn't anticipate. As long as everyone is happy and there are no major issues then we

are happy. But to answer your question- yes it does get really crazy sometimes.

CW: It takes "more than village" to make this conference happen and we are really lucky to have the team of people we do who are willing to work so hard. It also runs well because we plan way ahead. We start planning the next conference before we leave the current one. Also, we try to plan a conference that if we had the time, we would like to attend. We spend a lot of conference time troubleshooting and making sure things are running smoothly.

JC: Have conference committee members ever gotten angry with each other during all of this? Seems like it can be very nerve-wracking.

PG: Well let's just say there have been a few tense moments over the years, but all-in-all we get along well and we agree not to take anything personally in the heat of the moment.

JC: What's the craziest or funniest thing that has happened behind the scenes?

PG: I'm not sure this was so funny at the time, but on Saturday night in Westchester when we were at the Rye Town Hilton they ran out of beef dinners. It was for a variety of reasons but it wasn't a happy sequence. Most folks didn't know, but it was not good. The chef walked out and went home he was so mad. I think I cried in front of the banquet manager. We laugh about it now.

CW: Having to take down the student exhibit during the cocktail party at the Marriott to accommodate a wedding show and Bar Mitzvah wasn't any fun either. There have been other things that were very funny but we can't put them in print.

JC: Sure sounds like a lot of stress. Why do you keep doing this?

PG: Because when it all comes together it's worth it.

CW: Most people are very grateful and appreciative. We both have dedicated our lives to art education. It's a way to stay connected to many of the friends we've made along the way.

JC: If someone wanted to volunteer to help, whom should they contact?

CW: They can contact either one of us, or any of the others on the conference committee. They are all listed in the conference program.

JC: Any final words or advice to conference attendees?

PG: People should just try to remember that all of us putting on the conference are volunteers. Their patience is really appreciated. A few kind words and an occasional thank you go a long way.

CW: Well, it would be really nice if the conference attendees could take up a collection and send us on a mystery vacation to some place warm in December;-)