



2009 AAAS/Subaru Essay Writing Competition for K-12 Educators Finalist Essay



Lee Brogie
Science Teacher
Wayne Middle School
Wayne, NE
7th and 8th grade

Postcards from the Prairie

Lights! Camera! Action!

The studio lights were bright, but not as bright as the gleam in the eyes of my seventh- and eighth-grade students as we walked into KWSC's television studio. Dr. Maureen Carrigg, Associate Professor of Communication at Wayne State College, had invited us to her studio to learn the art of creating, recording, and editing TV and radio broadcasts. She had successfully recruited a team of college communication majors to work with us. We divided into teams and the studios transformed into hands-on learning laboratories. Teams rotated between the radio station, radio recording studio, television recording studio, and film editing. The day ended quickly. My students had one week to prepare for our next training session.

This was the beginning of a beautiful, project-based learning partnership between Wayne State College and Wayne Middle School. Our task: to create public service announcements that promote an understanding, appreciation, and sense of place for northeast Nebraska's tallgrass prairie heritage.

Wayne is a small town in northeast Nebraska. This is a rural community surrounded by farmland. However, it hasn't always been that way. Prior to

settlement, this area was home to the tallgrass prairie, a complex ecosystem including flowers, trees, birds, mammals, reptiles, insects, and microorganisms. In this ecosystem, grass is the dominant species featuring big bluestem, little bluestem, Indian grass, and switch grass, which can reach two meters in height. Once covering millions of acres, today's tallgrass prairie exists only in isolated remnants. This project, titled "Postcards from the Prairie," provided a dynamic learning environment for students to develop an understanding and appreciation of the dynamic nature of the tallgrass prairie's heritage. "Postcards" also provided students with the technological background needed to share what they had learned with classmates, college students, and the northeast Nebraska Community.

Learning about the tallgrass prairie was multidimensional. Students conducted research at the Wayne State College, Wayne Community, and Wayne Middle School libraries. They read books, investigated the diversity of prairie plants and animals using field guides, and visited Internet sites to gain a basic foundation of tallgrass prairie knowledge. Students worked with Dr. Mark Hammer, Professor of Botany at Wayne State College, and his students during plant identification labs. The living laboratory was the Dog Town Creek Prairie and Arboretum where Joel Hansen is converting 30 acres of farmland to a native grass, forbs, and wildflower prairie. We had an unexpected classroom visitor: David O'Sheilds. Mr. O'Sheilds produced and directed the award-winning film, "America's Lost Landscape: The Tallgrass Prairie." He had a speaking engagement at Wayne State College, heard about our project, and asked if he could come and talk to my students. Mr. O'Sheilds spent 90 minutes sharing



2009 AAAS/Subaru Essay Writing Competition for K-12 Educators Finalist Essay

his filmmaking experiences and fielding questions. He then autographed a DVD and gave it to our class.

As students continued to increase their personal knowledge base of the prairie, learning teams formed to pursue specific topics of interest. Over four weeks, students spent three more days at the Wayne State College TV and radio studios writing, editing, and recording their PSAs. Four PSAs were created: three for TV and one for the radio.

“Postcards from the Prairie” utilized the talk-show format to provide overview information about the tallgrass prairie. “Birds of the Prairie” used an interview format to introduce viewers to the most common birds of the tallgrass prairie. A game show format was used to teach about mammals of the prairie in “Mammal Millionaire,” and listeners

to the radio learned how to identify common grasses in the PSA titled: “Grasses, Grasses, Grasses.”

Students used iMovie and GarageBand to put final editing touches on their PSAs and to prepare them for a variety of audiences. PSAs were shown at school assemblies, broadcasted on the Wayne State College television and radio stations, and presented by the students at meetings held by civic organizations. [Postcards from the Prairie](#) is an overview video of the project that students created to share at assemblies and meetings.

Sense of place is about relationships. “Postcards from the Prairie” allowed my students to form relationships with their classmates, librarians, college professors, college students, a film director, audiences of all ages, and the tallgrass prairie.