

President's Message

Coming Home

Cathy L. Seeley



Who would have thought when I received my mathematics degree from Virginia Tech that I would find myself president of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics 35 years later? I dreamed of a future in the exciting world of computers, and I found an engineering school so that I could learn all about them. (In those days, the computer was the size of a building and less powerful than my current laptop.) I was idealistic and probably a bit naïve, so I believed that all people, male or female, could be whatever they wanted to be. After all, my parents had told me so. Little did I imagine how prophetic would be my mother's other advice—to take enough education courses so that “if all else fails, you can be a teacher.”

After moving to Colorado to start my career, I was dismayed to find that, if left in the hands of corporate America, my future would consist of wearing short skirts and demonstrating computers at trade shows. As the 1960s turned into the 1970s, I was a young woman trying to break a barrier I hadn't realized existed.

It turns out that my mother was right, but perhaps for the wrong reasons. Following her advice led me to a profession that I've loved for more than 30 years, although I've found it both more challenging and far more rewarding than I might have thought.

After several years as a middle school and high school mathematics teacher, I left the classroom for a series of positions in curriculum and supervision in Colorado and Texas; along the way I went to graduate school to learn more about teaching and learning. Through an unexpected sequence of events, I was offered the opportunity to work as director of mathematics for the Texas school system during a time when the state completely transformed its educational system. And during those same years, I was privileged to serve on the writing team for NCTM's 1989 *Curriculum and Evaluation Standards* as well as being elected to the NCTM Board of Directors. It was an amazing time, both for me and for the Council. It included the publication of the groundbreaking *Standards* document, the adoption of the Council's first statement about the mathematics education of every student, and the birth of a middle school journal, among other highlights. I have gone back to the classroom twice—once to teach algebra as a volunteer in the 1994–95 school year, and a second time, from 1999 to 2001, as a Peace Corps volunteer teaching secondary school mathematics (in French) in Burkina Faso, West Africa.*

Young women today, and young people of all ethnicities and socioeconomic backgrounds, have more options than at any time in history, especially if they are armed with mathematics. For me, in spite of the occasional moment of wondering what might have happened if ..., I wouldn't change any part of my career path as a mathematics educator. I have had the joy of seeing the lightbulb go on as a student understood something challenging. I have had the privilege to be a small part of shaping how

and what mathematics is taught at the local, state, and national levels. I have traveled to the other side of the world and worked with students and colleagues who had nothing and yet gave so much. I have learned firsthand the responsibility of a teacher not only to believe in what students can do but then to do whatever it takes to help them accomplish it. I have seen teachers in classrooms across this nation accomplish great things with their students, often in environments that are far from ideal. I have come to believe that the solution to every problem in this world begins with learning and education. It's clear to me that being a teacher is the most important job in the world and that being a mathematics teacher can open doors for students that will change their lives.

Discovering NCTM in my second year of teaching gave me access to what was probably the most significant professional door that ever opened for me. It connected an isolated teacher coming from a year of rural teaching to a wealth of professional resources. Most of all, it linked me to a professional community that I will embrace for the rest of my life. Since those early days, I couldn't imagine teaching mathematics without being part of this incredible organization. I have enjoyed every Council activity I've participated in, from volunteering for a conference workshop committee, to writing a journal article that was actually published, to serving on various committees and task forces with terrific people.

NCTM supports each and every one of us—through publications, products, services, activities, and mostly by connecting us as a professional community. Each of you accomplishes more small miracles every day than you realize. Collectively, we can accomplish even more, so that, indeed, every student can have real access to a high-quality mathematics education. I look forward to the opportunity to serve you and the Council as we work together toward this goal.

I would like to end each President's Message with one or more challenges or questions. So let me close with these: Have you reminded yourself lately why you chose to become a teacher of mathematics? Have you reflected on the lessons that you have learned in doing so and on all the lives that you have touched along the way? What advice might you give to a new teacher facing the challenges of today's classroom (or a colleague facing burnout)?

As you reflect on these questions, perhaps you will be willing to share a brief example or two. NCTM staff will select a few responses submitted to newsbulletin@nctm.org to publish on the NCTM Web site (www.nctm.org) or in our monthly e-newsletter.

* To learn more about Cathy Seeley's experience in Burkina Faso, West Africa, where she served as a secondary school mathematics teacher with the Peace Corps, visit her Web site at csinburkinafaso.blogspot.net. 