

Lessons Learned from NaNoWriMo

By Mandy Houk

Could you hear it? The flurry of keystrokes all November long as determined, caffeine-fueled, slightly crazy writers attempted to pound out 50,000 words in thirty days?

As we announced in the previous issue of the NewsMag, several of your fellow Pikes Peak Writers signed up for the challenge of National Novel Writing Month 2008. Once they'd had a couple of weeks to catch up on laundry and sleep, I invited them to share, along with me, what they took away from the experience—NaNo “winner” or not. Perhaps our words will encourage you to jump into the fray along with us this November.

Ian Healy: I learned that the fifth time winning NaNo is equally as thrilling as the first. Can't wait to find out what I write next year!

Bob Spiller: I did finish 31,000 words but never crossed the finish line. That said, I have a youth writing group at Lewis Palmer Middle School. Four of them were winners and we had a party to celebrate. I passed out noisemakers, “you're a winner” erasers and pencils and then we turned out the lights and broke out the glow sticks. Even the writers who didn't win were excited.

Debbie Buckingham: I was one of them who signed up but never got started... to be honest, I have been working on my manuscript and that has taken all my time. I really wasn't willing to commit myself to the challenge. I do, however, regret that I didn't do it. I will DEFINITELY do it next year.

Laura Deal: I had never done NaNoWriMo before, because I already have a hefty stack of manuscripts in first draft, but I decided to this year just to see if it could jar me out of a rut. The camaraderie I found on the Web site and with my local groups energized the process. I met the word count challenge and finished the whole draft in exactly thirty days. It was a magical, mysterious process and I will absolutely do it again.

Julie Kazimer: After a 20,000 word start in week one, I felt confident about completing the NaNoWriMo challenge. What a fool I was. My problem was two-fold: a loss of my laptop (stupid t key broke and we all know you can't write without t's), and boredom. I started off writing a thriller, and ended up writing ninety pages of it, getting bored by it, and writing thirty pages of an urban fantasy manuscript. The greatest lesson of the month was: focus. But on the plus side, I have two manuscripts to work on in the upcoming month. I'll just reset all my calendars and clocks and call this month November/December and eventually (probably sometime in November/March) I'll have two completed manuscripts. Just in time for the Pikes Peak Conference.

Margaret Brettschneider (aka author M.J. Brett): I'm pleased I tried NaNoWriMo for the first time and completed the challenge. I'll probably do it again. The best things are: 1) realizing you can do it, and 2) having a story well underway that you can flesh out in the coming months. I'm wondering how our region fared in the national count. (Editor's note: according to stats on the Web site, the Colorado Springs region logged over 5 million words in the 2008 challenge! Collective stats for all NaNo participants totaled 1,643,343,993 words.)

Debbie Meldrum: I was so proud of winning NaNoWriMo this year (my third attempt), and it made me realize that I could write much more in any given month than I

have been.

One anonymous PPW NaNo'er attempted to write a memoir, but discovered the process to be far too intense and emotional. She's decided to stick with fiction if she decides to tackle a future NaNoWriMo.

Mandy Houk: As for me, for several years I had watched my writing friends sign up for NaNoWriMo and summarily disappear for the entire month. I swore I would never subject myself to that kind of torture. Then I discovered that one of my favorite novels, *Water for Elephants*, was born when Sara Gruen challenged herself in a NaNoWriMo several years ago. And I saw the enthusiasm of PPW NaNo'ers in their notes on the loop. And I wanted to set a good example for my Creative Writing students. So I signed up. Since I had family coming for Thanksgiving on November 22nd, I had to complete the challenge by November 21st. I have a lot of editing to do, and my story arc is far from complete, but I did, in fact, break the tape at the finish line. It was wonderful to get the story out of my head, where it had been living for nearly two years, and onto the virtual page. More than that, I have proven to myself indisputably that I really do have time to write. Not at a sustained pace of 2,500 words a day, of course. But never again can I tell myself I'm just too busy.

If all of our personal stories aren't enough to inspire you, maybe this pep talk from NaNoWriMo founder Chris Baty will.

"If there's one thing I've learned from running NaNoWriMo, it's this: Whatever you think you are, you are more than that. You possess a fearsome array of skills and abilities, and the most satisfying of these may be completely unknown to you now. Your curiosity is a dependable guide; follow it. Put yourself in unfamiliar places. Kindle passions. Savor the raw joy of making things, and then remake the best of those things until they take someone's breath away. Wrestle bears.

Actually, skip the bear-wrestling.

But do keep trying big things, okay? Sometimes we can wait so long for a clear sign that it's time to begin, that the opportunity sails right past us.

Life is so short. Adventures beckon. Let's get packed and head out on a new one today.

I think it's time."

Originally appeared in The Pikes Peak Writer, Volume VIII, Issue 1, January 2009