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Who You Gonna Call? Ray Lawson!

Susan Steffel
Guest Editor

This essay in tribute of Ray Lawson is a fitting conclusion for this special issue celebrating twenty years of *LAJM*.

Whatever the question, the first answer never fails to be: “Ask Ray, he’ll know.” Whether the question is about the policy, history, or finances of Michigan Council of Teachers of English, Ray is the go-to guy. Additionally, if you want to know about Michigan school legislation or collective bargaining, you need only to contact Ray. Or, if you want to know about pedagogical issues affecting the profession like testing or censorship, then again Ray is a terrific resource. In fact, Ray has been my own personal “google” source for teaching-related issues for decades. It occurred to me that although there are hundreds of us who do know Ray and his contributions, there are also some who may not know him, and I hope that this article helps remedy that situation.

So, who is this man, Ray H. Lawson? For me, it seems like I’ve always known him. In many ways—at least professionally—I suppose that I have. He was already MCTE secretary-treasurer when I came into the profession. Do you remember always seeing that same distinguished looking man sitting at the MCTE Conference registration table? Well, that is Ray, and that’s how I also first came to know him.

Beyond being the person I send my membership renewal and conference registration to, Ray contributes much, much more. I have had the benefit of knowing Ray for more than thirty years, and he continues to serve as a role model for me. His thoughtful ways, his up-to-date and informed teaching, and his quiet, unassuming leadership style come from his 64 years of teaching, probably making him the longest serving teacher in Michigan. He recently retired from the Rochester Public Schools, but that doesn’t mean that he’s stopped teaching.

Graduating from Central Michigan University in 1940 with a major in English and history, Ray began his long-serving career in the public schools. Since that time, except for serving in the military during WWII, Ray continued to teach high school English fulltime for 64 years and served as senior class advisor for over 45 years. He continues to serve the profession in many leadership roles. Having recently celebrated his 88th birthday, he continues to serve as secretary/treasurer of the Michigan Council of Teachers of English, a position he has held for over thirty years.

As a teacher, Ray is without rival, and his numerous awards speak to his outstanding abilities. His principal, colleagues, and students all speak to his effectiveness in the classroom. He is not only liked, but respected. His standards are high, his courses demanding, but never does he forget that the student is the focus of his attention. I know of no other teacher who has been honored by his/her school district in the manner that Rochester Public Schools honored Ray in 2001,

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when hundreds of his former students traveled from all over the country to pay tribute to the man who had such a profound influence on them. The Ray Lawson Quality Improvement Fund was established in his name to provide funds for staff development in the Rochester Community Schools.

The Rochester Schools have benefited from Ray serving on, and often chairing, virtually every curricular committee there. He has been chair of the English department since 1948. Moreover, he has served as the chair of the K-12 Education for the ‘80s, the 7-12 Language Arts coordinator, and co-chair of the Instructional Technology Committee. On the state level, Ray continues to work with the Michigan Department of Education as a member of the State Writing Committee, the MEAP Writing Assessment Committee, and the State Advisory Committee for Basic Skills.

As a professional, Ray Lawson has also been recognized by his colleagues. He has won many awards, both public and professional. Best known to me are the Charles Carpenter Fries Award from the Michigan Council of Teachers of English in 1984 and the PTA Educational Service Award in 1997. The Fries Award is named after the first president of

MCTE, who had such an important role in the development of the organization. The award recognizes individuals for:

1. Long and faithful service to the profession of English teaching
2. Distinguished leadership not only in his or her own community but also at the state and/or national level
3. Inspirational qualities for students and colleagues
4. Originality in some form, having his or her own special stamp or way
5. Academic superiority

Most recently, Ray was doubly honored by Michigan Council of Teachers of English by being named the inaugural recipient of The Ray H. Lawson Excellence in Teaching Award (2002). He also received the CMU Distinguished Alumni Award in 2003 and the NCTE High School Teacher of Excellence Award in 2003.

In addition to his association with MCTE, Ray has also maintained memberships and leadership roles in numerous other professional and civic organizations, including the MEA, Michigan Interscholastic Press Association, and Michigan Association of Professions. As president of the Michigan Education Association (MEA), Ray was responsible for overseeing the implementation of the collective bargaining law for teachers and the teacher tenure law—two huge changes for the teaching profession and the organization. After his term as president, Ray continued to serve for fifteen years on the MEA Board of Directors.

If you didn't know anything about Ray Lawson's achievements, when you get to know him, a sense of the man comes through. For me, there will always be some things about Ray that stand out: He is the consummate professional. He ALWAYS dresses professionally, and by professional, I don't mean anything non-denim or that he ignores casual Fridays. I mean he always wears a suit or sportcoat, shirt and tie—the works! Casual for him is to skip the tie. He ALWAYS speaks and writes thoughtfully. He offers perspective rather than criticism and because of his longevity that perspective always includes history. He is responsible, highly organized, informed, and prepared. He ALWAYS puts others before himself. His graciousness is evident as a teacher, a professional, a friend. He ALWAYS is hopeful and positive and enjoys life.

Let me share an anecdote that, for me, epitomizes Ray. The one thing you really need to know about Ray is that

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he's always prepared. He always does his research and never is caught short. So—when we attended the CMU Alumni Dinner in Mt. Pleasant a few years ago so that Ray could accept the CMU Distinguished Alumni Award, he was there to enjoy and savor the occasion. A table had been reserved for him, his children, and their families. I, too, had the pleasure of joining that table having been asked to make Ray's introduction.

Well, Ray had graduated from CMU in 1940, and so I didn't think that he would know too many people at the event, and I was all ready to introduce him to those I knew in attendance. Silly me. It seemed that people were lining up to speak with Ray. They were former classmates, former students, or current friends. If they didn't already know him, they seemed to know of him, whether they were judges, business leaders, or teachers. We settled down for a nice dinner and as we enjoyed dessert, the program began. The first person to be recognized that evening for achievement was called to the podium. The person responsible for giving the introduction did so and then the guest stepped forward and proceeded to give a short speech. Ray and I immediately looked at each other with concern, for neither of us was aware that Ray was to do anything but accept the award. A speech was definitely not on the radar. Too late now, the program was underway, and Ray gave me a quiet shrug and a smile as the program proceeded. I looked at him again, and at first glance, he was calm and attentive. However, I could see in his eyes that his mind was going a million miles an hour constructing his response.

There were two more presentations before we were called to the dais, and my heart was pounding as I gave my prepared introduction—one that I'd spent all week crafting—all the time wondering how Ray would meet this challenge. I should have known. Poised and in control, Ray stepped to the podium and delivered one of the most eloquent and gracious speeches of the evening—without a notecard in sight. I was—and still am—in awe of him.

I have many more stories that I could share with you about Ray and the impact that he has had on my own career, but there are plenty of others who can do the same. When I sent out the initial description of this article and what I wanted to include in it to a number of colleagues who had worked closely with Ray through MCTE over the years and asked them to contribute, the response was immediate. Almost instantly, people started sending me their own favorite

anecdotes, impressions, or memories. All were personal and compelling. I was struck, too, by their similarities. Rather than picking and choosing, cutting and pasting them together, I've decided to include them all in a collage of tribute. Read them for yourself, and I think that if you don't already know Ray, you will come to know him through these following stories.

I remember meeting Ray Lawson in 1986. Having just moved to Michigan, I had gone to the Fall MCTE Conference with Kathy Drzick, my English Education colleague and mentor at WMU. Kathy had served as president of MCTE, and she seemed to know, and introduce me to, everybody there. But for some reason, I especially remember meeting Ray Lawson that day. He was distinguished looking, and Kathy had mentioned that he was an important leader within the MCTE board and that he had also been the president of the Michigan Education Association.

I eventually joined the MCTE Board, first as Region VIII representative, then as vice president, president, and past president. During those years I came to know Ray as patient and wise. He was a steady leader, who faithfully served as an effective "guide on the side" rather than as a "sage on the stage." He was content to let the current leaders lead. But he was ready to speak up passionately when the rest of us seemed to be losing sight of what was most important for students.

MCTE Board meetings always featured a lot of discussion—about upcoming events, about leadership, about curriculum, and about State issues. Ray always listened hard, but occasionally we would be stunned into silence when he exploded in disgust about some nonsensical mandate at the state or national level. He was always right, and we loved him for it.

In the Fall of 1992 MCTE faced a dilemma we had never encountered before. The State legislators had mandated a high school proficiency test that all Michigan students would need to pass in order to be awarded a diploma. The State Superintendent of Public Instruction had decided to invite four professional organizations—Michigan Council of Teachers of English, Michigan Reading Association, Michigan Council of Teachers of Mathematics, and the Michigan Science Teachers' Association—to each work under contract to design one of the four high school tests. Oh, what an MCTE Board meeting we had, one of my first as incoming MCTE president, when we discussed this volatile issue! The test results would deny some students a high school diploma, and we could hardly bear to

think of that outcome. But the legislature had already acted, and an expert panel of psychometricians had already been convened to recommend a process for test development. At MCTE we hated the prospect of doing potential harm, but we knew that somebody would agree to design the test. In the end, MCTE decided it was better to be at the table, better to have a voice, and better to design a test that would give all student writers a good shot at passing the writing proficiency test.

Ray was there at every step—managing the financial affairs as a dozen or so of us spent countless planning weekends, often at the Harley Hotel in East Lansing. He was there with the leadership experience we needed when some of us reached the limits of our own experience. And he was there when we met with the attorney hired by the MEAP office to challenge the emerging design of our assessments. Always he provided a steady, knowledgeable voice of experience. And always he spoke with keen insight, nudging us to do what was right for students and for the teaching of English. And today he still always believes the best about students and about English teachers. And he encourages the rest of us to move toward that light.

Ellen Brinkley, Professor of English and
Director, Third Coast Writing Project
Western Michigan University
MCTE past president, 1993

If someone told me, "Did you hear that MCTE shut down? I guess Ray Lawson retired" I'd be disappointed—I want to see MCTE go on and on—but I wouldn't necessarily be surprised. The organization and the man are so entwined in my mind that it's hard for me to separate them. I met Ray too late in my life for him to become the man I wanted to be when I grew up, but he's certainly been the man I would like to have morphed into. His quiet wit and consistent temperament and reliable presence have suggested to be that, in some things, the center can hold. Wouldn't it be nice to be someone who not only makes the day brighter but also makes it seem more secure? Wouldn't it be nice to be thought of as "the Ray Lawson" of your organization? Or to hear someone say, "In situations like that, I simply call upon my inner Ray Lawson" and know that whoever heard you would know what you meant and wish they could do the same? I think it would.

Bob Root
MCTE Past President, 1982

There are so many words that describe Ray Lawson as an English educator and as a member of MCTE: “dedicated” is highlighted in my mind. When Ray talked about teaching, I remember that it was about students’ needs and interests. I don’t remember his ever fussing over working conditions or injustices or current stupidities in the profession which consumed the interest of some of us. He worked diligently with his local school district, I understand, and I saw first hand his conscientious work for the Michigan Council of Teachers of English, keeping financial and membership records, attending board meetings with accurate reports in hand, quietly stating a reasoned point of view on issues, showing up early to provide a helping hand when we were organizing for a conference. I wasn’t sure that he should be helping the Michigan Department of Education escalate testing of Language Arts in Michigan schools, but I knew he would work well with those people, trying to get the best standards possible within the state mandates, and also the most reasonable test content and procedures.

Another memory of Ray glows in my mind. Ray often was accompanied by his wife when he attended MCTE conferences. They seemed to be such a fine couple, always concerned with each other. I enjoyed seeing them together. I’m sure the years since her death have not been easy for him.

I’m sure that Ray’s interests and talents will find good use in retirement. I hope that, like me, he finds retirement a busy and happy way to live.

Sheila Fitzgerald
MCTE Past President, 1983

When I was somewhere along the president elect, president, past-president route in MCTE, I remember that we’d had a rotating secretary/treasurer, people who did their best, but who passed through the position so quickly that the finances were really never sorted out. I can’t remember if this was an elected or appointed position. What I do remember is when Ray came into the position, the finances got sorted out, we started getting clear and accurate information about what we were doing, and we somehow had more money than we’d had before. I can’t remember why. It might have had something to do with some sort of magic Ray brought with him. The stability he provided for the organization was certainly a magic we needed.

Susan Tehudi
MCTE Past President, 1981

Elsewhere in this issue of *LAJM*, I refer to “the astonishingly-reliable Ray Lawson” who, with a few select others, constituted for me as a new member of the organization back in the mid-1980’s “the soul of MCTE – and, on occasion, its conscience.” So it was then, and so it remains today. I was especially grateful for Ray’s quiet, unflappable constancy 20-plus years ago when I dove into the then-roiling waters of the MCTE totally clueless as to what I was getting myself into. Actually, my discovering Ray was the result of a mistake. So that the organization wouldn’t look so, um, gender-imbalanced in its governing body, the MCTE Executive Board wanted a male name on the ballot next to the shoo-in female candidate for Vice-President. Mine was a male name, albeit quite unknown. So, after being assured I would not win, I agreed to run. Uh-huh. And thus did Ray Lawson become for me, as he had (and has) for so many others over the years, the most important member of the MCTE – especially when some unfortunate events dramatically accelerated my movement within the Executive Board. You might say I ascended out of my depth. Organization politics at the time were tense, on occasion even fractious. The participants were good-willed and well-intentioned, mind you; they just often willed and intended different things for the organization. In times like that, it is easy for a designated leader to offend. And when you worry too much about that (as rookies are prone to do), your judgment can be suspect, uncertain. I was ill-prepared to deal with this. But in Ray Lawson’s non-judgmental accessibility as well as his steadfastness to the ideals of the organization I found both direction and comfort. To be sure, Ray had his opinions, his principles, his passions. But – then as now — he also exercised restraint, the ability to defer to what he felt was, overall, the forward progress of the organization. When around Ray Lawson, I always felt the way was clear, the vision good, the prognosis positive. A rookie couldn’t have asked for more. Once more, Ray, I thank you.

John Dinan
Past President, 1985

I have no funny Ray story—but would like to comment that throughout all my work with MCTE, Ray was the one constant—always helpful, always professional, always positive. I appreciated his hard work, able assistance, and friendly manner more than I can say. He is, indeed, a great man!

Mary Harmon
MCTE Past President, 2000

I first met Ray Lawson when I became a board member of MCTE. I was amazed that someone who had been in the profession for so long did not follow the “traditional” rules of teaching English. Instead, Ray immediately inspired me that a teacher can stay current on research and best practices throughout his or her entire career. I will never forget Ray telling about how he “rebelled” and did not follow the traditional rule for commas in a series. This was typical of Ray – he was ahead of his time for something that is accepted and used widely today. I enjoyed my time on the MCTE board with Ray, and his advice and calm manner helped me through a huge conference and a year of many changes. He is truly an exceptional person.

Julia Reynolds
MCTE Past President, 2003

One vivid memory I have is of Ray before the Executive Committee meetings passing out the financial report and last month’s minutes in his quiet and efficient manner.

Ray’s dry sense of humor is also widely known. One particular quote that demonstrates his dry sense of humor was one he said many times during his financial report, “It never ceases to amaze me how English teachers can write bad checks.”

Ron Iwankovitsch
MCTE Past President, 2001

As a kid I remember my dad having his students turn in their note cards, outlines, and finally their “term papers.” The students had that day to get them in (on the due date), but the big thing was that he accepted the papers up until midnight of that day. There was many a night that students would be driven by their parents to drop off the papers, and they would ring the doorbell at 11:59 p.m. just to be on time. Boy, did this make my mom mad, but Dad was a very accommodating teacher to every student that he ever had. He was tough, but very fair. I made it through his class by the skin of my teeth (C+), but my college freshman class was a breeze. Thanks, Dad.

Taryn Sabo
Daughter of Ray Lawson
Elementary Section Chair of MCTE

With a team, my son Christopher was working on the Professional Registry for the Michigan Department of Education when he asked us about our friend Ray Lawson. The Registry was to be the comprehensive data base on Michigan educators. Districts were to submit information from their data files to the state for melding into a state-wide data base.

The shake-out of the Registry was not going well, but the team was able to locate the problem in the data field that was set up to accept “years of teaching experience.” They had set up the field with date parameter, and when they ran the data they would receive an “error!” note.

Christopher called us. He had met Ray many times through our council activities and, when he found the “source” of the error was this one person whose teaching dates were outside of their reasonable years of work parameters, Ray Lawson’s name came up. Could this be true? “Yes,” we said. “Give him a plaque.” One that says he is the best friend Michigan English teachers will ever have.

Ronald N. Kar
MCTE Past President, 1984

November, 2003

It was a wonderful morning for breakfast with the cool San Francisco air making us hurry to our destination. But we weren't going to miss this moment. NCTE President-Elect Patti Stock was to address the affiliate breakfast at the 2003 NCTE annual conference. As a fellow Michigander, Patti had the opportunity to put Michigan in the spotlight a bit, and she had asked us what we wanted her to include. We knew right away what it would be. Now, the moment had arrived, and we were so excited we were there early.

A group from Michigan found a table right up front and in the very front sat Ray Lawson, Secretary-Treasurer of MCTE, and a member of MCTE for so long that his teaching career spanned more years than any of us, even we "older" ones, had lived. Ray's daughter, Taryn, had accompanied us to San Francisco and was on pins and needles knowing what was to come.

As the end of her report neared, Patti began to talk about how NCTE was family, how we supported one another and how, through our organization, we became one another's solace and cheering squad throughout our career journeys. Then she began talking about one stellar journey, one that had spanned many decades, and finally, she let the audience know that there in their midst was a man in his eighties who had been teaching in the classroom for over 60 years and was still teaching to that day. She asked Ray to stand. He did, he stood and looked at her as she applauded, but we got his attention. "Ray," we said, "Ray, turn around." Ray slowly turned and what he saw was the entire room, hundreds of teachers and future teachers standing and applauding an unbelievable career and a great teacher. We all left that breakfast with tears in our eyes.

That evening we walked to a wonderful Thai restaurant. Joined by others who had known Ray in his many years as Secretary/Treasurer of MCTE, we ate heartily and drank merrily, toasting Ray and his achievements. It was a great day from breakfast to dinner—one none of us who were there will ever forget—because a man we admired was given a tribute that was well deserved.

Jill VanAntwerp
MCTE Past President, 2005

It's difficult to decide which metaphor to use when describing Ray Lawson as Mr. MCTE. Cornerstone? Memory Bank? Financial wizard? Mentor? Humorist? All of the above. Those of us who served on the executive board at various times over the past 30 years know what a gem of a secretary/treasurer he has been:

- Need to figure out how to providing funding support for a local teachers' group? Ask Ray.
- Need to know who the NCTE liaison of MCTE was in 1973? Check with Ray.
- Need to know how to get the best quick results from NCTE, the parent organization? Ray will know.
- Need to do some creative financial planning? Ray's an expert.
- Need to understand the complexity of writing instruction before the current theories were in operation? Ray's the man—understanding and supporting student writing long before the writing process was institutionalized.
- Need to negotiate the volatile political terrain of mandated writing assessments? Ray's the model.
- Need to learn how to do it all with wit, grace, and the right kind of toughness? That's Ray in a nutshell.

Ray is an institution. We'd clone him if we could. We'll settle, though, for having served with him, worked with him, learned from him, and counted him as a friend, a mentor, a colleague, and one of the finest writing teachers in the state.

Marilyn Wilson
MCTE Past President, 1996

Conclusion

Throughout his long career, Ray has modeled for all of us the importance of lifelong learning. Rochester estimates that there have been more than 18,000 students who have passed through his classroom. During his over thirty years with MCTE, he has come in contact with thousands more teachers, yet there is no real way to determine the actual number of students, classroom teachers, and others who have benefited from Ray's dedication and generosity. Selfless and unassuming, he leads by example, and his legendary influence is felt nationwide. Clearly, Ray Lawson exemplifies all that is great about classroom teachers.

Thanks, Ray, from all of us—for everything!

Susan Steffel
MCTE Past President, 2004