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This interview was conducted with Sylvia Vardell on January 8, 2016, at the American Library Association Midwinter conference in Boston Massachusetts. The interviewers are Nancy Johnson and Sylvia Tag.

ST: We are here in Boston, Massachusetts and Midwinter ALA with Sylvia Vardell, professor at Texas Women's University and we are going to spend some time finding out about your poetry experience.

SV: I'm thrilled. Do you need to check the recording, or you've done this and you know that it reaches.

NJ: It's one of those fancy pants ones.

SV: Super duper, alright.

ST: This is not the old fashioned kind.

SV: I know, I'm such an amateur --

NJ: Could you speak a little louder?

SV: A cassette tape.

NJ: We're going to mostly let you talk, and we might occasionally have a question or two.

SV: Okay, start from the beginning. Alright.

Well, my professor work with poetry is in the last 15 years or so, but in doing this, it got me thinking, where are these roots from? Where did this come from? And it just surprised me that poetry was there in my childhood in a way that I hadn't really articulated until I was way old. And I grew up as an ESL kid. My first language was German. My parents were German, and I learned English from neighbor kids. And, yes, so poetry was a way for me to get a handle on English, you know, the rhythm and the rhyme

and the way words are supposed to be pronounced. And I never really put that into words until way, way, way later. It was very powerful for me. And when I was about 8 -- the first books that I had were in German, little children's books in German, and there was a book that had all kinds of prose and poetry pieces. And there was a little poem in there that I made myself memorize and perform for my mom for her birthday that I still know, and it's not a great poem by anybody famous --

ST: Well let's hear it.

German poem from childhood

Wenn Vater oder Mutter Geburtstag haben
Was soll ich Dir sagen?
Was soll ich Dir geben?
Ich hab nur ein kleines ein junges Leben.
Ich hab ein Herz dass denkt und spricht
Ich hab dich lieb
Mehr weiss Ich nicht!

(Original source unknown)

NJ: Could you translate?

SV: It's something like when Mom or Dad have a birthday, what should I say? What should I give? I only have a small mind, a small heart, but I love you dearly, and that's all I have to give. Something like that. I know, it sounds really schmaltzy and corny in English, but in German it's just sort of rollicking, rhythmic rhyme, just silly kind of thing.

But anyway, I did that on my own initiative because that was the book I had, and I wanted to do something for my mom, and what did I choose? A poem. And I just love that. And I love that it's still with me. That's sort of the power of poetry too. It sticks in your brain forever.

But then years go by, and I'm an avid reader. I read lots of things. I don't actually read that much poetry as a kid, after that, when I move into English, I really don't. You know, you have to in school, memorize "The Village Blacksmith" in 6th grade for Mrs. Brooks. Under the spreading chestnut-tree the village smithy stands." And that was a hideous experience, because I didn't know what I was saying, you know, you're 12 years old. What's a village blacksmith? I'm a little German girl. I've never seen a blacksmith. So, and then the whole agony of getting up in front of your classmates to say a poem was a big negative for me. Even though I'm a really good memorizer, that public performance thing, that was not comfortable. I was a very shy kid, if you can believe it, very shy.

And so, that was, "Oh, poetry is not for me." And then in high school and college, you're memorizing, not memorizing, you're analyzing poetry, and I was actually very good at that. One of my favorite stories is an English class at UT Austin where we had to describe our analysis of a poem, and I hadn't

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even read it, I just made shit up, and then the professor reads my response out loud to the class as a model example. So what that taught me was, it's just all bullshit, you know. So you're going to have to censor that.

NJ: Or not.

ST: Not at all, that's -- a real response.

SV: Poetry is what it means, you know, whatever you think it means. And I was lucky enough not to have too many teachers who said, "You have to get what I got out of it." It was the '70s and we were all hippies, and they said, "Whatever you think, that's valid and legitimate." Which, I value that, but on the other hand, I didn't have any guidance in really understanding or thinking deep or looking at the context in which the poem was written, anything.

So that -- in my childhood I loved it, then I didn't read it, then I just made stuff up, and then -- actually at the University of Minnesota in my doctoral program, I was studying children's literature in depth, just loved it. That's really where things just caught fire for me professionally. And I worked with Norine Odland who's no longer with us. She was a giant in the field, and a cranky, cranky lady, but she was so smart, and she mentored me. She thought she saw something. And that was such a great experience. It just totally turned my life down the children's literature path.

But I also met a fellow doctoral student named Mary Kay Rummel, and I don't even know what she's doing now.

NJ: Oh--

SV: Do you know Mary Kay Rummel"? Is she somebody? See, I've not kept up with her in 30 years.

NJ: I haven't heard the name in a long time.

SV: She was a Ph.D. student ahead of me, almost finished, and I just knew her a teeny bit, but she was a poet. She wrote poetry and performed it and published it, in just small presses, and I was like, "Oh!" It just like opened the door again. And I just really sort of dived in and started reading all the poetry I could find, especially for young people. She was really writing for an adult audience, and I didn't pursue that, oddly enough. But it made me think about poetry again, and this is why I'm, oh my gosh, I'm going to be so old. This is when Shel Silverstein was new. *Where the Sidewalk Ends* was like brand, right --

NJ: First editions.

SV: -- brand new hot, and I'm teaching 6th graders. *Where the Sidewalk Ends* was written for my class. Oh my gosh, they loved it. And I always said, if I was stranded on a desert island with 6th graders, that would be the one book I would like to have, because you could just read it over and over and over again, and just laugh and laugh and laugh, and they were so, you know -- there's sort of an angry subtext in some of those poems.

ST: Of course

SV: Right, right. Which 6th graders totally get. So that was it, that was it for me. I thought, oh my gosh, I just love this. I did not think that poetry could be anything but the “The Village Blacksmith” or silly childhood rhymes, which I also value classics and silliness, but I’m now I’m seeing, oh, you can write with a child audience in mind, or you can write for adults but then kids see something in it too. It just, Woo! Very exciting. So then I started reading more poetry for kids, and various poets come to the University of Minnesota because they host authors, and that was awesome, meeting an author. Wow! I did not grow up with that as a kid. I don’t know if you guys did. But wow!

ST: No, it wasn’t a time -- this is a new time when authors started to travel and actually present about their creative process. That wasn’t an experience for my childhood.

SV: Right, right. Or maybe adult authors did it for adult audiences. I don’t know. I just never -- did not know. I was very like lower-middle class, you know. So that was so exciting to hear Tomie DePaola talk about work and sit at a table with him because the doctoral students are -- oh my gosh!

Yes, and a special time, and it was great. It was great. So then I started -- you know, I got my first professor job and started working in children’s literature.

NJ: Where was that?

SV: That was at a small college. The University of Houston had a branch in Victoria, TX, way down on the Gulf Coast. At the time, it was just juniors and seniors and master students. I don’t know if it’s expanded since then. They had a visiting position open, and I had just finished my exams actually. I hadn’t written a dissertation. And my husband was ready to move. He had stayed another year in Minnesota so that -- We went there for his schooling, he finished, then I started doing schooling, and I was almost finished, so he stayed another year, did another degree. He loves school. He could do degrees till the cows come home. But we were both ready to move back to Texas, which was sort of home for us, and that position was open, and I was like, oh, that would be cool. I’d never thought about being a professor, honestly. I wanted a Ph.D. because that was the most school that you could have. That was my logic. I mean, I love school. I just kept going to school and teaching kids. So I thought I would just be some curriculum person. Move from the classroom into supervision, and that was fine. But then I was flipping through *The Chronicle*, there was that position, I applied for it, and they hired me. Oh my gosh. I was just like, a professor, okay. I never knew a professor in my entire life. I didn’t know to aspire to even think about doing that. But oh my gosh, that first summer I taught summer classes that started at 7 in the morning, and I lived an hour away. I know! Now I’d be like, Hell no. But at the time, I was like, I will pay you if I could do this. It was amazing. It was the perfect storm of what Sylvia has to bring and what job is out there in the world. I felt like the luckiest person ever.

And I still feel really lucky. Don’t you feel really lucky to do this job, to get paid to read and teach and talk about books and help children and people who work with children, love reading? Oh my gosh! If I

were going to invent a perfect job to do for my life, that would be it. And I've been doing it almost 40 years and just love it.

So at the time, children's literature was not a thing you could do exclusively, so I taught reading and language arts and methods, even curriculum and instruction. And I supervised student teachers. You do a whole lot of things, especially at a small campus, any campus. And I enjoyed all of that, but children's literature was always my favorite thing. And little by little, I was able to specialize in that and move to a couple different universities.

And each time, it was a position that was just children's literature, until I moved to library science, which was quite a leap, in 2001, at Texas Woman's. I'd always been in reading or in curriculum, and they had an opening in their library information studies program, where Betty Carter was retiring, and she'd mentioned it to me. She said, "You should think about it." I was like, "Really? I don't have an MLS. I've never worked in a library." I took a library science course at the University of Minnesota, loved it, but it was at the very end of my program. If anybody had said to consider this, I would have done that in a minute. But again, you know, it's all the things that are in the road in front of you that unless somewhere mentors you, and I never had any mentors. So, she said apply, and I was like, Okay. And I applied, and I kept saying, I don't have an MLS, right? You know that, right? Because I didn't want to pretend to be something I wasn't, and I was older at this point and pretty established, and they hired me as a full professor at TWU, and I just do children's YA poetry, multicultural, just literature courses, and oh my gosh, that is the icing on the cake. So that's my career trajectory.

But the poetry interests actually evolved too, because first I was just doing general children's lit, and I'm studying authors because I was so taken with this power of meeting authors, did a lot with that. And then got involved in CLA, the Children's Literature Assembly at NCTE, which really was my mentoring body. They changed my life too. I met the best people, and opportunities came my way. Do you remember Richard Van Dongen?

NJ: Oh yes.

SV: -- invited me to be on the Notables committee, and I was just like, Oh my gosh, this is so amazing, books come to your house? Oh, I just thought that was I'd died and gone to heaven.

Was it? Yes, and that was it. Then you're like, I need more of this. I need some more heroin.

And so many good people. And then you just feel really connected with a bigger family professionally. And got really involved in CLA. And so first the opportunity was Notables, so that was sort of wide reading, and then the next opportunity was nonfiction. I did like 10 years, got to work on the Orbis Pictus and established that award. I got to come up with a name for it, and that was so fun.

I still love nonfiction, but then I was also intrigued by multicultural literature, again because of my background, the different language and cultures that I grew up with. A lot of my family doesn't even

speak English, so I was very aware of how important it was to expose kids to all kinds of literature. So I spent a lot of time also reading and writing about multicultural literature.

And then in each of these things, poetry's always popping up because poetry's considered nonfiction, right, in the library world? It's kind of weird. And then poetry kept popping up in multicultural literature because so many authors of color are poets or write poetry. I was very intrigued by that too. So little by little, I'm writing more and more about poetry, and I'm all the time reading it and including it in my teaching. And then, I think it was when I moved to TWU, yes, I think it was, that I really decided, you know, I just want to look at poetry now. Maybe it was because I finally felt comfortably settled professionally. I could focus.

And I had this idea that we needed a book of professional resources, it was very practical, about the teachings of poetry and the sharing of poetry. Really not even the teaching, just the knowing of poetry for children, because there was so much out now that I felt like my students didn't know about. They at this point knew Shel Silverstein, and then some would know Jack Prelutsky's work, but that was it. They didn't know the NCTE poetry award. And the more I taught the more I was like, you know, there's an absence here. So I came up with this proposal for a very little practical book about poetry and the sharing of poetry for kids and wrote a proposal, and ALA accepted it, and that became the book, *Poetry Aloud Here!* And man, that was so exciting to get to write that little book and have it be a big success, and then that opened all these doors and windows for meeting poets and presenting about poetry at conferences and sharing more ideas with students.

And then the blog thing happened. People started doing blogs, and I was like, "What's that? That's cool!" And so I wanted to do a blog. As a professor I thought that's a good idea to model for students. What shall I do? Well there were heaps, and this is 2005, heaps of blogs now emerging on children's lit, and I thought, Well, I don't want to be another children's literature blog. I'm going to do poetry. So I just started writing about the poetry that's out there for kids, how to share it, what to link it with. Then very, sort of practical -- always very practical minded. I'm not really a scholar, really, researcher. I know, I know!

But, I'm not really investigating things. I'm more -- I had a colleague once who said, You're a translator. You're trying to take what is known and then help people in the field use it.

ST: A connector.

SV: Okay. Whatever word you want to use.

ST: Translator.

SV: And I love that. I don't apologize for that.

ST: Your blog is exceptional though, in terms of the resources. It's very evident that you work very hard on it, the extensive listings of poets as well as the topics you bring up, and it's current all the time. You go and whatever's emerging really -- it's really a place.

SV: Thank you very much.

ST: You're welcome.

NJ: Powerful resource.

SV: I've had a lot of fun with it. And it was an opportunity to explore blogging. And then it was an opportunity to keep up. It's like going to Weight Watchers and you know they're going to weigh you, and so you've got to keep up. So you've got a blog every Friday, you're like okay, you're looking around, what do I need to write about? I'm a little behind at the moment actually. It's on my list of things to do. It's a Christmas post at the moment. But I'm always looking for the moment, because I'm thinking of my audience as basically practitioners, right? So they don't want to just analyze a poem, they want to know who's writing, what are the new books, how do we share them, -- what unit will this go with, etc. So, I've had a lot of fun with it. It's 10 years now.

NJ: When you said that I couldn't believe it.

SV: Yes, this coming summer, 10 years. I'm trying to think of what to do for 10 years. But of course now there are fewer bloggers I've found. That's sort of winnowing, but I still feel like that's a worthwhile resource.

And then that blogging led to more presenting at conferences and more fawning over my favorite authors. And I went to an IRA where Janet Wong was signing the very first book, *Good Luck Gold*, I believe, and I just loved that book. To me, it spoke to me as a little German girl, right, with two cultures, grandparents who didn't get America. I mean, she and I had a very interesting parallel path. And I went up to her and got her to sign my book, and I said, "Oh, I just love your work." And you know Janet, she's like, "Oh, now we're best friends." And I was like, Oh. So she was so accessible and just really engaged with me, and so as a professor, if you can put a proposal together with some authors on it, you've got a little better chance of getting accepted. So I thought, Well, I'll ask Janet. And she said yes to being on a proposal, and we had a really good time doing our session. I thought, Okay, I'll work with her again, because I've worked -- lots of authors, and some of them are easy and they deliver, and some of them are eh-well. Good writers, all, but some people are better speakers. Some people are easier to work with than others.

ST: Of course.

SV: Anyway, so oh man, this is kind of a long life story. So then I get a chance to be on the NCTE poetry award committee, and I co-chaired with Peggy Oxley, and that is tremendous.

NJ: Wow!

SV: That was a fun experience. And we chose Nikki Grimes as our recipient, which was awesome. I got to become friends with Nikki. And then the committee following mine had Janet on it, and Janet was a member, and I think it was Ralph Fletcher that was the chair. Oh I can't remember who they chose now. Was it Lee? Yes, it was Lee Bennett Hopkins. So Janet, being the dynamo that she is, when it came time for the committee to put forward proposals, because every committee is supposed to get on the docket for the next convention, she's like, Well, maybe Sylvia will help. And I'm like, Sure. So I wrote the proposal, even though I was the last year's chair, and it of course got accepted because it was a committee sponsored proposal. And so lo and behold, here comes the, I think it was the Philadelphia convention and Lee Bennett Hopkins was going to be honored, and it's falling to Janet and me, even though she's just a member, not the chair, and I'm on the old committee. Anyway, and we are like a deadly combination in terms of having ideas, more ideas than sense or money. And I said, You know what, we should do like a little *Festschrift* for Lee, like a little dittoed book of poems in honor of his winning the award, and she said, That's a great idea. She said, We should get it funded. And I'm like, I just thought we'd, you know, go run it off at Kinko's.

You know, my dreams are like this big, her dreams are like this big. And she's like, I'm going to go to NCTE, and she did. They gave us a thousand dollars, and now all of a sudden it was going to be a little nicer. And so -- I know, I know. So in the space of the summer before the NCTE conference, we gather all these contact emails from poets. We write them and say, Would you write an original poem for Lee? And like 65 people say yes, and they send us poems. And Janet and I go back and forth and back and forth, getting the poems, organizing them, and then we decide, We need to publish a little book. And Steven Alcorn, who'd worked with Lee, gave us free art. And then Janet did this research on who could publish a decent quality book. It was some company in Michigan. I mean, it was just insane how this little idea became, wow, really cool. I'm very proud of that little book. And Lee just loved it. It's a really nice actual book.

ST: Was it a surprise for Lee?

SV: Uh-huh.

ST: Ah, you managed to keep it a --

SV: I know!

ST: That's marvelous!

SV: Or maybe it wasn't and he just acted like it was, but he was thrilled, yes, it was great.

NJ: Wow.

SV: And we learned a lot about the poets that we were working with, again, who's easy and who's not, who uses the f-word in a poem and what do we do with that?

NJ: Who makes a deadline.

SV: Who makes a deadline, who doesn't. And we learned a lot about each other, and each other's working style was we were just so parallel. We would like, well, Nancy can totally appreciate this too, I'm sure. You probably can too, Sylvia. You know, you have people you write and then you wait a couple of days and you get an answer, and it's not clear and you have to follow up... Well, Janet and I were so in sync. Within minutes of each other, we were emailing back and forth. And, I don't know, it was incredible, it still is, an incredible working relationship, where there's no ego. Instead maybe she'll say, That's a stupid idea, and I'm like, You're right, that is!

NJ: But it's an idea.

SV: How about we just don't hurt each other's feelings. It's really great. I don't know how that is, but yes. So that was our first little effort together, and then she's like, We should do something else together. And I'm like, Yes, that would be great.

And one of my colleagues in Texas was telling me the following summer that Texas was about to start testing children's knowledge of poetry.

ST: Sigh.

SV: I know, I know. But my thought was, You know what that means? That means that teachers are going to freak out because they don't know how to do this. They don't know how --

NJ: The Blacksmith poem.

SV: Right, right. They don't know how to approach poetry. They don't do anything with it.

ST: Yes, the poetry that they knew, exactly, from when they were growing up instead of something that's new and innovative.

SV: This is an opportunity to create a resource for teachers that bridges that gap between -- they're going to be tested. Teachers need to know poetry first, and then they need to know how to share it. And that's how *The Poetry Friday Anthologies* were born.

NJ: Wow!

ST: Oh, is that right?

SV: Yep.

NJ: So it was because of Texas initiative.

SV: A very bad, yes. And yes, that's still - I hate that for testing.

NJ: Do they still do it?

SV: Oh yes. They keep refunding it, yes, yes. (Sigh)

So, that is sort of my career trajectory and sort of the history of Janet and me working together and the PFA series.

NJ: But it's not the only book.

SV: No, no, one thing led to the next.

NJ: Want to keep it going to how one book led to how do you make the decisions about, what book you're working on, and how do you --

SV: Sure.

NJ: Could you talk about those choices within the publishing and creating that.

SV: Okay. Yes, because that's been very interesting too, in terms of our deciding to publish it ourselves. Yes, that was totally nuts. But how did that happen exactly? We were walking around NCTE in Orlando, and I was sharing this idea with her about how I thought there was a market for something, because my *Poetry Aloud Here!* book had shown me that there was an audience for teachers and librarians to know just the nuts and bolts of how to select and share poetry with kids. But I thought, teachers in Texas, for example, needed more than that. They needed like lesson plans or actual poems, you know.

I know. So we were just tossing ideas around, and as Janet does, she starts promising, We're going to write a book, and then she starts telling everybody that we walked by on the sidewalk, So, what do you think we should do? And she's just so open and transparent. It's really great. It's a little nerve-racking sometimes too, but it's great. So we would like survey everybody we had dinner with at that whole conference about, What do you think, what do you think, what do you think? And I'm not even exactly sure, you know, how things sort of clicked, because we spent actually months on the format. What was the book going to look like? And originally, what was it going to include? It was going to have even more than it has, because Janet wanted -- We both agreed, by the way, we needed poems and lessons, sort of, together. But then she wanted even more. What did we have? The page was really full. We had a poem and a lesson and something else too. I can't think of what it was. Was it about the poet? It might have been, eh, it might have -- oh, I think it was. It was from the poet, like the writing of the poem, something like that. Which I love in concept, but when we had a layout, it was just like eh, you know, you just, it was more -- it was sort of the tipping point of I can't do anything with this for a teacher, you know, overwhelming, I don't know where to start. It assumed that you already loved poetry and that you would know what to do first, second or third, and I said, No. And she kept saying, You know, we need to get out of the poetry ghetto. Janet says that a lot, because we're always talking

to other people who love poetry. She said, That's nice, but that's not changing anything for kids, right? That's why you're doing what you're doing, see? We want to reach out to people who don't love poetry and show them, You can do this. You will like this. You'll be surprised how much you like this. And so that's when as we were looking at what should the book include, I said, Let's really distill and simplify. I think that that was my doing. I thought we just need the poem and the lesson, and that's it. And then we could have ancillary things on the web, because Janet's also very tech savvy, and she's pushed me to learn a lot about how to use websites and marketing, etc. We can do more elsewhere, but the book itself has to be -- the thing we were going for, that a teacher opens it and says, I can do this. And I hear that a lot, and it just makes my heart glad when a teachers says, I can do this, because before they were like, I can't do this. I don't know poetry. I can't do it.

So, how did we decide to self-publish? I think it was simply a matter of how fast she likes to work, the speed. Because you know, it takes two, three, more years, years, to take a book from proposal to actual publication. And then --

NJ: It couldn't wait. You got that test coming.

SV: Yep. I mean, that was sort of our logic. I'm sure it was Janet who knew about CreateSpace. That was not me. And I'm not sure how she knew about that because she had not done anything with it before. So I'm not quite sure. I'll have to ask her again, Where did that idea come from? But I know that wasn't mine. And so she was like, CreateSpace, it's from Amazon. It's print-on-demand. I'm like, What? So you know, I did some looking and I thought, Well, okay, it's self-publishing, actually, but I thought, Why not? I don't know. Janet always makes me feel like, Why not? And I kind of grew up with that. I guess it's my immigrant parents, you know, who left Germany --

NJ: They had to say that.

SV: -- moved to Australia, and they're like, Why not, why don't we go to America? My dad opened companies when he was alive, and yep, I kind of grew up with this, Why not? Which actually I'm so grateful for, because a lot of people I've met in my life, most people I would say, are like, Let's play it safe. I know this, I can do this. And I love that Janet and I both are like, Why not, let's try this. So, that's -- we decided on the self-publishing route. And now she calls us micropublishers, which I love. Because we established an actual company.

NJ: Because it has a name.

SV: Right, right, right. And that was her idea too. She's very business savvy. I am not. I would just give it away, honestly. It's so much work to be a business. But yes, so we came up with a company, and we went back and forth on what should it be called? That was a fun exercise, and I think I was the one who said Pomelo, because, gosh, we had spent months on this. It was going to be like Red Squirrel and Poetry is Us, and, you know, we came up lots of bad ideas. I was looking -- you know how you just Google words and the online thesaurus, What's another word for a poem or poetry? I was looking around, and the letters of poem were in Pomelo, and somehow Pomelo popped up, and I was like, Oh,

Pomelo, that's a fun word, although a lot of people say "pa-mello," and I say, whatever. But what was really powerful about it is that it has great significance in Asian culture, and it's very popular in Asian countries, and so Janet is very big on that too. She's so interesting. She's such a down to earth, practical gal, but the significance of numbers, numerology and good and evil --

Yes, it's very big to her. So like we can't launch on an odd day and stuff like that, and I'm like, Okay.

She's not really superstitious, and yet, you know, she has some ideas about that's not lucky and that is lucky, so that's been fun. I didn't know all that.

ST: Delightful.

SV: Yes, right. So, we went back and forth, Pomelo, yes, let's do that. And so the first book came out, *Poetry Friday Anthology, K-5*, and we decided also to research the common core because that was new, right?

And the Texas standards were out, the testing that was coming up, and we decided to try and combine those. And basically what we're trying to do is show people that really good teaching needs the skills and standards no matter what. We've said that for how long? But we tried to actually itemize and show, These are the skills that you are supposed to teach. Here they are. See, we've done it for you. But we tried to create these "Take 5" lessons so that they're real organic and playful and fun and varied. It's not the same formula over and over again. Each time it's a little different, and it's very interactive with kids. So that's been successful. Teachers have really responded to that.

NJ: So how many books now?

SV: The first one was in 2012, is that right? Yep, because that was my cancer year, going to always remember that. And then we were like, What are we going to do next? And people were saying, Are you going to do one -- the audience was saying, Are you going to do one for older kids? And we talked about that at length, middle school and high school, and the common core standards and the Texas standards for middle school are much more extensive for poetry than for K-5, as you would guess. They're older kids, they can do more. And so I was like, Well, it's going to take more space in the book to create a lesson that is meaningful for middle school, but we could do it if we have the poem on one page and the lesson on the other. Previously it had been poem with the lesson on the same page, okay? But previously it was K-5, six grades, now it was 6th, 7th and 8th, three grades, so we were like, Oh yeah, okay, we can do that. So I had a lot of fun. I do all the lessons. That's my proponent. I had a lot of fun with that, creating lessons that involved lots of technology and lots of drama and music, and that was fun. And so we did the middle school book.

Some people have asked about high school. We have decided unequivocally we're not doing a high school book, a lot of reasons. Mainly, in middle school it's still -- it's probably a specialist in English language arts or a reading teacher who's teaching it, but they're still sort of generalists, in terms of

covering lots of content in English. In high school, they really begin to narrow down. They think of themselves as academicians. They're very specialized and a little bit snooty and purist.

NJ: They teach content not kids.

SV: Right. And we thought, they won't want new contemporary poetry, live poets. They want classics, by and large. And they don't want the lessons made for them. It just -- we thought, it's not a good fit for our approach. Our approach is much lighter and more -- these are incidental things you can do in addition to curriculum. It's not intended to be a full-blown lesson. If you're going to do an hour lesson with students, this is not for you. You can build on it, but in a high school class, it's just a whole different ballgame. So we're not ever going to do that. I'm not, not interested in that.

NJ: And you don't need to, you have apparently enough projects --

SV: Yes, we always have projects.

Yes, so what was after that? We went back and forth. We've had lots of ideas that we haven't pursued, but Janet thought that we should connect with the content across the curriculum in some way. And I said, Yes. I teach a course in poetry for graduate students, and I said the unit that is the most popular is "Poetry across the curriculum," and she was like, Oh, okay, yes, that fits. And she said, Well, what is the area that typically is the biggest draw? And I said, Science, without question, because there is so much great nature poetry, animal poetry that naturally fits, for science instruction. So we decided to go down the science poetry path. But, once again, being the teacher, well we've got to connect with the standards, okay? So we had to really dig deep into the NSTA Next Generation Science Standards. That was an education. We actually went to science teacher conferences.

NJ: I know.

SV: Yes, very cool. Wow, that is such a different world! So different, and so fun, and they were so open to poetry. It's amazing. Yes, really, really open. Who knew? More so than generalist elementary teachers are open to science. They're not. There's a lot of resistance to science. It's very interesting. But we did the science one. And then that was 2012, was K-5. 2013 was middle school. 2014 was science. And last year, 2015, was the celebrations book.

And in the science book, we had a few poets who said, they were Latina, Can we do our poems in Spanish and English? And we were like, Yes, that's a great idea, absolutely! Because again, with my language background, I thought, I would love to validate many languages. And actually, one of the ideas I floated many times that we haven't pursued is an international poetry collection, with poets around the world using their home language and English. But the whole prospect is so daunting, not the least of which is paying royalties in different currencies.

ST: Yes, I think that's a fascinating direction -- the idea of children's, poets who write for children, it might be that they are adult poets who then have some children's poetry. I'd be so curious about that.

I've done a little bit of exploration of French children's poetry, and it's few and far between. But I'm not sure if that's just because I haven't dug into it a little bit, or --

SV: It's actually very popular in France. There's a whole company that specializes --

ST: But historically, I guess more, I was looking at that. So was there any older material? I think so, yes, because I was having -- anyway --

SV: Yes, I love that idea.

In the middle of all of this, I was editor of *Bookbird* for a bit.

NJ: Right.

SV: And that's an international journal of children's literature, and in my editorship, I wanted to emphasize poetry. So the last page of every issue was a poem, for kids, by a different poet from around the world. And so it was fun to explore. So I have those contacts too. And yes, I would love to do that. But it is quite daunting. First of all, the communicating with international poets is much slower. First you have to track them down, and then you have to tell them who you are. They have to figure out, What? And you have to figure out what language you're communicating in. Typically there's rights issues too, because a lot of them have publishers they want you to go through. And then they're not fast in responding. I mean, most people have a much saner way of life than we do. They take six-week vacations, and they take a week to get back to you.

NJ: August – the whole country.

SV: Right, right. So my urgency is not their urgency. So it would be a long-term project. I don't -- I would like to revisit that, but it would definitely take some doing. And then the characters of the different language --

NJ: The editing you'd have to have.

SV: It's -- yes.

NJ: And Janet brought this up. I think, I don't know how it usually works in anthologies, but you pay royalties to every poet.

SV: Yes, yes.

NJ: Is that unusual in an anthology?

SV: No, poets get paid. We've actually paid more than average, though. We're kind of proud of that. From what I've learned, poets typically get, typically, a hundred dollars per poem for an anthology.

NJ: A one-time.

SV: One time. Sometimes more, sometimes 200. That's fairly generous, but that's about it. But where they make their money is then their poem is out there, and this is awful, but textbooks and tests want to use the poem, and they pay big to the poet to use the poem there, and that's where poets make more money.

ST: Wow.

SV: How about that?!

NJ: I did not know that.

SV: Yes.

NJ: So, if Lee does a collection, an anthology of Paul Janeczko, for example --

SV: It's a flat fee typically. I think Lee might pay \$200 a poem, because his books -- he's more known, they sell a lot. I would bet Paul pays a hundred, but I don't know. But in our first four books, we paid per poem per book, so it's an ongoing royalty, but it was peanuts. I think it was -- I think it's 2 cents per poem per book, which sounds like nothing, and it was a labor of love for all of us. We didn't know if it was going to sell or not, and poets were like, We love you, Janet and Sylvia, here, it's great. But it's ended up being more like \$800 a year for some -- yes! -- for some poets, because the books have done pretty well.

NJ: I was going to ask, how --

SV: Yes. I mean, our money that we make, we just plow right back into the books.

ST: But it's unique on the market -- for having something for educators to actually integrate poetry.

NJ: And the poetry collection. And so the new ones have, the new science one, has its own anthology just for kids. It doesn't even have --

SV: Right, right. That's brand new.

NJ: So that's a new piece for you. Are you going to continue that?

SV: I think so, I think so. What I would like to do, and Janet seems open to this, is that middle school collection, the 6th, 7th and 8th, I'd like to take those poems out and make like a teeny, cool looking rad - you know, right?

NJ: Right. Do it.

SV: Yes.

NJ: That would be one that's almost done.

SV: I think so too, right, right. Minimal art, very graphic looking, but yeah, we'll see.

ST: So you mentioned *Bookbird*, but you have other columns that you write.

SV: Mm-hmm.

ST: So could you talk a little bit about your experience. Was that something that you proposed to *Book Links* or --

NJ: She edited it.

ST: Edited *Bookbird*, but you also do a regular for --

SV: For *Book Links*.

ST: -- for *Book Links* -- the poems. I just was using it recently and I was going through it and acquiring, trying acquire all the gaps that we didn't have,

SV: Okay, cool. How did that happen? Well, initially I don't remember exactly. It's a long time --

NJ: I thought it was Laura Tillotson.

SV: Right, mm-hmm, yes. I love Laura. Oh, she was so great to work with. And initially, I just submitted articles to *Book Links* because I liked it. It's such a practitioner-friendly magazine, and it was a chance for me to mentor a new colleague and a doctoral student, so I wrote with a variety of people just to submit. And I think it was Laura who said, I love what you're doing with poetry. Would you consider writing something for us? And I was like, Sure, that would be great. And so one thing led to another led to another, and then all of a sudden it became like a column, you know, a regular, and I'm not exactly sure how that happened. I think it was a combination of they liked -- you know what, it really can come down to the editor likes poetry, and I've been really lucky. Laura was a fan of poetry, and then Gillian Engberg after her, huge fan of poetry. Now they're kind of in transition. Gillian's actually not editing. She moved to Switzerland with her husband. They got married. Unfortunately, the last I heard from her, things were not working out well. The job was not what they thought it was going to be. So I think she's in transition again. I'm not quite sure.

Anyway, yes, they sort of embrace poetry. And another person might have asked you for an article on something, and then they're like, Thank you, that's nice. But she wanted another and then another, and then all of a sudden we're seeing, Well this is going to be a regular installment, which was great, even though the discipline of it --

You got it. It's like, Oh, it's already a deadline again?! How the heck did that happen? Right, yeah so, there's some days I cursed *Book Links*. But I love that they value poetry, and I love that the audience then is getting a steady dose of, Oh, yes, yes, I need to think about poetry. And it's great for me too. It's great for the recognition that I am associated with poetry. It's about my other work, and Janet's and my

work. It keeps us on people's radar, basically. So I'm now kind of synonymous with poetry, which is awesome. I love that. But that just sort of happened, and yea, I love that. I love the *Book Links*. I can't believe *Book Links* still exists, honestly.

NJ: It doesn't exist like it used to.

SV: Freestanding. I think its greatest value is the online supplement nowadays.

NJ: Yes, probably.

SV: Because a lot of teachers can't, or librarians, they can't afford to subscribe to *Book Links*. I couldn't subscribe to *Book Links*. I get it because I write for it, but otherwise, I couldn't do it. So that's a shame.

NJ: Could you talk a little about you and Janet, that collaboration, and how that works, especially when you put books together, or maybe even plan programs, but you each bring strengths to it, but just a little bit about that.

SV: Okay. Yes it's great. I love working with her. And she's like the most responsive person. I guess we both kind of live online, all the time. I guess you guys probably feel the same way, but you can count on that person to respond right away, right? And if they haven't responded --

NJ: You're worried.

SV: -- you're worried. Is Sylvia okay?

NJ: I know. It's really good.

SV: It's been 20 minutes.

SV: I know. It's so sick, right? But it's lovely that you have someone so simpatico. And when it comes to academic and these proposals, I write all the proposals. And it's funny because I've been doing a poetry session at the Texas Library Association for 12 years now, and we call it the Poetry Roundup. It's based on the ALSC thing. I went to the very first ALSC poetry -- was it called a "Blast"? -- and I just loved it, because it was just a session where poets got up and read their work. And I was like, Oh, this is so fun, and we should do it in Texas. So I started it at TLA, and it's been going on 12 years. I've had like a hundred different poets over the years. But now Janet comes every time, and everybody thinks it's Janet's roundup.

NJ: Okay.

SV: Exactly, okay.

ST: She's a presence.

SV: She is a presence, and I love that. So any kind of academic thing, I do all of that. But she's really -- she knows everybody, and so she's really good about reaching out and saying, Would you like to be part of our proposal? So I'm like, Oh, okay. I put them in, but she's the contact.

In terms of our books, that's really even more collaborative. Typically, our most productive, like dynamic brainstorming, is when we are physically in the same place. That's when we launch new things, I would say always. We'll toss ideas back and forth via email, and we'll get on the phone and chat, but to really be serious about, Okay, we're going to do this now --

How are we doing for time? Okay?

ST: I was just going to say, we have about 5 more minutes.

SV: Okay.

ST: We should -- I didn't want to look and interrupt you.

SV: No, no, that's alright. That's no problem.

So we do take great pains to make sure that we're in the same place a couple times a year, actually more and more and more. This summer -- she's also a go-getter for getting us to speak to schools and libraries. That's her doing. She does a lot of that. Do you like to do that? Do you like to go and --

NJ: Mm-hmm.

SV: Do you? Okay.

NJ: I haven't done any of that -- they've stopped doing it.

SV: Yes, exactly. There's not much of it. In-services and that kind of thing. I don't love it as much as she does. I find it really exhausting --

NJ: It is.

SV: -- the preparation and the execution, and she's very energized by it. But she just shows up and she's Janet. And I'm doing a hundred PowerPoint slides, right, research, articles, readings --

NJ: That's the difference, yeah. But I learn so much when I do them.

SV: Oh yes, absolutely, and I try to then transfer that into my writing and my blogging. I mean, it's all great, but it's a lot of time and work, yeah. And Janet's just Janet, and I love that, but she's like, Well we can go do a week, like we're going to Millersville University next summer, and I'm like, A week? Okay. So that will just take me a lot of prep time to have something substantive to offer. But that's great. She gets it now, when she says, Oh, Sylvia, we're going to talk for a whole day. Okay, I'll do that, but --

Yes, so, this summer I was -- she had arranged for me to talk to a school in New Jersey, which was interesting, and those were not poetry lovers, but it was fine. But, because I was in New Jersey where she lives, we knocked out three extra days. I stayed over and we worked, worked, worked for three days. It was really great. That's when we start to think, Okay, what do we want to do next, and how are we going to take this in that direction? And Janet has lots of crazy ideas that I think are very interesting, but we haven't committed to yet, like she wants to make toys and -- I know, I know -- card games!

NJ: Well, she's getting this new machine that's --

SV: The 3D printer. This is Janet, right?

ST: It's marvelous. And I think this is actually a really nice spot to end up the recording piece of this, on ideas and what, because I imagine that this will, to be continued.

SV: Okay.

ST: I can't imagine that this will be the only time that we'll get a chance to talk to you, but it's part of the oral history recordings.

SV: I feel like it was too much of my life, though.

NJ: Well that's what it was. This is called your oral history --

SV: Okay, alright. It seems weird, but --

ST: Well, the reason it doesn't seem weird to us is that we have been so incredibly grateful for your really tangible support of launching the PoetryCHat vision and what's happening.

NJ: Oh, I know, that huge support --

ST: The response has been really --

SV: Well, you're welcome. Let us know what else we can do.

ST: Absolutely.

SV: There's lots more.

(End of recording)