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This interview was conducted with Sara Holbrook & Michael Salinger on Sunday, October 2, 2016, around the kitchen table at the home of Nancy Johnson, Bellingham, Washington.

NJ: Let's start with this. We just finished our first Poetry Camp with PoetryCHaT. I've had a chance to know you and see your work for years. I've heard you speak to kids. Would you mind backing way up from poetry camp and from all of those experiences working with kids and writing poems, and talk about how you became a poet.

SH: I actually started writing as a hobby for my children. When they were young, I would put them to bed with a poem. When we ran out of Shel Silverstein, I started writing, but this would

have been in the 1970s. Every once in a while, I would submit to a magazine. The first magazine that ever rejected me was *Highlights*. Ironically, 17 years later, Boyds Mills Press, owned by *Highlights*, picked up my option after I had self-published. This was in 1990, I couldn't get a publisher, so my day job was in PR. I bought printing. I knew how to do that, so I self-published three little books, really as gifts for my friends. I don't know what I thought I was going to do with those books. I had 200 copies of each book and ended up selling 43,000 books. People ask me how I got published. I picked up the phone in the kitchen one day, back in the days when phones hung on the wall, and it was Kent Brown saying, we want to print your stuff. Bea Cullinan had sent him copies of my books.

NJ: How did she get her hands on those?

SH: Well, I was in PR, right? And we had this big catalog of all kinds of publications. I was very naive. I had never been to a teacher conference. I had never been to a book festival. I picked it up and I thought, oh look, there are journals here for teachers. There's this thing called *The Reading Teacher*. So, I sent my three little books to Lee Galda at *The Reading Teacher*, and she actually called me on the phone and said, I really like your books, but you don't have national distribution, so I can't review the books. Do you mind if I send them to my friend Dr. Bea Cullinan? I said, No, that would be great.

In the meantime, I was doing a few school visits, just for my friends, their kids. And, you know, maybe I'd take an afternoon off work and do an assembly. I found out you can get paid for assemblies, so I eventually scaled back to halftime in my job, and then quit my day job. It was a little scary. It was 1990 when I started that, and I printed those books. This is like all my business. I printed those books as a 40th birthday present to myself. I went around to festivals, outdoor festivals, and I would perform the poems with kids sitting on bales of hay at a renaissance fair.... Amazingly, teachers love to go to those things, so they would say, Will you come to my school? That's really how I started doing school visits.

I had a couple of professors who were very supportive. One was Dr. Nancy McCracken at Kent State University. And Dr. Evelyn Freeman at Ohio Wesleyan. They both assigned my books to their students, my little self-published books. And I was doing all point of purchase sales, no books for sales, and that launched my career. I had many people to be grateful for that start. I kind of came in the back door.

MS: I was always writing. I was this little kid in the class that was the writer in the class all the time. I don't know what really steered me toward poetry. I was just doing art, so I was doing performance art. I started out as the little writer in the class. In the 10th grade, I had a really great 10th grade teacher who told me that I was one of the best writers she had ever had in the class, but the worst speller she'd ever had. She encouraged me. I was lucky because the school I went to was a really good writing school ... This was in 1970s, so this is not necessarily

something that was really big then. But we were a fairly affluent suburb, so I was able to take a poetry class elective in high school, that was just strictly poetry. I took a science fiction elective, and we were reading Vonnegut -- *Fahrenheit 451* and stuff -- so we were reading good, good work.

I just liked writing. And I liked poetry because it was short. I had a short attention span, and I was sending stuff out, and I got a couple things published.

NJ: In high school?

MS: In high school, yes. I got a couple things published in high school. And then when I was in college, I got things published in a literary magazine there. But I started performing my work, and I started doing it as performance art. I was doing things like writing these pieces that also involved standing on stage and dropping stuff from the ceiling while performing, so these things were exploding around me, or busting cinder blocks or cutting myself out of metal boxes with acetylene torches, and just -- And then I was playing in punk bands. Poetry slam began in the 1980s, and I was in the avant-garde literary scene in Cleveland in the '80s and early '90s. Poetry slam was starting in Chicago. I performed my work rather than just read it, so it naturally gravitated toward poetry slam. The first National Poetry Slam was in Chicago in 1991, and it was a handpicked team from Cleveland, picked by the Cuyahoga County poet laureate, this guy named Daniel Thompson, who was a really amazing street poet. He was buddies with Ginsberg

and d.a. levy, and all those guys. I came in from the beat side. It was a whole beat kind of thing. And who was the guy with the thugs? The guy came through town, and we went -- and so anyway --

MS: It was...oh, I'll think of his name. He's still alive, and he's selling his archives right now.

SH: Not William Burroughs? Because you've met him.

MS: I met Burroughs too, yes. These were the people I was hanging out with, and I was doing performance art, poetry and performance. But you know, I wanted to dabble in this kind of stuff. Surrealist kind of stuff. So, I ended up going into poetry -- early into poetry slam -- as one of the first people doing poetry slam.

Back when we were doing slam, someone could be slamming a sonnet, someone would be slamming a villanelle, because it was still new.... A winning poem could be about Anna Karenina, you know. It was just crazy. It's changed over the years, but it's still good stuff happening. I'm doing poetry slam.

In the meantime, the whole time I'm still submitting to some literary magazines, I'm working in manufacturing at this point, and I had some lost years in there, because I was drinking too much. I was on the team that represented Cleveland a couple times in the early '90s. I got to tour with Lollapalooza in '94 as a performance poet, so I got to open with the Beastie Boys.

There were three stages at Lollapalooza. One was a poet stage, one was a second stage, one

was the main stage, and the Beastie Boys would grab a couple poets to go up and open for them every night. I got to open for them a couple times, but, you know, there were other people doing it too. It was fun. The biggest audience I've ever read before is 35,000. I've had a 35,000 person audience. Who knows how many were listening ...

(Laughter)

MS: And then I kind of dropped out of the scene for a while, had a couple kids, got divorced, got sober. Then I ran into -- and then I got back into poetry slam. I figured I might as well just get back into writing again. I did that, and Sara and I ended up on this team that represented Cleveland at the '98 Poetry Slam. I've been together with Sara since then.

I was working as an engineer at this point, in manufacturing, so Sara would go away, and then she'd come back. And she'd go away, and she'd come back, and she'd go do school visits somewhere, or she'd go to a conference somewhere. I had taught a couple classes in the community college and did some workshops, because I was a minor poet in the Cleveland area. I was known in the Cleveland area. And she said, you should put together a presentation for Michigan Council Teachers of English. That must have been like 1999, or something.

SH: Yes, right about 2000, I think.

MS: I took this book of surrealist parlor games and I looked at ways I could use those to teach poetic elements. I would teach metaphor and understanding metaphor using an exquisite

corpse kind of game. I came up with these workshops, and teachers liked them. I made these little booklets with the workshops, and the teachers dug them. And then I would go to breakout sessions, and I started taking, you know, more -- I really enjoyed reading the pedagogy. My job as an engineer was root cause analysis, finding ways to get to the crux of something. I would come into your part of the factory and if something went wrong, I would interview you, and I would drill down to what the cause was. The other part of my job is I would interview you and I would write your job. I would do work instruction, so that someone else could come in and know how to do it. My job was to find the missing pieces that someone with a lot of institutional knowledge would kind of just skip over. It was very detail oriented. I really dug getting into this, getting into the education side.

I had been at the same company for over 20 years, so I had five weeks of vacation, and we would go do school visits on my vacation time. My first overseas visit to Shanghai American School, was done on vacation time from my engineering job. I started working more and more with youth, and I started a program at the Cleveland Playhouse --

SH: Playhouse Square.

MS: -- Playhouse Square called Slam-U, where we did writing and performance for youth in Cleveland. I put together an eight-week program with a syllabus. Sara had her first PD (professional development) book come out with Heinemann, and I'm having dinner with Sara

and Harvey Daniels, and Harvey says, What are you working on? I said, I have this eight-week syllabus I just put together that we're doing at this thing. He looks at what I've got, and he says, Well, that's a book. Sara will help you write it. And that became *Outspoken.... Outspoken* was based on that syllabus. We did that for four or five years while I was still working in manufacturing, and then my company was basically sold.

SH: You got downsized.

MS: And I got downsized. I took unemployment as an arts grant, and I never went back to work.

NJ: When was that?

MS: Ten years ago?

SH: We tried to figure that out. I think it was in 2005. We should really figure that out. It's 2016 now, so I think that was about right.

MS: Yeah, like 2005, 2006, so it's been like ten years. I've been doing this since, and I've gotten to work with amazing people. I get to, I just -- Sara was already at this level of having had this access. We were laughing about that earlier tonight at dinner. I had no clue of the status of the people I was with -- because you've got your own, whether it's like Frisbee and dog competition, or with bicycling, or it's rock climbing, you've got people that are at the top of the

field.... Because I was playing in punk rock bands, I knew a lot of people from the punk rock scene and stuff, so I was never too impressed by celebrity. But these, they're just nice people, and I just treated them like nice people, and I think that's what really helped me a lot too. I think it's helped my career that I don't have stars in my eyes, but I can understand hard work. We've gravitated toward the people that do hard work, people like Sylvia -- there's just hard work and that's where it is. I still enjoy writing. I like writing for kids, it's fun, and I like challenges.

NJ: Talk about writing for kids and teens. You both have published for adults. Talk about the difference; is there a difference?

SH: I started out writing for kids, because I was writing for my own children, and I went to, let's see if I can get these years right. In about 199- , wow, -5, or so, I went to a poetry festival sponsored by the Poetry Alive people in Asheville. I drove down there with Sharon Draper, and we went to this festival. It was the first time I had ever heard slam poetry. I had always been very intimidated by adult poetry. I would open up *The New Yorker* and try to read the poems, and they didn't make any sense to me.... but then I heard slam poetry, and that really spoke to me. And really, on the way home, it's --

Here's how I feel about my writing. When I was in college, I took one creative writing class. I majored in English and journalism and took this one creative writing class where the professor

said, Good poems don't rhyme. So, I tried to write free verse. It was horrible. And then I started writing for kids. I kept those poems in a separate journal because I knew they were no good. They rhymed. I wrote in rhyme pattern verse for at least 10 or 12 years, exclusively -- because I was writing for children. And then I went to this festival. I heard slam poetry, and my adult voice came back to me. And I was able to write free verse that worked. So, I started writing for spoken word, and that grew into a book that was published by Cleveland State University.

NJ: Title?

SH: *Chicks Up Front*. At the same time, through the '90s, I was working for Dr. Janet Allen in the summers. For 11 summers, I did between three and seven workshops over the summer. At first, I started out being the third day afternoon entertainment. And then, after I did that for two years, she said to me, Sara, we have a lot of high school science teachers coming to this next event. Could you come up with a workshop for writing poetry for science teachers? She's the one who pushed me and nudged me into thinking about, how can we write poetry in social studies? How can we write poetry in math? I sat there and listened to a lot of experts, because she would also have guest speakers come in. I really had 11 summers, almost like getting an advanced degree in education, listening to all these people. My dissertation, then, my first dissertation would have been, *Practical Poetry*. That book came out in 2004, I believe, maybe 2003. I'd have to go back and look. At about the same time, I wrote *Wham! It's a Poetry Jam*,

which is a trade book, because Boyds Mills Press asked me to write a book on poetry slam for elementary. I said no, because I don't think that poetry slam is appropriate for elementary. It's too hard on the kids' egos. I mean, Michael and I have competed on slam teams, and we have seen adults dissolve in tears because of scores. We can't do that to a 10-year old. So, I came up with games that we could play in performance. Those two books came out very close to one another, and they were really my first teaching books.

It was after that that we wrote *Outspoken* together, about two years after that, I think. And --

MS: And I fell into it. I'm good with, not necessarily numbers, but I'm good with the standards. I can look at the standards and I can come up with lessons, or I can take the lessons that we've written, and see how they can apply to the standards. You know, it's like I said in the class today that the standards, the Common Core, all this stuff is like the Bible. You can look at it, you can make it mean anything you want, you know.

(Laughter)

MS: If you just look at it, you can game any of it, really. It's not necessarily gaming it, because we're all teaching, we're doing a good job, and all this stuff is just to sell product. As far as I'm concerned, the whole standards and the Common Core and this and that, and whatever -- it's all so they can sell more product.

SH: Market driven.

MS: It's market driven.... A lot of people who are a lot smarter than me have said that.

(Laughter)

MS: That's the luckiest thing for me, I get to work with a lot of people that are a lot smarter than me, and I think that's made me a better teacher.

SH: I think we both identify as teaching artists. We do not pretend to be education Ph.D.'s. We are not. We are writers who teach our craft.

MS: But we're good at coming up with lessons. And we're good at taking direction. We're good at, you know, --

SH: Challenges.

MS: -- challenges, yes.

MS: I don't want to toot our own horn. I think the thing that makes us as successful as we are, or what makes our stuff successful in the classroom, is that we understand it's about the kids, once we get in there.

SH: And there's a huge difference. There's a difference between -- we usually do a kickoff assembly when we go to a school, and that's very much focused on us. But then when we go in the classroom, then that is student focused. It's good to keep that separate.

MS: What we're bad at is selling our books.

(Laughter)

MS: We're bad at moving product. And whenever we do -- and we like teachers. We like working with the kids. But yeah, we're bad at selling our stuff. We forget to bring it or --

(Laughter)

MS: But that's not what we're there for, you know. We still like poetry as an art. One of the things that I really like, and we forget to do it so often, is when we are on the road and we are working with kids, is book an adult gig at the same time. That's always fun to get out and go into a club or a bookstore and do our adult work.

The difference, you said the part about writing for kids, what's different about writing for kids. I think the only thing that's really different is the subject matter. And sometimes that's not even different. It's -- it might be vocabulary. It might be keeping the vocabulary at a grade level.

SH: I remember saying that to a colleague, a former colleague, after I quit my day job, and she said, Sara, you used to write for lawyers. I was the director of communications for the second largest law firm in the world. I had seven writers that worked for me. I quit that job, and she said, What's the difference? You used to write for lawyers, now you write for kids. And I said,

Well, you really have to watch your language. She said, Well, no kidding. I said, No, I mean if you're writing for 2nd graders, you can't use a word like "subtle," they don't know what you're talking about. So, the word choice is very important.

And that was something that Dr. Amy McClure helped me with. Boyds Mills Press hooked me up with her because I had self-published these books, and I had this idea that fans would sit around the fire and read the books. I don't know -- my family didn't do that kind of stuff. We didn't have time. I didn't know anything about grouping poems by age group. What Amy McClure did is we sat down at this huge round table and spread all the poems out. And when they picked -- when Boyds Mills picked up my option, Amy helped me sort the poems out by age group. What we were looking at was the vocabulary. Not so much the subject matter, well a little bit, because I write some poems about teenage angst. A 2nd grader just doesn't get a poem that begins "I hate my body." They love themselves.

SH: Right, until they get to be a 6th grader, then they start feeling geeky. They're either too short, too tall, too wide, too, you know, their nose is too big, or whatever. So Amy helped me sort through that. That was the first time Boyds Mills rearranged my stuff.

The second time Boyds Mills rearranged my stuff, Kent (Brown) said, I want to reprint some of these books. He said, Who do you want as an editor? I said, Well, who I want, you can't afford. And he said, Well, try me. I said, I want Jane Yolen. And he said, You're right, I can't afford her.

But she sat down in Scotland, in the summer of, I forget, 2002 or so, and read 350 of my poems and reordered them into books that we were going to publish. The first book was *Wham! It's a Poetry Jam*. The second book was *By Definition*.

Then the editorial leadership changed, as often happens at publishers, and they said, We're not going to do that anymore. Then a new editor came in and said, We're going to rearrange all your poems. And then we had *Zombies*, and the --

MS: *Weird? (Me Too)*.

SH: -- *Weird? (Me Too) Let's Be Friends*. That was going to be a series. And editorial changed again. They said, No, we're not going to do that anymore.... That's just the way of the world in publishing.

MS: Sara was doing *By Definition* ... these definition poems for elementary kids, and we were using these in our assembly, and she said, you should write some definition poems for older kids, Michael. So I started, and I did it for our assemblies. I was doing it for fun. I was getting up in the morning and I'd write two or three definition poems for SAT level words. Then I get a letter from Boyds Mills that says, we're going to publish this. Sara had taken my poems off my computer and sent them in and submitted them, so I got my first kids' book published ... by Boyds Mills.

SH: *Well Defined*.

MS: *Well Defined* came out.

MS: And that's my only really main kids' book. The rest of my stuff has all been for adults.

SH: Or in anthologies.

MS: Or in anthologies, yes, I have a lot in kids' anthologies. But what I'm good at, I think, is taking assignments. Sylvia (Vardell) and Janet (Wong) know we need a poem about waves.

SH: Or levers...

MS: Or levers or simple machines. Can you give me a poem about this? I like doing that. Most of my kids' stuff is written on assignment, whether Sara gives me the assignment or whether an editor gives me the assignment. You know, because I've had -- J. Patrick Lewis has written me and asked me to write about this, write about that. And I like doing that....

SH: Right.

NJ: How many anthologies are you in? Do you have any idea?

MS: At least a dozen, I bet.

SH: Probably a dozen or so.

MS: Maybe a dozen or 15.

NJ: Sara, do you do that as well?

SH: Yes. A recent example is J. Patrick Lewis was doing a book for National Geographic. He gave us both assignments for that. That was on nature. The new one that he's working on are different places in the United States, and he asked me to write a poem about the Underground Railroad. I did, but I placed it -- we had to place our poems -- so I placed my poem in Cumberland, Maryland at a house that I knew was in the family. It supposedly was a stop on the Underground Railroad. That's the folklore of the town, that this house was a stop. In my mind, that's what I pictured and I wrote about that.

MS: I did one for Cleveland for the Rock Hall (Rock & Roll Hall of Fame), and I wrote a poem about the Ramones and he took it.

(Laughter)

MS: And then, the last one, for --

SH: -- *One Minute till Bedtime*.

MS: *One Minute till Bedtime*.

NJ: You're both in that one.

MS: So we're both in that one.

SH: Right.

NJ: Did he give you a topic for that one, or did he just give you a general theme?

MS: Just a general theme. He said, A one-minute poem that -- Well, the funny thing about that one is, the poem that I originally wrote for him, he sent back. He didn't like it. So, write a different one.... I gave him three poems to choose from, and the one that ended up in the book is the one that he first rejected.

SH: The same thing happened to me.

MS: So I think he's got another editor. I don't know.

SH: Right.

MS: This shouldn't even be on here.

(Laughter)

SH: Because --

MS: I think there's another editor there. Because I knew that first poem was good.

(Laughter)

MS: And I think, I'm going to look at it. I think it could be a picture book, because it's -- I want to get that poem and rework it. I've got to wait six months after it's published before it reverts back to me and then I can --

SH: One of the anthologies that I'm proud to be in is by Lee Bennett Hopkins called *America at War*.... We do have four professional books, and those have taken a lot of time. Every time one of those goes out the door, I feel like I've just written another dissertation, or the closest I will ever come to that kind of --

MS: To have an eternal degree. They're terrible, they almost kill us.

(Laughter)

MS: I like the research part of it. I really like researching. I like reading about what's going on. I like reading education theory. And I think what we do is we can either take what we've already come up with for classroom ideas and either bend the theory to that --

SH: (Laughter)

MS: -- or we can write new things too with that. But I mean, it's all -- best practice is, is best practice is, is best practice is. They change the names, you know. They did the same thing when I was in manufacturing. When I was doing quality control, different standards would come through. You'll see when you drive by a building, you see ISO 9002, so that's just an international standard everyone's working to. In five years, it will be ISO 9008 --

(Laughter)

MS: -- because they'll change like six or seven things. A bunch of consultants will come in and help you set up . . . but it's all still valid practices. It's just keeping up with the lingo, throughout it.

NJ: Did you read poetry as kids? Was it read to you? Do you remember any poetry in your lives as children?

SH: We talked about that this morning. My mother thought it was great for me to memorize nursery rhymes for her friends' entertainment. My dad was in Korea when I was a toddler, and I don't have these records anymore, but she recorded me on little records with memorized nursery rhymes and sent the records overseas to my dad in Korea. I think at one point I knew as a kid, like, a couple dozen nursery rhymes. So, that was in me.

I don't remember anything about poetry until I got in 7th grade. I was in accelerated English, they called it, which meant I had an extended English program. I had a great teacher. She read to us over the course of the year *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, a little bit at a time, and read aloud. But I also remember her reading to us "The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere." And she said, that's a poem. I want you all to write your own poems. I wanted to write like that, but I couldn't. I mean, I had those nursery rhymes in me, I had that rhythm, but I just couldn't make it happen. There was no instruction, she just said, Here's your mentor text. I feel sorry for kids when I see -- we still do this in classrooms. We give kids mentor texts and we say go for it. As far as I'm

concerned, that's like showing kids a wedding cake and giving them a sack of flour and some eggs and saying go for it. Anyway, I copied a poem out of a book and handed it in. And she caught me. I also remember in 9th grade having to memorize "The Charge of the Light Brigade" as punishment for talking in biology class. Beyond that, I don't remember too much.

I didn't even -- I'd never heard of Emily Dickinson until I got to college. I mean, poetry just wasn't part of the curriculum, at all ...

NJ: As a child?

SH: Yes, Michael's younger than I am, so education changed or something.

NJ: In your home was there much poetry?

MS: No, there weren't any books in my house. When I was growing up, my family wasn't super -- weren't super literate. People didn't read for pleasure. We had the 1969 World Book Encyclopedia, and I read that from front to back, the whole entire -- I mean, I would read the encyclopedia for fun, because that's all we had.... That's not really true because I always got books from Scholastic, because they were coming to you, and my parents always gave me money to buy books from Scholastic. So, I was always bringing something, bringing books in. Not much poetry, I didn't buy poetry. I bought *Encyclopedia Brown*. That was the big thing. I really liked those.

SH: But both of us came up before young adult literature was a thing.

MS: Yes, there was no such thing. I didn't even know who Shel Silverstein was until I was an adult. I don't even know when he was being published.

SH: 1980s.

MS: In the '80s. See? I missed that.

SH: Right.

MS: So that was --

NJ: But that wasn't part of your classroom --

MS: That was before my time. I mean, I was before his time then.

SH: Yes.

MS: If Shel Silverstein was coming out in the 1980s because I was in grade school in the '70s.

NJ: Late '80s.

MS: There was nothing there. There wasn't, you know, kids' poetry. But I was writing poetry. I was writing because I had a teacher in 4th grade who -- I had a poem published in *Scholastic* magazine in 4th grade ... about monsters going to a birthday party.

NJ: Do you still have that?

MS: No, and I can't even find it online. I wish I could. If anyone ever finds it -- I was writing poems then, it was like 3rd or 4th grade. I really got back into it in college when I was in the bands and stuff, and I learned about the beats, and I just thought that was, you know, I was just -- I was doing more abstract data kind of writing and stuff. And I think that was --

SH: You had a poem published, you told me, in mechanics magazines.

MS: Yes, I had a poem published in this metallurgy --

SH: (Laughter)

MS: Well that's when I was -- that was during poetry slam time, so that was --

SH: Before I knew that.

MS: Yes, and it was the only poem that they had ever published. It was about a machine. My first collection was called *Big Machines and Things with Wheels* (sic), and it was all around manufacturing.

NJ: Who was the audience for that?

MS: The audience was --

SH: Bars.

MS: Yeah --

(Laughter)

MS: -- bars, bookstores, you know, just beatnik kind of hangouts.

SH: I mean, graveyards, think about some of the places of reading (inaudible, multiple speakers).

MS: Yes, we did readings in junkyards --

SH: I mean, people don't know that. (Laughter)

MS: We did readings in junkyards. The thing is, in Cleveland, the poetry scene, the performance poetry scene was connected to the punk rock scene a lot. So we were doing -- I mean, I was up between bands, between punk bands, and I was playing in some punk bands. I might do a poetry set, and then my band would play next or --

SH: Which, I think, would be an eye opener as we create the history of adult poetry, because I think a lot of people think that spoken word poetry grew out of the Hip Hop scene, but it actually preceded hip hop in coming out.

MS: A lot of people think that poetry slam is hip hop and is rap, but poetry slam was before hip hop existed. In the performance poetry scene, I was working with people like -- God, who was the guy who did the Thug? I'll think of his name. But they would come through, like, avant-

garde jazz people, in these little clubs in Cleveland, and that's what we did. We were just stupid kids doing art. That's where that came from. That's just what it was. Then I had a day job. I was one of the only people who had a day job in this crew too.... the only one still going to work. It was fun, it was fun. We did some good stuff. What the heck is his name? He did a thing with the Manson family too.

SH: Eww.

MS: I mean, he wrote a book about them.

SH: Oh, okay. (Laughter)

NJ: One of the things that you mentioned last night, when we were talking with the poets yesterday, was the fact that you actually make a living as poets, or educators.

SH: Right.

NJ: When did you know -- You said you quit your job. But when did you know you could do that? There aren't very many people who can make a living doing this.

SH: Well, I am grateful for the years that I spent in the business world, because I think -- I meet a lot of creative artists who can't manage their business, right? And when I worked at the law firm, I had a multimillion-dollar budget I had to manage. I am grateful for that. I'm grateful -- What happened with me is, I took out a line of credit on my house. I had one kid in college,

another kid in high school fixing to go to college. I found out you could get paid to do assemblies, and I sat down and I did a budget. I had this much coming in child support, and I figured I would need to do this many assemblies, and I sent out postcards. I do want to say that I don't think today I could do what I did with self-publishing, because at the time, Shel Silverstein was up where today, in 1916 (sic), where Suzanne Collins is.

MS: 2016.

SH: 2016.

(Laughter)

SH: I'm sorry, 2016.

MS: We're old, but we're not that old.

SH: Right.

(Laughter)

SH: He was at the top of the best seller list. Betsy Byars gave me a little blurb to put on the back of my self-published poetry books, and I still have some of those, and I will send you those -- for your library, because she's a good friend of my Aunt Sophie's. I didn't know she was famous. I just knew she was Aunt Sophie's friend, Betsy. She looked at a bunch of my poems before I self-published. I showed her over lunch one day a couple of my poems, or more than a

couple probably. I was obnoxious. And she said in that beautiful South Carolina accent, she said, Sara, someday I think you will get published, but you have to separate these poems out by subject matter. She didn't tell me the thing about the age groups. She just said subject matter. I thought, well I can do that. So, I went and I made one pile of poems about school, one about families, and one about feelings. In the meantime, I told my daughter the story, and she went, Oh my God, Mom, she's famous! And I didn't know that.

(Laughter)

SH: Those first three books that came out -- one was *The Dog Ate My Homework*, one was *Feelings Make Me Real*, and one was *Some Families*. Those were my first books. Later I came out with *I Never Said I Wasn't Difficult* and *Walking on the Boundaries of Change*. Those were my self-published titles. Then when we went to Boyds Mills, they kept the titles, but we rearranged the poems by age group. It was just this sort of bizarre thing that happened. I just kept scrambling and growing, the whole time learning, because I really didn't know anything. I think if I had ever -- And there was a gap in the market. What had happened was Shel Silverstein had come along and gotten kids all jazzed up about poetry. But, a good reader by the time they got to be in about 5th grader, they'd worn him out. What was happening in schools is they were jumping kids from Shel Silverstein to --

MS: -- to Walt Whitman.

SH: -- Walt Whitman. Right? That is a big leap. And so, McClure, McCracken, and Evie Freeman, were anxious for tween poetry, to get kids, to help transition them. I would speak at a conference, and those books would just fly, because there was nothing. Do you remember that time?

NJ: Yes.

SH: It was a hole in the market. Then I also at that point linked up with the educator Dr. Janet Allen. She got me out of the state of Ohio. We went all over the country, Alaska, California, Arizona, Florida, South Carolina, Maine. We were all over doing these conferences. So, I have a lot of gratitude, a lot of people to be grateful to, including you. (Laughter)

MS: The guy I was thinking of is Ed Sanders, Ed Sanders. Those are the people I was following. There was Ed Sanders, and a guy named John Giorno who was a big performance poet doing stuff back then. That's where we collided, where we came together. We came together through slam, and that is how Sara and I met.

SH: And a bar.

MS: And a bar. Sara introduced me into the education side of things. Then we did that conference for Bonnie Campbell Hill, and we opened the conference by each performing one of our poems. After we performed poems, these three crazy ladies came up and asked, Do you want to come to --

SH: Bahrain.

MS: Bahrain and talk at the TARA (The Arabian Reading Association) conference? That started our international career.

SH: At the Smokey Daniels thing.

NJ: Yes.

SH: He was staying there, and he said, Would you ever come to Shanghai? And I said, Sure, I'd come to Shanghai.

MS: When I went to Shanghai ... I was still working, and I went, just intending to go along, and -

SH: They threw you in high school classrooms and worked you the whole time.

MS: They threw me in high school classrooms and worked me the whole time ... And we've just gone from there. We've developed, you know. Singapore is where we wrote the last book.

The *High-Impact Writing Clinics* came out of that. It's just, it's been fun. It's how we make a living, it's a business too.

SH: Right. Right, so -- practical things. Together, we work on a six-month budget, and we look at our expenses. And we have to pay our taxes quarterly and that sort of thing, so we have to map all that out.

MS: Very low overhead. We keep a low overhead.

SH: We do.

MS: We keep our, you know, our house is just about paid for. We don't --

SH: -- spend what we don't have. (Laughter)

MS: We don't carry debt on credit cards. We're not living off the grid, but we're living, we're not in debt. We couldn't do this in debt. We live in Cleveland. We couldn't live here and do that. We couldn't live in Seattle, it would be too expensive for us to live here and do what we're doing, but we've got a pretty good life.

SH: We do.

MS: You know, we get long chunks of time off --

NJ: You're on the road a lot. When do you write?

SH: We do, we write on the road. I mean, my novel was written basically on the road, and in the summer. We were home -- this summer we were home really a long time. We finished our last school gig in May. We had a couple conferences this summer, but other than that, we were pretty much home for 4 ½ months. That's a good stretch. We're usually home between the first week in December until about the middle of January. Schools aren't real interested in having you then. It's just a crazy time for everybody, so you get those blocks.

MS: We've got three or four projects right now. Each one is about 75% done.

SH: Right.

MS: We will be shopping around, trying to get ... We've got to finish one or two of them and get them out.... You almost have to publish at least every two years. You've got to get something out.

SH: Right.

MS: We're getting up on that two year point. Now Sara's got the novel coming out --

SH: I have a novel.

MS: I need to get something out. I've been putting more stuff in anthologies and things --

NJ: When you work for anthologies, I don't know how that works. Do you get -- I mean, I know if you're doing a book, you get royalties.

MS: Yes, anthologies --

NJ: How do anthologies work? Do you get paid at all?

MS: You get like a hundred bucks.

NJ: So it's by a poem?

MS: By a poem.

MS: What's nice about --

SH: Single rights.

MS: Yes, that's what's nice about anthologies, because then it's your piece again.

NJ: You said in six months.

MS: It's one time rights. Yes, generally --

SH: One time rights.

MS: So it's like, you can't send it anywhere else. It's first time exclusive rights for six months.

Once it's published, after six months, you can shop it around somewhere else. Like this one I've got in *One Minute Before Bed* (sic), I think it could be a picture book. I might do a little bit of rewriting of it or something, but I could send it out now, because the book just came out and nothing -- everything takes two years to come out anyways, so if I get --

NJ: Especially if it's illustrated.

MS: Yes.

SH: And the novel has been a big-time investment. I've written two novels, basically, in the last couple of years. That has been -- it's just taken a lot of time. But I'm at an age, and I don't

know if you feel this way, but I kind of have to look at my time and say, This is what I want to do, and this is what I don't want to spend my time doing. For instance, I was asked to co-author a book from Heinemann on technology. This was a few years ago.

MS: Oh yes, that --

SH: Like about three, yes, about three years ago.

MS: They wondered if we wanted to write something on tech in the classroom, and we said, No.

SH: I for one, I never say no, so I said yes. Then we talked to Lee Ann Spillane about being a classroom teacher on it, a woman I respect and admire greatly, we both do. And at one point I just called her up and I said, Lee Ann, I think you should do this, but that is not where I want to put my time in. I just, I have these three novels that I want to do, and I have some picture books. I did Jane Yolen's picture book camp two, almost a year and a half ago. I have three or four picture books that I want to get out. And I really want to focus on my own creative writing at this point in my life.

NJ: I know as people who perform poems, I didn't ask you to bring a book, but could we close with a poem from either of you, or both of you?

SH: Sure. What kind?

NJ: I don't care.

SH: Adult or children?

NJ: It could be for adults, it could be for children. This is PoetryCHaT, maybe children to teen.

SH: Teens?

NJ: Yes.

SH: Hmm.

NJ: If that put you on the spot, no big deal.

SH: I have probably about 200 poems memorized, so I'm okay with that. Here's a poem that I think I can read to young kids and I can read this to adults and they can identify with this poem. Let's see. It's called "The Loneliest."

I can't remember the first line now. Wait a minute, hold on.

MS: So you only have 199 poems memorized.

SH: Right, right. Oh wow. It's because this machine is running, and my brain has stopped running. Let's see. Let me do a different one, then. I can do "I Never Said I Wasn't Difficult," which is kind of a signature piece.... I will tell you about this poem. I wrote this poem because (Jack) Prelutsky had a book of poems that came out about holidays. I think it was when his

Halloween book came out. People kept asking, Why don't you have holiday poems? So, I actually sat down to write a poem about Thanksgiving, and all I could think about Thanksgiving is how I used to fight with my cousins about who was sitting where and that sort of thing. Out of trying to write a poem about Thanksgiving, I wrote this one.

I never said I wasn't difficult, I mostly want my way. Sometimes I talk back or pout, don't have much to say. I've been known to yell, "So what?" when I'm stepping out of bounds. I want you there for me, and yet I don't want you around. I wish I had more privacy, and never had to be alone. I want to run away, I'm scared to leave my home. I'm too tired to be responsible, I wish that I were boss. I want to blaze new trails, I'm terrified that I'll get lost. I wish an answer came every time I asked you why, I wish you were to know it all. Why do you question when I'm bored? I won't be cross-examined, I hate to be ignored. I know I shuffle messages like cards, some to show and some to hide. But if you think I'm hard to live with, you should try me on inside.

I want to say quickly, because Sylvia was talking about the STAAR test in Texas. This year we did a school visit in Texas, and the reason the teacher contacted me is because she said that I am the only poet who has been on the STAAR test twice. And I said, Oh, really?

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Children & Teen Poetry Collection (PoetryCHaT)

NJ: Do they pay you?

SH: They pay the publisher, I guess, for that. I didn't notice it in my royalties, you know. But it probably was there in the fine print. They had chosen a poem I have called, "Sudden Self-Loathing-Syndrome," which I think is, like, one of my most neurotic poems. And then they had also chosen a poem about insomnia, a different one. I have to tell you, I read the questions that the kids were asked, and they're always after kids to figure out what is the author's purpose. I have no idea what my purpose was in this. I want you, if any teacher listens to this, or preservice teacher, I do not know. I just sat down and wrote it. I did not write it with any kind of purpose.

MS: This teacher that we're talking to said, You mean the test writers didn't talk to you about the questions? You mean the test writers didn't ask you what you were thinking? No. Someone is sitting back in a room somewhere, coming up with the questions, coming up with the answers themselves, and it's bullshit.

SH: One of the questions I had to say, on every one of them, I could have given an argument for a couple of different answers, and I think they would have worked fine. It made no sense to me. So, I just have that out there. That's it. That's what I had to say about that.

NJ: Where is that poem published? What book?

SH: It's in *Walking on the Boundaries of Change*. They're both out of *Walking on the Boundaries of Change*. I actually can give you the STAAR test. She sent it to me. It's now up online because it's a past test, and they now use it for coaching the kids for the next ones. So I have the questions. I think the questions are of very little value. And I don't know why they chose those poems. I can't believe they chose the one they did, or one of them they did. The other one's okay. But it's just astonishing to me.

NJ: Wow.

SH: So you just don't know. This was for the 8th grade test in Texas.

MS: So this one, you said difference between adult and kids. This is something that I would read in an adult reading as well as at a high school or a middle school. I wrote this for (my son) Max when he graduated from college. I think you know this poem, but. I've done this one before. "Belay off."

Belay off. They tell you to never look down. The average climbing rope is 50 meters long, and it's rated by the number of falls it can withstand because it is expected that you are going to lose your grip. And these ropes are designed to stretch up to 6.5% of their length, thus they absorb your body's weight, as it accelerates 32.18 feet per second, per second spring you back in safely to a stop

rather than snapping you in half. But, with a carabiner click, you've unhooked yourself. Belay off. And up you scale, chalk absorbs hand sweat but not your fingertip pain. Trigger loaded cans sway at your waist like a cluster of colored pendulums picked one by one, inserted into fissures and cracks, then left behind as if they were antique keys poking from an attic's trunk. And you look up, because you've been warned to never look down, feeling for imperfections in the rock, facilitating just enough friction that you may cling to its face, as you surmount this obstacle, one hand, one foot at a time. Simply because it is there. And once you've reached the summit, before you spy your next climb, go ahead, look down. See how far you've come. Belay off.

NJ: That poem is in the collection called?

MS: *A Bear in the Kitchen.*

SH: I would say one more thing that's different between kids' writing and adult. I don't rhyme in adult verse, unless I'm being humorous, right? I think that's because when I was a kid, I really liked rhyming words, so when I think like a kid, I play with rhyme. I also like to play with form. I've written a lot of sonnets, villanelles. In the book I wrote with Alan Wolf,

More Than Friends, we experimented with a lot of different forms. I like experimenting with form. But again, that's a book for teens. But mostly I don't rhyme in adult verse at all. Unless, assonance, and maybe throw in some subtle ... but end rhyme? No, no.

NJ: As we think of wrapping up. I started with a few questions, and then I guided a little bit. Is there anything about who you are as a poet, a poet educator, and what the field is about, that you would like to include?

SH: Two things. I think it's very important for me to be in the classroom. I think that that feeds not only my educational philosophy, but it keeps me current with kids. So being in the classroom is extremely important. When I start to hear consultants speak at conferences, I can smell it if they haven't been in the classroom in the last twenty years. I think that that is extremely important.

And, I always approach every class as we are collectively a community of writers. In the professional books that we have written, instead of saying, giving directives like, You do this, you do -- I say, We do this. I feel that I'm learning, and I am joining these students, whatever age group they are, we are a community of writers. It's so important for me to write with the kids.

MS: I agree. What I really liked about what I heard this weekend was -- her name was Laurie? Who was the one who was doing the word game things?

NJ: Julie Larios?

MS: Yes, Julie Larios. I'm not a big fan of precious poetry. You know, it's just so precious and it's everything -- and I don't care. Everything does not need to be surrounded with a heart.

(Laughter)

MS: ... I said it earlier in the conference, our job is not to create poets, because the poets are going to be there. You're not going to stop someone from being a poet. Our job is to help create citizens that are going to go out into the world. The poets are going to be there. What we're doing isn't going to stop people from being a poet. But if we can get one lawyer to have a little more empathy. If we can get someone in finance to think a little deeper. I think that's what our job is as educators. You know, that and feed our dogs.

SH: We feel very strongly that poetry is created nonfiction. And I just think that --

MS: Other people have different opinions about this.

SH: Rilke tells us that poetry is not simply emotion. One has emotions early enough. Poetry is about experiences. And as such, it is our task, as poets, is to be present in our time and write from this time. This is history. We are first person narratives. And the stories that come out -- like my poem "Chicks Up Front," that is -- that could not have been written

-- It is written about the March on Washington in 1968, and that is a piece of history. Does it have my feelings and emotion in it? Yes. But it is really about that experience. And that's our responsibility as poets, is to be true to our own vision, what we have seen, what we have -- Think about it, these are the poems we love.

MS: But that's our opinion. And we agree with each other. Not everyone agrees with us.

(Laughter)

MS: But we agree with each other, and that's what we push, and that's what we believe.

You know, other people can believe other stuff, you know. They're wrong.

(Laughter)

NJ: Your writing reflects that.

MS and SH: Yes.

MS: That's what we do, you know. I believe in the Hippocratic Oath, you know, do no harm. There's a lot of people out there that we might not agree 100% with their philosophies, but they're not necessarily doing harm....

SH: I think that children's literature, the fun poems, the silly poems, the absolutely ridiculous sometimes poems, are so important, because they give kids language skills. And then when the child has something important to say, they have the skills to say it. So,

anything we can do to trick kids into reading and expressing themselves in words is a good thing. Poetry is just perfect for that. It is perfect for helping kids be precise and concise in their writing, and also when they perform poems to speak with clarity and conviction.

NJ: Thank you, both, very much. Thanks for coming to Poetry Camp.

MS and SH: Loved it.

NJ: And thanks for the work you do.

SH: And thank you. You know what? People like us would not have a job if it were not for the support of educators.

MS: You are singlehandedly responsible for our teaching innovations.

(Laughter)

NJ: Thank you, thank you.

(End of audio recording)