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This interview was conducted with Liz Van Doren and Kerry McManus 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 at ALA Midwinter in Boston. And, we're having the wonderful opportunity to speak with Liz Van Doren, who is the Editorial Director of Boyd's Mills Press.

KM: And Kerry McManus, marketing manager.

NJ: And what we will do is try to disappear, because more than anything, we would just love for you to talk. Mostly, because this is for our PoetryCHaT, poetry collection, about Wordsong. Don't worry about it being a natural flow. Whatever comes to mind from when you started working with Bea would be awesome, any of that connection.

LVD: So I wish that had been the case. Wordsong was started at the beginning of Boyd's Mills Press, which is 23 years ago. The story, it's a great story, and we can provide you with this interview. There's an interview with Bea in --

KM: -- NCTE journal.

LVD: -- an NCTE journal. She was originally invited. She was connected to Highlights for years, and she was invited by our editor in chief to come and speak to the board about what makes a great story. She was also a longtime friend of Kent Brown, who was the founder of Boyd's Mills Press. He is the grandson of the founders of Highlights. And he wanted -- Kent is kind of a visionary, and he saw things that maybe other people don't see, and he was perhaps less concerned with commerce and more concerned with bringing great books to kids no matter what it takes. So he wanted to start a poetry imprint, and he invited Bea to come and do it. Nobody who is on the staff now, unfortunately, worked with her because her association with Wordsong -- I'm not going to say it ended, but it kind of, you know, slowly slipped away over the last 10 years. I've been here for 5 years, and I don't --

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KM: Yes, I agree. It's probably been closer to maybe 7 or 8 years that she hasn't been affiliated with, strongly affiliated with Wordsong.

LVD: And as she kind of slipped out of that role and did other things, we hired first as a freelancer and then as a full-time staff person Rebecca Davis, who had worked at Simon & Schuster, she worked at Greenwillow, she worked at Orchard. She has a deep passion for poetry. It really takes a special kind of editor to edit poetry. It's very, -- it's complicated, and yet it's just the same as editing anything because a poem is a story. But poetry also has form, and you need to understand the form, and you need to understand when the form works and when the form doesn't. So Rebecca pretty exclusively publishes all of the poetry for Wordsong now.

We think a lot about, National Poetry Month is in April, and we kind of look at how many books a year are we going to publish, and how are we going to manage those? We do publish poetry books in the fall occasionally, a few. We try to publish them mostly in the spring so that we can take advantage of any poetry month promotions. But we also try to keep the list small so that we're not cannibalizing our young, so that every book has an opportunity to --

KM: And there are some years that we don't publish any Wordsong titles.

LVD: Right.

NJ: So you don't make a commitment to say, We will publish two Wordsongs a year?

KM: No, it's really list driven, I would say, author driven, editor driven.

LVD: So one of the things as I was doing some research because I have to confess that I had to go to our editor in chief and say, I should know how Wordsong was founded but I don't know that much about it. And she said, I don't know that much about it either (laughter), which made me feel so much better, because a 23-year-old history is 23-year-old history. But Wordsong is the Japanese word for poem, and that was Bea's idea to name this imprint after something really sort of deep and ethereal and heartfelt. I know, very cool.

And so, one of the things you asked in the email is what drives our acquisitions? You can imagine that Rebecca gets a lot of submissions every year, and some of them are great, and some of them are okay, and some of them are not great. And so, it's always a little bit mysterious and yet completely obvious what's great. One of the things that's sort of the hallmark, one of the things that we look for, is books that are unexpected. If it's been published before, we - you know, there's no point in our doing it.

NJ: I'm chuckling because it makes such good sense.

LVD: Yes, unexpected is a really important word. If something is expected, that's not a good thing, in a landscape where books are very expensive to make and very expensive to market and very expensive to buy. We look for books that are kind of inspiring to young readers, that challenge readers to think about themselves, to think about the world, to think about their assumptions, to think about what is inside them emotionally. I think that poetry publishing is a very underserved genre. I just love that there is a

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day called Keep a Poem in Your Pocket Day, and I love that schools do that, and I think that poetry, even for the most reluctant reader, poetry is something -- a poem is something that they can be successful with. And a poem tells a story in very few words. But we really think about, you know, we look for excellent writing, we look for a deep understanding of form. A rhyming picture book is not a poetry picture book, and so that's always - something that is talked about a lot in our editorial meetings, is, you know, someone will invariably say, Well, it rhymes. Shouldn't it be a Wordsong book? And Rebecca has a bruise on her forehead from banging it on the table because no, poetry is something bigger than just rhyme.

ST: And that's something that we addressed and confronted ourselves as we were developing the collection, what we're going to bring into poetry collection from the picture books. And coming to that same, really coming to that same decision that rhyming picture books are not part of what we are going to define as the poetry collection.

LVD: Right. And a book could be -- the entire book could be a poem. You can take a poem and illustrate it, and then that's a poetry picture book.

ST: Right, absolutely.

LVD: A book can be a collection of poems and be a picture book, and as I talked about earlier, have a story woven through, something that knits all of the poems together.

NJ: Your example today, *The Farmers Market*

KM: Right.

LVD: Yes, the *Fresh Delicious*, by Irene Latham.

A book, you know, poetry extends into older age groups, and I've just been so excited to see acknowledgment in the literary world of novels in verse with our own *Words with Wings*, with Sharon Creech's books, with Karen Hess's book, --

KM: Kwame Alexander.

LVD: Yes. So, I think those are -- And Rebecca can definitely speak to you more about what, but one of the things we always talk about, Is it unexpected? Has it been done before? How will it be illustrated? With a picture book, that's really important. We have rejected manuscripts that we could not figure out how to illustrate. There's a great book that we're publishing next year called *Thunder Underground*, which is a collection of poems by Jane Yolen about what happens below the earth. But it's not just about ants and moles and rabbits. It's also about sewers and earthquakes and volcanos and what's under the ocean floor. But it was a crazy challenge to illustrate that book and to figure out, to find an illustrator who wanted to take it on, and kind of figure out how not to be literal with the illustration.

KM: And to that note, we have really renown poets that we publish some works on like Jane Yolen and Nikki and Lee Bennett Hopkins. We have a collection of his, *Jumping Off Library Shelves*, which has all of

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the different renown poets in that book. So it's curated by Lee, and then we have Nikki and Jane in that book as well, and then we have new poets. That you could probably speak to, Liz.

LVD: Right. So I brought a list because we had a --

NJ: We're curious who you got to illustrate that one.

KM: Jane Manning was *Jumping Off Library Shelves*.

NJ: But who is doing *Thunder Underground*

KM: I don't know. I can't remember.

LVD: I'm going to look because I think I have it here. I can tell you --

NJ: You said it was a real challenge, and so I'm curious how you worked through that.

LVD: It was a real challenge.

NJ: Because of illustrators of poetry collections, that's something that Sylvia and I have been talking about.

LVD: Josée Masse. She's a -- J-O-S-É-E, with an accent on the first E, M-A-S-S-E. So glad I brought my publish list. Be prepared! So, you know, here's a list of some of the people we've published: Jane Yolen, Rebecca Dotlich, Laura Purdie Salas, J. Patrick Lewis, Amy VanDerwater, David Harrison, Lee Bennett Hopkins, Marilyn Singer, Georgia Heard, Nikki Grimes, Janice Harrington, Irene Latham. And we had a dinner at NCTE last year. It began with Janet Wong saying, I got a few people, let's have a dinner. And then we were like, Let's we'll have the dinner, and we'll invite eight people, and it was one of the most moving experiences of my career. We had 30 --

KM: Yes, 30 --

LVD: -- 35 or 38 --

KM: It was like Wordsong throughout the years. All of these backlist authors, and front list authors, all in one room.

LVD: Everybody who is writing poetry for kids was there.

KM: Yes.

LVD: I was like, Oh my god, it's like the Academy Awards.

KM: Yes, it was an amazing gathering of people.

LVD: So we really do -- we publish just about everybody who's writing poetry. We also happen to be the only publisher with an imprint devoted to poetry. But you know, the goal is not volume. The goal is quality. The goal is refinement. The goal is to celebrate poetry.

KM: To do the best.

LVD: And publishing poetry is hard. Poetry books don't sell the way picture books and novels do. Occasionally if they win an award, that certainly helps it. It's interesting to me always that poetry is categorized as nonfiction by the ALA committees, which doesn't make sense to me at all.

NJ: -- Dewey Decimal System.

LVD: And in the Dewey Decimal System. Like, where did that come from? Why is that? Isn't that -- doesn't it always seem odd to you?

ST: And we always joke about it.

LVD: Everybody always jokes about it.

KM: -- and we always forget about it, and then we're like oh, it's nonfiction, so we have to recalibrate our thinking sometimes.

LVD: I think everybody has to recalibrate their thinking.

ST: Well there's a sense of the history of poetry as expository, as something that was actually historically something, that wasn't necessarily -- it's interesting how it ended up in Dewey as nonfiction. It's interesting too when -- I was preparing for this myself and inventorying our own holdings of Wordsong. I was surprised that there were not fewer titles because we plan on having every single Wordsong book in our collection because we have to have that.

KM: Yay.

ST: And I was struck by the same thing, but hearing you talk right now about the importance of selection and the intentionality about what you publish, it makes perfect sense.

LVD: Well, and the reality that any publisher will talk about is we're not a nonprofit organization. You know, we have to think about sales as we -- So we do think about *Fresh Delicious*, for example, that manuscript really, as I said earlier, it sparkled. And there's a lot of books about farmers' markets, but there's no poetry book about a farmers' market. But there have been other poetry collections that have been submitted to us that just didn't jump off the page. There was just something about those poems that make you want to eat the fruits and vegetables, want to hold them and look at them, because it's about color and it's about taste and it's about shape and texture.

NJ: Texture

KM: Yes, sensory.

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NJ: I would like to ask you a question about, and this goes back again to Bea, but the NCTE poetry award and the books that they used to have for poets who won the award that Boyds Mills did, that Bea was a part of, what's Wordsong or Boyds Mills' connection to that award, if any? Do you know?

KM: I don't know. And yes, I'd have to look through -- we have an archivist actually at Highlights, so that's a great --

NJ: We could send that question.

LVD: I think it was -- here's what I think about it. The book was called *A Jar of Tiny Stars*,

KM: Right.

LVD: -- and then there was a second called *Another Jar of Tiny Stars*, and I just had this perplexing conversation with our sales people because we put *A Jar of Tiny Stars* out of print, and they were like, Well why would you do that? It sold a lot of copies. And I said, because *Another Jar of Tiny Stars* is the same book with more in it."

NJ: It's different poets. The first ten and then the next ten.

LVD: Right. It was a hard decision. They were, again, I think that was Bea's labor of love.

NJ: Yes, I think you're right.

LVD: Because we don't -- there was no connection between Boyds Mills and the award. It was her connection with Boyds Mills and the award.

NJ: That helps me.

LVD: Yes.

NJ: How do you choose an illustrator for a poetry collection?

LVD: It's interesting. It's pretty much the same process as choosing an illustrator for a picture book manuscript. You know, we think about what -- the first thing an editor thinks about is, What kind of art style do I think would work? Do I want quirky? Do I want humorous? Do I want watercolor? Do I want graphic? Do I want contemporary? Do I want classic? Do I want timeless? And once you kind of shake that through the funnel and kind of come out with the style that you're looking for, then you start looking at illustrator websites, agent websites. This conference and any conference is an awesome opportunity for us to walk around and look at what other people are publishing. Because, to be very frank, because the sales of poetry are slower and smaller than the sales of picture books, we also really like to discover people early in their career, partly because they're willing to maybe accept a lower advance than they would for a picture book. But also because it's a different kind of illustrating, but the thing we're always asking them is, You have to tell a visual story. You have to find the visual thread that pulls you through. Not every illustrator can think that way, but when they can it's great. So it's not any different a process than matching a picture book manuscript to an illustrator.

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You should ask Rebecca that question too, though. She may say something different.

NJ: Does she, which is an interesting question I have, does she make all of the decisions for poetry about which books, all these that you're going to do or which one a year, and does she make the decision about the artist.

LVD: She makes the recommendation.

KM: Yes, it's very collaborative. We have an editorial meeting every month.

NJ: Okay.

KM: All of us are included in that, and we all give our opinions, good or bad, but then generally it moves from there over to a smaller, more succinct group of people, Liz, and a smaller group that makes the final decisions.

LVD: The final decisions are made by me and our publisher with feedback from marketing and feedback from sales. But Rebecca makes all the recommendations, and it's usually pretty clear. You know, she's a smart cookie. It's not that often that we say no, because she has already gone through her own process of vetting.

ST: And that encompasses type, font, and those kinds of decisions as well -- because that's also so important for a poetry book, how the word --

KM: Mm-hmm, how it's laid out --

ST: -- the layout of the actual --

LVD: Those are all decisions that are made between Rebecca, who's the editor, and the designer.

NJ: Designer, okay.

LVD: But again, because publishing takes a village, the creative director and I certainly weigh in. With every book, once the illustrator's chosen, then we either create galleries for the illustrator to do their sketches with, or they do their sketches, and then we start the type design. The designer and the editor will work closely together, and then they'll present what's called the dummy, the pages to me and the creative director, and we'll -- Our creative director has a really good eye, and she'll say, I think that font is going to overwhelm the artwork, or it's too thin and you can't read it. So there's -- publishing any book is, I would like to say in any house, I can't speak per many other houses, but at least at our place and most of the places I've worked, a very collaborative process that involves editorial, marketing, sales, design, and production.

KM: Right.

NJ: All those names don't go on the book.

LVD: None of the names -- you know, the only names that go on the book -- this is so funny -- the only names that go on the book are the designer and the production manager.

KM: Yes, I know, that is kind of funny.

LVD: In magazines, every name goes in it.

KM: Right, marketed by...

NJ: I want to go back to something you may have answered, but I might not have heard it clearly. So this coming year, you have two novels in verse.

KM: Mm-hmm.

NJ: Are they Wordsong, or how do you decide?

LVD: They're Wordsong.

NJ: As long as it's any kind of poetry, no matter the form, format, it would be Wordsong?

LVD: Yes.

KM: Correct, yes.

NJ: Okay. I just wanted to be clear on that one.

ST: And how do you juggle all these different parts that you have in terms of the differences.

KM: Well we write marketing plans every list. Every season and every list, we prioritize our lists. And sometimes it's a tough process. We have to -- we get a lot of feedback from editorial. We work very closely with Liz, and we identify our lead titles, and then we really put our muscle behind select books. We love them all, but the beauty of Boyds Mills Press is that it's a small list, so we can work with every author, every illustrator, every title --

ST: You can adjust if a book emerges in the list

KM: And we can adjust. But I will tell you, like Nikki's *Garvey's Choice* is a lead title for us of course, so we will be putting a lot of marketing muscle behind it.

NJ: And that is when?

KM: That is fall.

LVD: Fall of '16.

KM: Fall of '16.

LVD: So we will have ARCs for that book at ALA annual. We will have a big marketing -- it also depends on the author's availability -- Nikki's very excited about this one.

KM: -- it's a collaborative, and then another collaborative process over here. That kind of swirls around, and we work very closely with authors and illustrators, especially now with -- We were just talking about this today at the lunch, you know with the advent of Twitter and Facebook, a lot of it is author driven, and it has to be, but we can support them and help them find other avenues to market themselves, but a lot of it is heavily author driven.

NJ: It is so different.

KM: Yes.

NJ: It adds another layer to an author's life.

KM: It does. It's a good thing though. Ultimately it's a good thing, but it takes a lot of time.

ST: Well it makes a personal connection -- between the book and author, but as you said, it takes a lot of time --

KM: Yes, it takes social media --

NJ: And some authors, I'm sure, are less, not just skilled, but even willing to --

KM: Exactly.

NJ: -- invest that part of self. It's because it's an investment of yourself.

KM: It is. It takes a lot of time for them.

LVD: It takes a lot of time for them, but I think today more than ever, any author who expects the publisher to do all the work for them is very misguided.

KM: Right.

LVD: It just doesn't happen. It can't happen.

KM: No. It's a different era. You know, working in the '90s and publishing, it's totally different. It's really evolved in many, many ways.

ST: You still have plenty to do.

LVD: We have plenty to do.

KM: We have a lot to do, a lot to do. It's never ending. We could always be doing more, and that's one of the factors with our jobs is that we have a certain layer of guilt sometimes, that we could always be

doing more to help an author, but we have to sometimes really pick and choose and really put time behind certain titles.

NJ: How many other publishing houses have you worked with? And I'm going to say with poetry.

LVD: Four.

NJ: Okay. So in those houses, how is poetry here different from poetry in those houses? I mean, you have an actual imprint specific to poetry.

KM: Right.

LVD: Well, that's the big difference. I think poetry in my longest gig was a little bit marginalized. It fell in the regular picture book publishing program. If it got attention, if a poetry book got attention, it got great reviews, then people would pay attention to it. But the poetry picture books were seen as picture books first and poetry second, and I think we look at it the other way, right?

KM: Yes, I agree, I agree. And that's my experience too, from working at Random House in the '90s, it was always picture book first. If it was poetry, that was always second.

LVD: Even though you would say, It's a poetry picture book, what people heard was picture book.

KM: Right.

NJ: And you, I'm imagining, feel free to correct me, the reason no one else has an imprint, one of the big reasons, is sales.

LVD: Absolutely.

ST: So what do you attribute the current upsurge, as modest as it might be, within publishing that's happening currently with narrative verse in particular, but poetry also? Or maybe not, you don't see it as much in picture book poetry, but certainly in narrative verse it's there.

KM: I think it's reactionary to other trends in publishing, you know, the whole dystopian novels maybe. It's a kinder, gentler reading for a student, or a person in general.

LVD: You know, and I have to say, librarians and reviewers are deeply important to our business, and when a book like *Out of the Dust* wins the Newbery, or Newberry Honor, I can't remember which one --

NJ: The Newbery

LVD: -- the Newbery, it gives us hope that when we publish a novel in verse that it will be paid attention to. So as Kerry said, it is reactionary. I was at NCTE last year. We were right across the booth from another publisher, and I was so excited to see one of our authors, Laura Purdie Salas, sitting there with a signing line that went on and on and on and on, and she's very early in her career. And I think I should mention teachers too. I think that poetry is a really integral part of elementary, you know, ELA

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classrooms, and I think that it's a great way to teach writing. It's a great way to teach reading. It's a great way to talk about creativity. There's a lot of now national programs. I cannot underestimate the importance of things like the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards, where young poets can be honored nationally by the submission of poetry that is judged by grownups, by real live, awesome, adult, well-known poets. And I think that, I don't know, I'm very happy to see it, but it is reactionary, and I think it's just something changes and then people notice, and then it changes a little bit more, and it changes a little bit more, and suddenly it's just part of the conversation.

KM: Yes.

ST: Well, I know in speaking with Sylvia Vardell, her comments about The Poetry Friday Anthologies that she and Janet Wong are publishing and how they've gone through to middle school, and that's sort of their cut off. They are not doing those for high school, because it really is at K-8 grades where they're finding this rich response to those collections of verse. And I'm just curious myself eventually to see what's happening with YA literature and poetry. It's curious --

KM: Right. And we have ambassadors, like the children's poet laureates --

KM: -- J. Patrick Lewis. That didn't exist.

NJ: -- and Jackie Woodson is now in that role.

KM: That didn't exist. So that's a fairly new phenomenon that really keeps poetry in the forefront.

NJ: That's right. That's a good point. We need to think about how we weave them into the conversation. That award and people who created that award.

LVD: Well the National Poetry Foundation is a really, really powerfully active organization, and I think that they have certainly helped. Because they support that post, and so I think it would be very interesting to talk to their director as well as to Pat Lewis or, I forgot who followed him. I think that --

NJ: Kenn Nesbitt. And he's in Spokane in our area. And, the role of people like Janet Wong and Sylvia Vardell, and they're so present out in the social networking of poetry, that's cool. I mean, they do such cool stuff for teachers. And I imagine that that has, I would hope, had an impact even on poetry sales?

KM: It's huge for us. Sylvia every year comes to us and says, What do you have that's new?

NJ: Every new book -- it will be posted on her blog.

KM: And she will support us. She supports us.

LVD: And she supports our authors.

KM: She does. She really tries to get a Wordsong author on her poetry panel every year at TLA. So she always lets us know, always asks us. If we have somebody, she accepts them, and it's a great promotion for us. So she and Janet are support.

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LVD: It's great support for us because we do need that support, you know. We can't just do it ourselves. The poets do.

KM: Right.

LVD: I also think something else that I'm noticing as the parent of a middle schooler, and Kerry, you might be noticing this too. Poetry has gotten kind of cool. Like that whole kind of downtown art beat spoken word. Like spoken word is now part of the conversation among teenagers, and it's kind of this sort of retro, this thing that has come around again.

KM: I agree. Even with social media that they use, you know, the Snapchats and Instagram posts, just a little quick poem accompanied by a photograph is -- I see that a lot when I check their social media

LVD: Exactly, when we monitor their social media.

KM: It's cooler. Even the stores they like to shop, and, you know, the little journals that have little poems added. They love that. They love it. So it's coming around again to that age.

NJ: There's so much about poetry that's about identity and voice.

LVD: Yes.

NJ: But I think of Kwame's making it cool. In fact, he's a huge influence on the role of poetry, spoken poetry, but linking it with basketball. You and I know poetry's about something, but a lot of people don't know that.

LVD: Well, they're threatened by it. They think, I'm not gonna understand it.

ST: Well, there's the right answer that you have to answer about poetry, which is unfortunate.

LVD: You know, something else I didn't say earlier that sort of belongs in the how do you make a decision about what to publish. I talked a lot about picture books and a rhyming picture book, and this is a trend we're seeing that I'm about to address. A rhyming picture book isn't necessarily a work of poetry. A novel that has line breaks in the middle of a sentence is not necessarily a novel in verse, and we get a lot of submissions that are just phrases kind of lined up to look poetic, and Rebecca will be the first one to say, It's not poetry. It's just broken sentences.

KM: Right, right.

LVD: So that's also interesting that we're getting a lot of those submissions.

NJ: It helps us understand what it is, then. What is the difference?

KM: Mm-hmm.

LVD: Yes.

NJ: Because that's part her expertise.

LVD: She speaks about it way better than I can.

ST: It's part of the craft.

NJ: How long has she been with Boyds Mills?

LVD: She started out as a -- it's been about five years. She's been our full-time employee for three, I think.

NJ: Did she always do poetry in her other houses?

LVD: No, she did picture books and novels as well. But when she was hired to work as a freelance editor, she was hired because she is an editor who deeply understands and is very passionate about poetry. But she also publishes picture books and fiction as well. For example, if another editor wanted to publish a Wordsong book, they could, but Rebecca would be involved because she has so many smarts and so much to say and so much experience.

NJ: She's got a lot of knowledge.

LVD: Exactly.

ST: I don't know if we have anything else. This has been a wonderful start. And gosh, and again, just to reiterate the centrality of Wordsong as an imprint.

LVD: Well thank you so much.

ST: I anticipate it might be that we come back again and have another conversation.

KM: Yes.

LVD: Absolutely. We'll talk on the phone.

LVD: We're on the phone all day long, so --

KM: You can dial in to our 800 hundred number.

ST: And we are so grateful.

KM: And like I said, we have a lot of archival information about Wordsong that we can pass --

LVD: Yes, that interview with Bea is great.

KM: I will make sure I'll put together a whole packet for you on a .pdf, whatever you'd like.

NJ: Really valuable.

ST: That would be extremely valuable. The vision for the collection really is very broad at this point. We would like to interview illustrators, the publishers, the editors. We would like to interview the publishers and the editors and all the different components that belong,

LVD: Yes, it would be really interesting to talk to the illustrators.

KM: Especially the ones that had a relationship with Bea.

LVD: But like, someone like Matt Cordell, for example, he illustrates picture books. He also did a book of poetry for us.

KM: Right.

LVD: So, it might be interesting to talk to someone like him about what's the difference.

ST: I'm going to turn off the recorder at this point.

End of recording.