Angela: Although we were laughing at his cranky voice, it did become a conversation about social emotional learning. When I wrote *The Magical Yet*, that was really a conversation about growth mindset. I like to think about how to apply these concepts that are really so relevant to students and educators. How can I offer an opportunity to begin those important conversations with our youngest audiences?

Q: Would you describe your workspace for us?

Tony: We are in a fairly modern, new construction home that Ange found during peak Spiderwick, when I was working all of the time on the books. The house was framed out, and she said we could finish the attic or the basement for my studio. So, the art either catches on fire or gets flooded. I chose the basement because this space is unbelievable. It is a big, walk-out basement. It is kind of a weird mutation of my bedroom at ten years old, because I have to be ten so often when I am working.

There are toys, some of my actual toys. Some are recaptured toys from when I was that age. And, lots of books. Ange bought me a Pac-Man machine, and there's a pinball machine. It is a super creative space that is cluttered with toys and books and other stuff.

Angela: We have sofas down here, so we can sit and have meetings and talk about things when we need a break. He has the computer area, a drawing table, and he can step outside for a break. I have an office upstairs, two floors away, so I can also have my own space. I feel like we create in all the spaces of our home, not just one room. Sometimes, we will be in the library and set up with a laptop. Other times, we like to be in the living room or in the kitchen, with all of the hustle and bustle of the household, and our daughter and our dogs. I feel like for the most part, usually, we are together.

We have a lot of original art work from Tony and a lot of other artists whose work we love as well around the house. We have really thought about surrounding ourselves with inspiration. I think that is why we tend to kind of bop around to different places because each one of those spaces almost evokes a different energy.

Q: What has it been like to share your work with children?

Tony: One of the most rewarding aspects, other than creating, in the creative process is getting to share my stories with kids. I love seeing the work do the job that it was intended to do. When COVID happened, I did not have that opportunity. I am so happy to get back out on the road.

Angela: I write books for the six-year-old version of myself. It is so rewarding when I get to sit with children, get their feedback, and see them make the connection with the words or the illustrations.

Tony: It is very validating. You can see how all the decisions you made to create this story and do it the way you did impact people. Winning awards and being on best seller lists are great, but those things are very ephemeral compared to when you meet a child, or the parents, and the book is all beat up and the covers are taped back on, or they are dressed up as your character. That is the stuff that you really remember.

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Q: Do you have advice for couples who might be considering collaborating on books for children?

Angela: Respect one another's perspectives. And remember what causes you to want to collaborate together in the first place. This is just another facet of our lives that we collaborate in, whether I am making a meal, and we are having a conversation about how to julienne the carrots, and Tony is the sous chef, or if we are working on a picture book together, we respect one another's thoughts and opinions and strengths, and support one another in all of it.

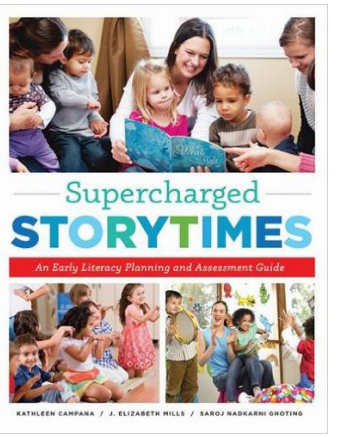
Tony: How do you separate work from life? So, if we are having a heated conversation where I say, I think *The Cranky Book* should be yellow or red, and she says, no, it is blue, it can get heated. We cannot just leave the studio with that argument, and go up to watch TV or whatever. We have to work through the issue, together.

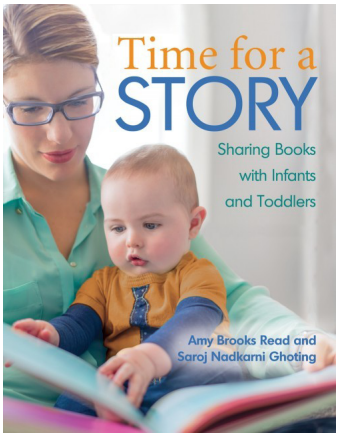
Angela: It took us a while to figure out how to separate our personal and professional lives well, and to see what those dynamics look like. Sometimes I step back and I remind myself, Tony is an artist. He is going to have a perspective. He is going to have a vision, and I respect that. Now sometimes I think that my perspective is better, or my opinion should carry more weight in this case, but figuring that out is important. And just like in this conversation, we are allowing space for both of us to have our own thoughts. What makes any relationship work? It is respect, and the ability to listen, and the desire to have someone become the best version of themselves. &

Supercharged Saroj!

Early Literacy Leader Shares Decades of Wisdom

PAMELA MARTIN-DÍAZ





Now retired, early childhood literacy consultant and national trainer and author Saroj Nadkarni Ghoting has spent decades supporting the causes dear to librarians' hearts. We thought spotlighting her long-time advocacy was well earned.

Saroj, you have always supported and promoted diversity in your work; how did this become an important value to you?

I guess you could say I was lucky! My father was from India and my mother was the daughter of orthodox Jews from Russia. So, I grew up with multiple languages and cultures in Bethesda, MD, a suburb of Washington, DC.

We spoke English at home. My father taught us Marathi before we visited India when I was 12, and my mother read us the postcards in Yiddish she received every day from her mother. Our father told us stories from his childhood, from Hindu works (*YAY! Oral storytellling!*). My mom read us picture books every day. And we always used our public libraries.

There weren't many east Indians in the US in the 1950s and 1960s. I remember when people would ask about my background, I would say I was "half Indian." People thought I was half Native American! Because of my mixed heritage, I learned to be welcoming and accepting of everyone, to see people as individuals with a story to share.

What inspired you to become a children's librarian?

After I graduated from Oberlin College (OH) with a BA in South Asian Studies, I wasn't really sure what I wanted to do. I always liked children and thought maybe I would become an elementary school teacher. My Mom thought it might not be a good match because I tended to be bossy. After talking with some family friends who were librarians, I tried out two courses at The Catholic University of America (DC) and decided to continue to get my master's in library science to become a children's librarian.

What was your first professional job?

I didn't know it at the time, but I almost didn't get that first library job at Arundel County (MD) Public Library. The person in human resources assumed I didn't know English because of my name.

Pamela Martin-Díaz *retired from the day to-day pleasure of working with patrons in a public library in 2020. Since then, she has held workshops shaped by decades of experience as a children's librarian and branch manager. She is currently an instructor on early literacy with Library Juice Academy.*

Luckily, the branch manager knew I had applied and asked to review my application. If she hadn't known me, I never would have even gotten an interview.

And here's another twist. As part of my interview, they asked me to tell a story as if I were doing a storytime. I hadn't prepared anything. YIKES! So, I thought for a few minutes and then told a story from a Hindu epic my father had told us growing up. A couple of years later, the children's coordinator told me that the story I had chosen and the way I told it was a tipping point in my favor!

What is your favorite book to share in storytime?

Something from Nothing by Phoebe Gilman, which is based on a Jewish folktale. I love clever stories, and this one has great rhythm and repetition with lots of details in the illustrations. It also has a special connection with my mother. I showed her a flannelboard I had made from the story. While looking through the book, she noticed that on the last page the boy is writing in Yiddish! It says *epes fun gornisht* which translates to "something from nothing." From then on, I pointed this out whenever I shared the book. It added another whole dimension to the book for myself and how I shared the book.

What are the most significant changes you've noticed in children's services over the years?

It is hard to overestimate the impact of Every Child Ready to Read (ECRR) for me and the profession. PLA/ALSC's parent early literacy initiative was a paradigm shift for us. It completely changed the way many of us thought about and did our work. We learned some important concepts—that early literacy, what children know about reading and writing before they can actually read and write—doesn't just emerge naturally. It is learned behavior which children acquire through adult interactions. Also, we learned that to make a difference in children's early literacy development, we had to reach the people who are with children every day, to help them to support their children's early literacy development. We broadened our focus to include parents and caregivers more directly.

Were there any bumps on this new road?

After seeing how adults reacted to ECRR workshops, I worried that we were losing the fun in books and that there was a danger of choosing books for their "educational value." I realized we can support early literacy development with ANY book. It's how we intentionally share books that makes the difference. So . . . HOORAY . . . I could use any and all of the fun books that children and I loved by adapting how I shared them.

We connected the research from the workshops to storytimes by sharing that information with adults through early literacy tips or asides, little bits of information. We learned how to broaden our outreach to parents and caregivers in our communities. Outreach evolved into partnerships and community engagement because when we learned the language of early learning, we were better able to advocate for quality programs for young children. We finally had a seat at the table.

How has storytime itself changed?

Even before ECRR, I noticed our storytimes were different. My first storytime experience, at the age of four, was with other kids who were starting kindergarten in the fall. Our mothers waited for us in the library while we went into the storytime area. For most of us, this was the first time we were separated from our parents and part of a group. Now more children go to preschool, so storytimes tend to skew younger; we include programs for infants, and mixed-age storytimes too. Parents and caregivers join us in storytimes, as opposed to sitting in the back of the room on chairs.

Even what we emphasize in storytime has changed. Children's attention spans are shorter than before and research has helped us understand how children learn—through repetition and interactivity. The intent became not to just expose children to books but to give them an opportunity to internalize and understand them. This resulted in changes in my storytimes. I used fewer books, gave more time to talk about what was happening in them, and making connections to children's experiences.

I repeated books in different formats, including songs, flannelboards, and activities, both within a storytime and over multiple storytimes. ECRR expanded the way I looked at literacy. I knew books lead to literacy but did not realize how important all language is to literacy—talking, singing, playing, and writing. So, all of the activities I did in storytimes became language activities in themselves, *what fun*! From loving reading to loving language!

With the second edition of ECRR, we incorporated another critical expansion in our early literacy strategies into storytimes—the new emphasis in the parent workshops on the importance of

background knowledge or world knowledge and the role it plays in a child's ability to understand what they read when they are older. We intentionally included factual books and information when sharing picture books in ways that weren't intimidating for parents. We moved from just thinking about early literacy by itself to looking at how it is a part of early learning.

How did you come to "supercharge" your storytimes?

Supercharged storytimes (SCST) was born from the VIEWS2 study, which set out to discover both the impact of incorporating early literacy skills in library storytimes and effective strategies needed to do so. Those of us already acquainted with ECRR were already emphasizing interactivity and intentionality. The biggest expansion for me was adding assessment tools.

How so?

I thought we might lose the joy and delight of storytime by assessing them. Of course, I would think about how my storytimes went in an informal way based on my own impressions, how participants reacted, and sometimes I would talk with the parents afterwards to get feedback and try to improve from there. I would also ask colleagues for input. But SCST offered much more.

As an evaluator, I preferred encouragement to a judgmental approach. I was surprised to find that more formal assessments could be encouraging and not discouragingly critical; I learned how to do assessments in constructive and meaningful ways. Supercharged storytimes gave us lots of different tools—for self-reflection, peer observation and sharing, and outcome-based processes in observing children's early literacy behaviors.

How has your relationship with technology changed over the years?

There are two areas that come to mind—research and online learning. ECRR was based on workshops which were built on research including brain development, early childhood development, and early literacy. This was an impetus for me to read research journals. Sometimes, I made too many assumptions about how the research conclusions could be applied in practice. Because of the internet, I could easily contact academic researchers and was surprised that they were very willing to explain their research to me!

The other aspect of technology which influenced me was online learning. . . it was a challenge! I was comfortable with in-person training and loved being with and talking with participants. To me, the online format felt stiff and not interactive like in-person training was. But it became more and more difficult for staff to get out of their branches for training, so Enid Costley, the youth services consultant at the state library in Virginia, convinced me to try training online. She held my hand as I learned Moodle software to develop online courses on early literacy.

This work led to the Early Childhood Literacy certificate program with Library Juice Academy, as well as the free class offered by Web Junction. I found online classes are much more in-depth and personal than the interactions I could offer in webinars. I was amazed to see the course participants learn so much that they were able to take back to their communities. By talking with library staff who had participated in both my online and in-person training, I found that each method has its strengths and both are excellent ways to keep learning.

What are your thoughts on the role of the public library today?

I have always felt that the role of the public library is to "serve all" and to make sure that we support and advocate for people who are underserved. We are the bridge for families connecting language development and research to what the schools expect. We need to be humble and open as we think about how to support and develop early literacy staff training and library programs that honor and are responsive to people's backgrounds and values. Just how we can do it is a difficult, complex question and an ongoing challenge.

Public library staff need to be advocates for young children and their families. Offering opportunities for all requires training for library staff on current research and how it applies to early literacy, early childhood development and learning, cultural awareness, assessment, and self-knowledge.

Administrators and funders must allocate resources for community partnerships, for library programs and services, and assessments. There are always children being born, new parents and caregivers, new staff members, new research, information and strategies to make a difference in the lives of our children and their parents and caregivers.

I feel fortunate to have been part of children's services in public libraries and to have worked with so many children's librarians and staff who are passionate, creative, caring, and tireless in their work to support young children and their families.

I believe children are important in and of themselves. They need us, they need adults, for support and guidance. Young children deserve our support, our advocacy, and all we can offer them. We have the power to boost a child's confidence, to spark joy and curiosity, and to offer acceptance and safety. We need to wield this noble power mindfully and unconditionally.

May you carry these thoughts with you as you embrace the joy of sharing books and nurturing children and their families. And remember never underestimate the impact you can make in the life of a child.

Saroj, thank you for talking with me today and for your decades of sharing your love of bringing libraries, families, books, and children together. You have been an inspiration for so many. &