

## SIM Story Corps: November 2023

### Becoming a Better Teacher with SIM

Janet Atallah (FL) and Bonnie Palasak (TN)

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#### Jocelyn Washburn:

SIM StoryCorps is a candid conversation between two educators about what's really important in the field of education: students, connections, hope, success. How did SIM contribute to attaining what matters most? Listen to these stories of the educator's heart to find out. Then, we invite you to find a partner and tell your story. In this SIM StoryCorps, we'll hear Janet Atallah, a SIM Professional Development Leader in Florida, and Bonnie Palasak, a SIM Professional Development Leader who is part of the SIM Network in Arkansas, Florida, and Tennessee. They will talk about how SIM helped them to become better teachers.



#### Janet Atallah:

When I started out teaching in high school in 1981; I was really a terrible teacher. I was. The reason I was a terrible teacher was not because I didn't work hard, I worked harder than I'd ever worked in my life.

My kids worked really hard, and I worked really hard. And their reading didn't get any better. their writing didn't get any better, their grades didn't get any better. I met John Pfeiffer through Fiddler's. He was my SIM mentor, and I learned the Sentence Writing Strategy. John came in and he coached me with my kids and my kids just made such phenomenal progress. And then it was Paraphrasing, and then it was Test Taking, and then it was Word ID, and then I just couldn't get enough. And he mentored me to become a professional developer.

So, then I met a whole network of people that had something in common, that just wanted to get better. So, other people just helped me get better and better and helped me get to be a better teacher. And every time I learned something from Don or Keith, or Jean, or another mentor that I worked with, I thought back. And I thought, "Wow, I was a terrible teacher last year." But compared to 1981, I was nowhere near that, but I still learned; I learned how to work smarter and how to help my kids to get better.

So, working with SPDG when I retired from teaching, I met Bonnie, and we taught Xtreme Reading during extreme circumstances. It was during Covid, and we had to go all virtual with a program that wasn't set up to be virtual. So, Roseanne Arvin and I, along with the support of the SPDG folks and Bonnie began virtual Xtreme Reading. And then Rosanne couldn't help us anymore because she retired that year. And so, Bonnie and I just spent countless hours trying to figure out how to help our teachers virtually. But the result of that was that every teacher we worked with, that implemented the program that year and kept it going, their kids made gains between one year, and some of them made five- or six-years gains, and we have the data to support that.

I learned so much from doing that, and I realized then how much more I knew than before Covid and having to go virtual. You really have to really dig into the strategies and learn more and more. So, I think my story is, SIM kept me going and the people that I've worked with and the results of all the kids that we've helped.

**Bonnie Palasak:**

So, when, I first got started in SIM, I had started a new job teaching seventh graders who really just were basic or below basic on our state test. And so, I was hired as the reading specialist for seventh grade, and I wasn't quite sure what I was going to do with them, but I was going to try all kinds of things and then our Literacy Coordinator came to me and said, "Would you be willing to try this thing called SIM?" Her name was Kandi Cowart, and I said, "Does it work?" She said, "Yes, it works." I said, "Then I'll try it."

So, she convinced Tom Blount from our co-op to come to my classroom two days a week, and he modeled for me the Word Identification Strategy. He did it with my students, and then he would do that in first period, and then I would do it in second period and third period and fourth period. So, that's how I initially learned SIM was through Word ID. And when I saw what it did for my kids, I was hooked, because not only did they become better at reading, but it gave them confidence. And if you've ever been in a PD with me, that's what I always say is that it's the confidence that it gives the kids who have always been bad at school. The confidence is what I think is just so imperative, the way they do the progress charting. And you know the verbal practice; them trying to remember that mnemonic device. There's just so many key elements.

But I also felt like it changed me as a teacher because it was explicit instruction, and it was something that had been tried and tested over and over again. And I feel like that was something I was lacking in teaching before that. It was a specific set of strategies to do with kids. We would try this or try that or try this. But this was a formula that actually worked and then I, just like you, just latched on. And I wanted to learn the next one and the next one and the next one. And then Kandi came to me and said, "I think we should become Professional Developers for the SIM network." I said, "Okay, great!" So, we went to the University of Central Arkansas, Mashburn Center for Learning, and that's where I became a PDer in Learning Strategies. And then I did the same process with Content Enhancement Routines. And then Kandi came to me and said, "I think we should learn Xtreme Reading." So, we went to a seminar on Xtreme Reading in Texas. And we learned that too. And then I was really blessed by the SIM Network, because Janet reached out and said, we need an Xtreme Reading teacher. Who do you have that is available?

And they thought of me, Jocelyn or Peony, or Mona; somebody thought of me, luckily. And so, I've been very, very lucky the last four years to work for the SPDG Grant in Florida, and I have become a much better PDer. I'm not as good as everyone in the SPDG network, but I've learned so much from doing PD with Janet and Rosanne and our bosses at the SPDG Grant, Janice and Cindy, have just been such a great support for us. And you know, being good PDers, and it's just been a blessing to me with teaching, you know, because it's made me better on so many levels, professionally. And it's helped so many students.

And my message for future SIM PDers is just keep it going. I don't know why this isn't all over the world at this point, and everyone isn't doing it because it works every time. If you implement with fidelity, your kids will grow. And I just don't know why it isn't everywhere. So, I just want everybody to spread the word!