Interview with Evan Ortlieb

A Rising Star

By
Jack Cassidy, Co-editor,
The Literacy Professional

Typically, these profiles of the prominent members of the Specialized Literacy Professionals have focused on literacy leaders who have a long history in the field (i.e. Dorothy Strickland, Linda Gambrell, Heather Bell etc.) However, this interview is with a literacy professional under 35. Evan Ortlieb, the incoming Chair of the Specialized Literacy Professionals SIG, at only 33, is already a full professor at St. John’s University in New York where he coordinates the graduate programs in language and literacy. He is editor of the ongoing book series Literacy Research, Practice and Evaluation, and also the author of countless journal articles including pieces in premier publications like the Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, Literacy Today and Literacy Research and Instruction. For the last few years, he has joined Stephanie Grote-Garcia and me in authoring various pieces related to the What’s Hot in Literacy study. Before coming to St John’s University, Evan served on the faculty of universities in Georgia, Texas and Australia. For Monash University in Australia, he taught classes near Melbourne and also in Singapore. When he was looking for a rental home near Melbourne, he was featured on an episode of HGTV’s popular program, House Hunters International. Today, he cautions those who watch the show not to believe everything they see on TV. This profile could be just a litany of Evan’s many academic accomplishments. However, the focus is more personal – on Evan, the remarkable young man.

Tell us about your early life.

I was born in Louisiana and spent all of my early years there. As a child, I was always interested in science. I had a childlike interest in experiments and explosions. “MacGyver” was one of my favorite TV shows. I definitely preferred riding my bike to reading. Competitive sports like baseball, basketball and golf also occupied much of my time. I was a middle child — my older brother is an engineer and my younger sister is a speech language therapist. My mother was always pushing language and literacy. Originally, I had intended to be a pharmacist and, with that goal in mind, I attended Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. One semester, as part of a service-learning project at LSU, I was tutoring science to students in a local elementary school. It was that experience that instilled in me a passion for teaching and a realization about the importance of literacy for all learning. Soon, I entered a five-year program that gave me both a bachelor’s and masters degree as well as my teaching certificate.

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A Rising Star, continued

Do you have a person or persons you consider a mentor? Undoubtedly my mentor would be Dr. Earl Cheek, Professor Emeritus at Louisiana State University. I studied with Dr. Cheek for both my masters and doctorate. At a partnership school with LSU, Dr. Cheek gave me the opportunity to teach many diverse learners who were experiencing various literacy problems. He also gave me a historical prospective on literacy leaders of the past and present. I both gained a new appreciation for those who came before and expanded my own interests. I came into the literacy field with all these amazing “unique” ideas. Dr. Cheek kept me grounded by reminding me that my amazing ideas were not always as “unique” as I thought.

Tell us about your avocations.
My avocations are typically aimed at spiritual growth and physical fitness. I live in Grammercy in New York City, and I constantly go for long runs or vigorous work out sessions in the city. Recently, I have taken up a new hobby – photography. As I run, I stop to document cityscapes with my camera. Also, I try to volunteer as much as I can.

What is the Ortlieb Foundation?
The Ortlieb Foundation is dedicated to providing college scholarships to cancer patients or cancer survivors. Since 2009, we have awarded 27 scholarships, and are looking to grant another five for next semester. Typically, young cancer patients often face challenges on three fronts — academics, finances and health. Hopefully, these scholarships help relieve financial burdens associated with attending college. My dedication to this cause was prompted by my own personal experiences. At the age of 16, I was diagnosed with Non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma. For two and a half years, I went to see a psychologist who mentioned that I was not college material. Probably, that comment, the cancer experience, and my early interest in competitive sports have made me more aggressive in my career and propelled me to start the Ortlieb Foundation.

What do you like to read?
I like non-fiction. Typically, I like to read books about religion, spirituality, and Eastern philosophy as well as books on finance and physical fitness.

What is your favorite food?
I am addicted to protein shakes.

Now for the big question – are you single?
Yes.

(Jack Cassidy is the Executive Secretary of the Specialized Literacy Professionals SIG and co-editor with Jennifer Shettel of the newsletter. He is a former president and board member of the International Reading Association and the Association for Literacy Educators and Researchers (ALER). Ideas for newsletters should be sent to dr.jackcassidy@gmail.com)

Chair’s Message

Dear Members,

I write this column as we prepare for the annual conference of the ILA to be held in Boston, July 8-11. We as classroom teachers, reading specialists, literacy coaches, and curriculum leaders know how our teaching is making a difference for our students and our peers. We are making the Difference that Matters. We also need renewal of our professional learning and coming together at conferences to learn about new practices and current research and share our practices with others can be transformative, making a Difference that Matters in our professional learning. Here are some updates on the work of our SIG and its members.

Roles and Responsibilities of Specialized Literacy Professionals. Rita Bean and Diane Kern (co-chairs) and their committee co-authored a position statement and a research brief for the International Literacy Association. The title of the position statement is The Multiple Roles of School-Based Specialized Literacy Professionals. Both the statement and the research brief can be accessed at this address: (www.literacyworldwide.org/docs/default-source/where-we-stand/literacy-professionals-position-statement.pdf?sfvrsn=4)

February 2016, Literacy Summit. We hosted an extremely successful literacy summit celebrating the 20th anniversary of What’s Hot and What’s Not in Literacy. We also hosted a featured session, celebrating Dr. Jack Cassidy for his long-term commitment and leadership to our Specialized Literacy Professionals Special Interest Group. Co-Chairs were Stephanie Grote-Garcia, Jack Cassidy, and Elda Martinez.

Previous Webinars. Along with the literacy faculty of the University of Texas, San Antonio, we hosted two webinars for literacy professionals. Julie Coiro, current ILA Board Member, Associate Professor at the University of Rhode Island, was the keynote speaker for the first webinar entitled, Online Reading Comprehension: Opportunities and Challenges, and the second webinar, entitled Strategies for Supporting Productive Online Inquiry. If you were unable to attend our live webinars, they are archived for you to access independently. The first webinar (held February 2) is archived at this address (www.youtube.com/watch?v=F99zGKZV4c&feature=youtu.be#sthash.oCpI0Dey.dpuf). The second webinar (held March 30) is archived at this address (www.youtube.com/watch?v=uwuyKZMxFtQ&feature=em-share_video_user #sthash.oCpI0Dey.dpuf).

Vicki Risko, Chair

(In addition to being chair of the SIG, Dr. Risko is a former IRA President and former president of the Association for Literacy Educators and Researchers. She is a member of the Reading Hall of Fame.)
Literacy Summit— A Smashing Success

The Literacy Summit, “Celebrating 20 Years of What’s Hot” held on February 12 & 13, 2015 was a fantastic success. Over 300 educators came to the beautiful University of Incarnate Word (UIW) campus in San Antonio to hear speakers from over 20 states. The Summit was co-sponsored by the Specialized Literacy Professionals SIG, the Texas Association for Literacy Education (TALE) and UIW. Dr. Stephanie Grote-Garcia, a UIW associate professor and a SIG Board member, was the conference chair. She said, “This has been a wonderful professional development experience for Texas teachers as well as educators from across the country.”

Our Members Publish! 2015

(Here is a list of just some of the many 2015 publications of our members. Specialized Literacy professionals should send a list of their 2016 publications to newsletter co-editor Dr. Jennifer Shettel, Millersville University (Jennifer.Shettel@millersville.edu)

Rita Bean (University of Pittsburgh), Diane Kern (University of Rhode Island School of Education) and several other SIG members co-published:


Jack Cassidy (Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi), Stephanie Grote-Garcia (University of the Incarnate Word, TX) and Evan Ortlieb (St. John’s University, NY) published:


Jeanne Cobb (Spardoni College of Education, Coastal Carolina University) published:


Laurie Elish-Piper (College of Education, Northern Illinois University) published:


Rona Flippo (University of Massachusetts Boston) published a book that included four of her former students as contributing authors, and the Foreword by P. David Pearson.


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Our Members Publish, continued

Rosalind Horowitz (The University of Texas, San Antonio) published:

Sharon Kletzien (West Chester University, PA) published:

Donald Leu (University of Connecticut) published:

Barbara Marinak (Mount St. Mary’s University) published:

Evan Ortlieb (Monash University, Australia) published:

Victoria Risko (Vanderbilt University) published:

Misty Sailors (The University of Texas at San Antonio) published:

Laurie Sharp (West Texas A&M University) published:

Sheri Vasinda (Oklahoma State University) published:

Wolfram Verlaan (University of Alabama in Huntsville) published:

Shelley Wepner (Manhattanville College, NY) published:

Kathleen Williams (retired) published:

Visit www.literacyprofessional.org for information about membership.