Mill Valley Oral History Program
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LYNDA CHITTENDEN

An Oral History Interview
Conducted by Caroline Robinson and Stella Perone in 2015

TITLE: Oral History of Lynda Chittenden
INTERVIEWER: Caroline Robinson and Stella Perone
DESCRIPTION: Transcript, 23 pages
INTERVIEW DATE: May 5th, 2015

In this oral history, beloved school teacher Lynda Chittenden recounts her 30-year teaching career in the Mill Valley School District. Lynda was originally hired by superintendent Jim Collins to teach at Old Mill School in 1967, a time, she recalls, when public education in Mill Valley was in the process of radical transformation. Lynda describes various pedagogical initiatives in which she was involved over the years as well as the ways in which her personal teaching philosophy and practices evolved. She discusses her participation in the Berkeley-based Bay Area Writing Project beginning in 1977, and this same year conducted a project with her fifth-grade class to write a textbook on marine mammals entitled *Our Friends in the Waters*. Lynda recounts her simultaneous work as an educational consultant and her involvement in developing new statewide standardized tests that were innovative in the way they tested student thinking rather than the ability to produce correct answers. In 1987 she moved to Park School, from which she retired a decade later in 1997, having left her mark on thousands of Mill Valley's kids.

Oral History of Lynda Chittenden

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Editor's Note: This transcript has been reviewed by Lynda Chittenden, who made additions, corrections, and clarifications indicated below as footnotes.

Caroline Robinson: I'm Caroline Robinson, Mill Valley resident, and sitting here by Lynda Chittenden, who I first met when my oldest child was entering fifth grade.

Lynda Chittenden: In what year?

Caroline Robinson: Oh, my.

Lynda Chittenden: 1967.

Caroline Robinson: Uh-huh. Right in the height of activity in Mill Valley, and the height of a renaissance in the school system in Mill Valley. Lynda, tell us how you first arrived in Mill Valley.

Lynda Chittenden: Okay. I had never been to Mill Valley. Jim Collins, who was then the newly hired superintendent of schools, I had known well for many years. He had — in a way, he and his wife, Mary Collins — taught me everything I knew about how to be a teacher.

Caroline Robinson: Let's backtrack a little bit, just basic thumbnail, where you were born, where you went to college, first teaching job, okay, and where you are at this point.

Lynda Chittenden: I was living in Los Angeles. I went to L.A. State to get an elementary teaching credential. It was a terrible program. *Terrible*. The most mediocre, pedestrian, uncreative — one illustration: I can remember going in with a class. It was art methods, and we all sat in little chairs in the demonstration school on the campus at L.A. State. All the children were in desks in rows. The teacher in the front was teaching them this art lesson. It was about an urban landscape that they were drawing. So he taught them to do rectangles with Ls in it for windows, and little birds, and all the kids drew *exactly* the same thing that he was doing. And that was being shown to us as what we should be learning to do – *we* should be doing that with our students when we got them. At the same time that I was an undergraduate there, I was working, 'cause I came from a very blue collar, working class family, nobody in my family had ever been to college, and I needed to earn money. So I was working at an elementary school nearby, not far away, and Jim was the principal. Jim and Mary were then getting their PhDs at Claremont Graduate School. As in my job, I was a teacher's assistant to the upper grade team of teachers that were doing *extraordinary* things. So I learned how to be a teacher from my job in that school, which was in a way kind of a demonstration school for Claremont Graduate School. It was *such* a contrast. [chuckles] So I worked there all through college, and my first teaching job was in Jim's school. As soon as I graduated, I began teaching

there. Then Jim left, got *his* first administration job beyond being principal; he got an assistant superintendent's job in Lafayette, up here. At the same time in my life, I wanted to leave L.A. So I moved to Berkeley just as Jim became assistant superintendent in Lafayette, Contra Costa County, and he gave me a job there. And it was *terrible.* They were — can you imagine an elementary third and fourth grade that was departmentalized and homogeneously grouped? So for each grade level — I was a third and fourth grade language arts and social studies teacher. So these poor kids were divided into low, medium and high,[1] and had to move from classes to classes to go to math, to go to history. It was terrible, I *hated* it.[2] So I only taught there one year, and I got an NDEA grant — Johnson was president and there was lots of money for those NDEA grants —

Caroline Robinson: What's NDEA?

Lynda Chittenden: National Defense Education Act, and it gave money to — I mean, I just made an application, got a grant for graduate school, everything paid. And then in that time, Jim stayed one more year in Lafayette. He hated it too. And then he got hired in Mill Valley. But I was going to work in Berkeley, because that's where Neil Sullivan was the new superintendent. He was integrating the schools, and it was a very dynamic place.[3] I did not want suburb. Lafayette had *so* turned me off suburbs. And so [chuckles] that's where I was gonna teach!

Caroline Robinson: So was Jim a superintendent, or —

Lynda Chittenden: Yeah, he got hired as the superintendent here in Mill Valley, on a Monday night. He called me Tuesday morning, and said, "You have a job, and you can have any class you want, and you can close the door, and you can do what you want." And Berkeley was just — I got offered jobs there, but there were all of these very dynamic, smart black principals that Neil Sullivan had hired, and they came in like gangbusters with their plans and they were — it was *full* of pull-outs. They would pull kids out for this and that program, lots of intervention. And I didn't want that. I wanted a class of heterogeneously grouped kids, preferably multi-graded, and let me do what I know how to do. And Jim offered me that. And of course I wanted it, but I still had never been to Mill Valley. And while I was in graduate school, I had all my teaching stuff stored at my father's, and he borrowed a pick-up, and we put it all in there, and we drove to Mill Valley. It was my first time ever being here. I already had the job. And I remember [chuckles], we pulled into town, and we immediately ended up in the parking lot at the Depot. [chuckles] We didn't know how to get out of there, but we found our way to Old Mill School. And I just unpacked my stuff —

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[1] Whether by achievement, maturity or "ability" was not clear.

[2] My educational philosophy was then deeply felt and this Lafayette school was the polar opposite: at the elementary grades, children learn best in a heterogeneous, self-contained community of other children. The teacher needs to see each student as a whole child, needs to know their family and be able to both diagnose and create curriculum to meet their academic needs as well as create a community that works to help them develop healthy emotional and social selves. 7- and 8-year olds, in this "ring" (school bells) and "run" (dash off to another classroom for another subject with another teacher), the so-called Joplin Plan, was anathema to me.

[3] He had integrated the schools in Prince Edward County in Virginia..

Caroline Robinson: The rest is history.

Lynda Chittenden: So that's all I knew when I came in and started. Now, I did discover — and this is something that Caroline knows a whole lot about, because her husband was on the school board at that time; and what was happening in the school board between quasi-conservative, I mean those —

Caroline Robinson: Who's the quasi-conservative?

Lynda Chittenden: Well, semi-conservative. There was a conservative force and a progressive force in town.

Caroline Robinson: But who was the conservative, relatively conservative, representative on the board?

Lynda Chittenden: Oh I don't know.

Caroline Robinson: I thought they were all pretty —

Lynda Chittenden: They *were* progressive, but within the community, I mean.[4]

Caroline Robinson: Yes.

Lynda Chittenden: And then —

Caroline Robinson: But the town was split.

Lynda Chittenden: Not yet.

Caroline Robinson: Oh.

Lynda Chittenden: Right. The town became split.

Caroline Robinson: But it was diverse.

Lynda Chittenden: Well, you know more. But the first thing after hiring Jim, they hired someone named David Erskine as the principal at Old Mill School. And he — in retrospect, I can see was *very* ambitious. He was compatible philosophically with what Jim wanted to do, and with Mary, Jim's wife, Mary Collins, who was a superb teacher/educator, and went on to do amazing things in a Petaluma school. But they just let me do what I wanted to do.

[4] It had to have been somewhat a progressive board to have hired Jim Collins because I'm certain in the hiring process his educational philosophy was made clear.

Caroline Robinson: Lynda, I think you were hired as a model for a new direction for the schools. Nobody knew what the new direction was, but Dave Erskine and you were to put down in clay what the dream was of the superintendent.

Stella Perone: Do you agree with that?

Lynda Chittenden: I was unaware of it at the time.

Stella Perone: Do you think there's truth with —

Lynda Chittenden: It's probably –

Caroline Robinson: In essence that's what it was.

Lynda Chittenden: Uh-huh.

Caroline Robinson: Because nobody knew the future. All we knew is that there was a group in Mill Valley, mostly fairly recent arrivals, who didn't want to continue the education you described from the '50s, that we inherited from the '50s, with the children in the rows, because we felt the world was changing, and that education didn't teach children how to adapt to change.

Lynda Chittenden: Yes, yes. The first thing that I did was get rid of all the desks.

Stella Perone: This was 1967 you said.

Lynda Chittenden: Yes, yes.

Stella Perone: Right, okay.

Lynda Chittenden: Get rid of all the desks. And instead there were tables.

Stella Perone: What grade did you have? I'm not sure if you said that.

Lynda Chittenden: There was no straight grade. In September it was fourth and fifth, and then — what I don't recall is how quickly Dave started putting other grade levels in there. If it was first year or — I think I started with fourth and fifth, and then I think Dave brought in a few third graders, and by the next year he brought in some second graders. So I had second through fifth. But then those kids who had *been* fifth didn't want to leave, so then we said, "Okay, you get to do sixth grade here if you want." Some didn't want to go to the middle school.

Stella Perone: Oh, they didn't have to go to the middle school?

Lynda Chittenden: Well, later they had to, but at that time, no. It probably wasn't until the second year — I had second through sixth, and almost 40 students. And lots and

lots of help. Every mother, every parent, PTA — I mean, all you guys came in and helped. There were no hired teacher aides then, but, I mean, I had a whole schedule[5] —

Caroline Robinson: I remember these wonderful single mothers who were on welfare who were artists, and came in and did all this art.

Lynda Chittenden: Oh yeah, we had wonderful, beautiful art.

Caroline Robinson: Because we had cabins in the valley that people could live, struggling artists could live in.

Lynda Chittenden: Yeah.

Caroline Robinson: And they all came and gave to the school.

Lynda Chittenden: Oh yes. I mean, I remember serious, earnest discussions on how the school should not be just the walls of that building down there, that within the whole community kids should be able to — if they're interested in learning something about building, and a dad or family are building, and there's a kid who wants to work a few days helping them, that should be *okay*. I'm not sure we ever got quite that far, but [laughs] —

Caroline Robinson: I remember we had a sculptor who came and taught everyone sculpting, including the parents.

Lynda Chittenden: Yeah. So there was. [laughs]

Stella Perone: So you got rid of the desks, just put tables in.

Lynda Chittenden: Tables and couches. We would pick up couches from anybody who would give them to us. And always a rug, couches, pillows, a rocking chair, those great big — what were they called?[6] Parents were very much involved then. So people would give us hand-me-downs.

Caroline Robinson: Oh, those huge pillows that were twice the size of your body.

Lynda Chittenden: Right. And kids would lay on them and curl on them, and instructionally, at that time — and I am not in any way saying it's *the* way to do it, it's just what we were doing at the time.

Stella Perone: Who's "we"?

[5] I had a whole schedule of outside people who would come in at specific times to work with specific individuals or small groups of kids.
[6] Bean bag chairs.

Lynda Chittenden: Myself and anybody else who was part of our school, our philosophy. It was individualized instruction with contracts for doing the work. Now, I wouldn't do it that way now, because there are instructional difficulties; some kids need more direct instruction than they were getting then, and that was a problem. In retrospect, we were very much about being a community; it was very much about empowering students and taking them very seriously.

Caroline Robinson: I might add that Dave Erskine and Lynda and others were empowering us mothers and the PTA, because we were the first generations of mothers who were college graduates but did not work. And we were frustrated. And Mr. Erskine, and Lynda and others opened us up to be part of something that mattered: our children's schooling.

Lynda Chittenden: And I remember one of the first things I learned from Dave was his message to parents that, "*You* are responsible for your child's education." He invited parents in, in ways that weren't being done.

Caroline Robinson: And we ate it up. Because we had roles as mothers, but we had been to college, and we wanted more. And this was an opportunity to be a stay-at-home mother and also matter.

Lynda Chittenden: But part of what for *me* was important — and I may not have for the next 30 years done completely individualized instruction with learning contracts and all of that; I found other, better ways to structure the curriculum. But what never changed, I mean, my last year of teaching in 1997, I still began every day with a classroom meeting.[7] From the very beginning of the year, the day begins with a *class* meeting. There's a *class* chairperson, there's a *vice* chairperson, there are *roles* for every student. There are offices, there's the one who collects the homework, and checks that out. Giving the students responsibilities for the classroom is to me very, very important and very much a part of grades fourth and fifth in particular, that class is self-contained. It's the last time they will ever be in a self-contained classroom. And they can experience and work through community issues in a way they'll never be able to do again in school, and [whispering] *they loved it.*

Caroline Robinson: They loved it?

Lynda Chittenden: They loved it. I hadn't figured out to do it then, but something that came later was a "Truth Box." I found an old army surplus ammo box at this army surplus in Marin, remember that?

Caroline Robinson: Mm-hmm.

Lynda Chittenden: And some guy there — I don't know what kind of machine he had to use to burn an opening in it, so that paper could be stuck in it — it has a very elaborate lid, and to take it off is elaborate. It was the Truth Box; and the Truth Box sat over some

[7] There was an agenda of subjects that as a group we needed to talk about.

place; and you could write complaints.[8] But you had to sign it. Or you could make an apology, and sign it, or an appreciation, and sign it. It was a way to get at all that underground stuff that goes on.[9] Here we did it through just discussions, and the items on the agenda, but this what really got at it, and maybe only once a week or week and a half, the truth box would be opened, and we'd all sit in a circle on the rug, open up the truth box, and these papers would come out all folded up, usually in an origami or something, or folded up [chuckles], but you had to label on the outside, was it a complaint[10], or an apology or — ?

Stella Perone: Did you read all of them, or some of them you screened out?

Lynda Chittenden: Well, I would dump them out, and I would put the complaints in one pile, and they were always mostly complaints, and the other things would come last.[11] I would open each one, and I would first make eye contact with the kid that wrote it, "This is your last chance to withdraw it." [Lynda speaks in the voice of an angry child] "No, no read it." And it was always about rotten behavior in the classroom,[12] or teasing, or something like that, was usually what it was. The kid who wrote the complaint would add more if needed, and then the kid named in the complaint got to have a say, and then anybody else who was there — and it always ended up, maybe, with an apology or a promise not to do it again. [chuckles] I once even got called out. I got a complaint in the truth box once because I had teased, in a way that hurt somebody's feelings, and I had to apologize. But I'm rambling —

Caroline Robinson: It's so relevant to the bullying question today.

Lynda Chittenden: The Truth Box and daily classroom meeting got at every interpersonal, psychological, working, community issues were dealt with that way. So I just use that as an example of my philosophy that didn't change as I learned more than I knew in 1967. I did many things that were sound. However, rigor, intellectual rigor, was not yet part of what I later learned to build into the curriculum and its assessment. That came later as I realized it was too loose.

Stella Perone: I'm curious, you said that you took all the desks out of your classroom. Was that a personal choice for you as an individual teacher or did all the teachers at Old Mill do that?

Lynda Chittenden: No. I did it.

Stella Perone: Okay.

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[8] That is, a complaint about someone, usually about being treated unfairly.
[9] Agenda items at class meetings dealt with community issues: e.g. how to fairly share a limited number of playground balls, whether or not all the kids at a table with a few who aren't turning in their homework should also lose table points, what to do about the few students who aren't doing their clean-up jobs, etc..
[10] Often spelled "complant."
[11] Usually, there were a few apologies or appreciations.
[12] Or often out on the playground at recess.

Lynda Chittenden: Actually, in reading a *Pacific Sun* article entitled "Mrs. C is a Sub-Divider" — it's about the bloody refrigerator boxes — but part of what's in it is commentary from the kids, saying they didn't like it when they first came in. [13] [Lynda imitates a child's voice] "Where's my desk?" I want a desk with a lid that lifts up that I can stuff things into." And then later they were saying, "No, I like the way it is now." But we were upstairs — the school has been rebuilt now and this classroom no longer exists — but Room 9 was a huge room upstairs that Dave gave me. And how this happened — we had all this space, and in a discussion of — because there were evaluated assessment discussions that went on every day — we would end the day also with, "How are we doing?" How did the day go?" What do we need to change, do differently tomorrow, and so forth." Kids being distracted was a problem, so somebody got a new refrigerator, and they brought the box in. "Could I have this, and can I put a desk in it?" Sure. So some kids chose to do this, and some decorated it, and then, well you can see.[14]

Actually I got a letter from a former student where he says — this is a kid who found that video[15] online — "As a side note, I'd like to comment on the cardboard boxes. What I remember was that the teachers encouraged us to shape our environment, to create within the classroom our own space and what we needed for learning. One day, someone had a box and made his own private space within the larger classroom. We thought the boxes were great for a while, but then it got out of hand when the classroom became filled with them. As a class we talked about how we had lost our common space, and connection with one another, and they were taken down." Well, they weren't all, but some —

Stella Perone: Was this one year, just one year?

Lynda Chittenden: No, but this was probably a total of no more than three years.

Stella Perone: Okay. After your first year when you came there in '67. And you were the only classroom that had the cardboard boxes?

Lynda Chittenden: Yeah, yeah.

Stella Perone: Okay.

Lynda Chittenden: But for me the boxes were not a big part of my experience.

Caroline Robinson: It was an experiment, experimental mode.

Lynda Chittenden: It didn't *feel* experimental.

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[13] It was an article written during those few years in Room 9 at Old Mill.
[14] The refrigerator boxes were a way some students chose to deal with distractions.
[15] The video referred to as "Ol Mill" had been recently done at Tam High by a great student, Hana Dahl, and was then getting a lot of YouTube play. In it I had tried to talk in a larger sense about what I was doing back then at Old Mill School, but the resulting video was mostly just about what I came to call "bloody refrigerator boxes."

Caroline Robinson: But it was. As a public school, maybe not private school, but —

Lynda Chittenden: Right, it didn't feel experimental to me, because I had a certainty that we were on the right path, we were creating something, we were creating something new. I didn't think of it as an experiment.

Caroline Robinson: I would imagine in American history quite a few one-room schoolhouse teachers —

Lynda Chittenden: That was our model.

Caroline Robinson: Did things like that.

Lynda Chittenden: I mean, that was in a way what I had in — yeah.

Stella Perone: So what was the parents' reaction to this?

Lynda Chittenden: Mixed. There were some students who only were in my class one year and then they moved. They moved someplace else.

Caroline Robinson: Would you say that Dave Erskine hand-picked your students with parents that were open?

Lynda Chittenden: As we went along, I bet for sure he did. I was unaware of it, but he probably did.

Caroline Robinson: It takes courage to do this in a public arena.

Stella Perone: But you had some of the kids remain in your class for a few years.

Lynda Chittenden: I had some kids for four years. And *many* for three. And many more for two.

Caroline Robinson: This carried on as a model in middle school. My daughter had the Tanguay class for sixth, seventh and eighth grades. Similar.

Lynda Chittenden: Yeah.

Caroline Robinson: So for many students it was a very profitable way of learning. Of course if they liked it, their parents could select it.

Stella Perone: So that was your first three years at Old Mill School. Do you want to comment how that morphed into —

Lynda Chittenden: Well —

Stella Perone: You were there 30 years, right?

Lynda Chittenden: Well, I was in the *district* 30 years.

Stella Perone: Oh, okay.

Lynda Chittenden: But Dave had this ambition of expanding what I was doing into a larger arena, and that was when we created the Learnatorium [laughs]. I named it, but he put three classes in them, in the auditorium, and it lasted only one year, or more accurately I lasted in it only one year, because I was responsible, but there were two other teachers, one of whom understood what I was doing, I could talk and plan with her, but the other was a male, new teacher, who was *spineless*, and he absolutely — I mean his kids were just running *wild*, and he would not assert himself and be the adult in the room.

Stella Perone: But there were three of you teachers in this room.

Lynda Chittenden: And three classrooms of kids. So at the end of the year I wanted back in my own room. Other teachers came in and carried on the Learnatorium. But I didn't.

Stella Perone: How many years did the Learnatorium go on for, do you think?

Lynda Chittenden: I don't know.

Stella Perone: Do you remember the Learnatorium?

Caroline Robinson: Yes, some parents felt that it was a disaster for their children.

Lynda Chittenden: Yeah, and if they were in that class with the teacher who was spineless and *not* in charge and *not* creating what I felt needed to be created. It wasn't good for them.

Caroline Robinson: Also, it's very threatening to parents that children are given wider boundaries than the parents are comfortable with.

Lynda Chittenden: Yeah, and that's what we were doing, very much what we were doing.

Caroline Robinson: I know one mother I could think of who felt that that changed her daughter's life forever. That it made her daughter a much different person for the rest of her life.

Lynda Chittenden: Positively or negatively?

Caroline Robinson: Yes, in charge of her life in a very broad way. So the conclusion was that for some children it was wonderful, and other children couldn't handle it. Part of it is how structured the family was, the parents' attitude towards structure.

Lynda Chittenden: Well, and the part that used to agitate me was the people, how they said my classroom is completely unstructured. Where I knew that there was a great deal of structure. It just wasn't so visible. And there was accountability — not enough then — I learned how to have the students be more accountable as the years went on.

Stella Perone: Were there any standardized tests in those days to judge, to measure —

Lynda Chittenden: Yeah, there were, but they were *really* easy. I mean, they were something that didn't interfere. When I say they were easy, they weren't particularly good in the sense that they measured anything important, but they were the kind of thing that any halfway bright kid could just sail through — ugh — they were just, you know, they were multiple choice.[16]

Caroline Robinson: Mill Valley was a very special place during those years. There were a lot of people who really welcomed us. It had a lot of air with all the artists to try new, wide boundaries, so it was a good community for this, but it was a diverse community, so there were many parents who felt differently.

Lynda Chittenden: Yeah, in terms of diversity, economic diversity, there was a lot.

Caroline Robinson: And cultural —

Lynda Chittenden: And cultural.

Caroline Robinson: But the community as a whole was very tolerant of cultural difference. That was a unique thing about Mill Valley. We all were one community even though we had different values. That was very, very unique. *Very* unique. And Old Mill School was — I don't know why they picked Old Mill, except my husband was from Old Mill, on the board, and we were kind of willing to try new things. Maybe that's —

Lynda Chittenden: Meaning why Jim put Dave Erskine there?

Caroline Robinson: Yes.

Lynda Chittenden: As opposed to another school?

Caroline Robinson: It's possible.

Lynda Chittenden: I don't know; I have no idea.

Caroline Robinson: But many others schools developed very well, too.

[16] They only tested basic math and reading comprehension.

Lynda Chittenden: Mm-hmm.

Caroline Robinson: Well you can imagine the split in the community. However, four years later — or, maybe in this case, three years later — when my husband and another man ran for the board again, they had no opposition. They were accepted.

Stella Perone: Let's go back to this. Your room with no desk and just tables and boxes, did that just go on for three years? Or did that —

Lynda Chittenden: No, I mean, those same tables I used all 30 years.

Stella Perone: Okay.

Lynda Chittenden: They were made in San Quentin, and they had — here, here they are. They were half circle oak tables, and four kids can sit at them. At that time, in the beginning, there were no assigned seats. I learned to assign seats. [laughs] Kids could roam, we'd move desks, and we would change how they were placed in the classroom. But kids, I soon felt, really needed assigned seating.

Caroline Robinson: But it was good, for structure.

Lynda Chittenden: The wandering around didn't take place when you had your own assigned seat.

Caroline Robinson: Lynda, I wonder something. A lot of the education during that time — *Summerhill* was very influential. I don't know if you know of *Summerhill* –

Stella Perone: Is that a person?

Lynda Chittenden: No, *Summerhill* is a book by A.S. Neil. And it's an account written in the early '60s about a school — a private school, could've been a state school actually — in England where there was no required curriculum, and basically no required anything. And it was, at this time we used the term, "self-directed." It was very important that students be self-directed, and this school took it to quite an extreme. But A.S. Neil's next book was called, *Freedom Not License*, and he —

Caroline Robinson: That wasn't written yet.

Lynda Chittenden: It hadn't been. But he wrote it soon afterwards because just like that young man in the first year in the Learnatorium, he just let the students be. Well, no, you *don't.* That's license. Providing a structure within which to be free but also to take responsibility[17] —

[17] You, the teacher, are responsible for student learning. I knew that with certainty in 1967. It took a few years for me to realize that in the best classrooms students also understand that they are responsible for being focused learners.

Caroline Robinson: So children were developing within a structure.

Lynda Chittenden: Mm-hmm. Hopefully. And I did look — I just was reading in my scrapbook, that was put together when I retired. But Karen, Myra and —

Caroline Robinson: Wise?

Lynda Chittenden: Yes! Karen Wise. I had all three of those girls. But Karen, the oldest, was in that first class. And here she is [Lynda refers to her scrapbook]. She loved to read. This scrapbook had letters — forms where kids filled out what they remember, what they like, didn't like, or whatever. Anyway, I read —

Caroline Robinson: This was years later?

Lynda Chittenden: Yeah. Written in 1997. And somewhere is Karen's. And she talks about when it was contract time. Because I met with every kid, every day. I mean, after the morning's meeting, I would put up our schedule for the day. And that included what kids I needed to meet with, and every day I would meet with somebody to go over their contract. "Show me your portfolio of what you've accomplished this week," and so forth. And Karen says, "All I wanted to do was read, but I didn't want to do any math at all." But she talks about how Lynda would say, I would say, "Okay, [speaking as Karen] I am going to do this much math," and that I would *not* let her get away with that, that I would nudge her and push her to do more. She was very receptive to it. All three of the Wise girls did really well.

Caroline Robinson: Lynda, I hear that some schools, what's happening now is that they say if a child doesn't read by third grade, they're kind of out of it. They have to be held back. But that wasn't the way it was in those years. In these years — what Lynda is talking about — the feeling was a child will exhibit their reading when they're ready.

Lynda Chittenden: There was a belief: give them time, give them time and the right structure, and it will happen. And there was a belief that it will happen for every kid. Now, in retrospect, there were students that should've had more intervention, more structured, focused intervention early on. Many of these kids in these pictures, I still know. I know where they are now, and I can think of a couple that we didn't do well for them. I can think of many more that are fine. Because of societal — there were kids in families that were kind of crumbling and this was an era of open marriage, and all of that.

Caroline Robinson: Let me make a statement about this. During this period, Mill Valley in the '60s, many families divorced. Half of my children's friends' parents divorced. A lot of them were people who married right after college. They hadn't had a single life, if they had wanted it. And also there was drugs coming up towards the end of the '60s, and the parents were experimenting with drugs. So the children were going through a very terrible time.

Lynda Chittenden: Yes. Those little boys right there [Lynda refers to her scrapbook], all three of them, that was what was happening in their lives.

Stella Perone: They're all brothers?

Lynda Chittenden: No.

Stella Perone: Or they're three different —

Caroline Robinson: See, the parents were also experiencing the lack of boundaries.

Lynda Chittenden: Yeah.

Caroline Robinson: And life was healthy out here in Mill Valley. Wonderful weather, everything was free and cheap.

Lynda Chittenden: Yeah, so not every student thrived. And I know now what I would do differently. But I wasn't the reason, the sole reason, for some of those kids not thriving.

Caroline Robinson: I can make an observation about the times. When we had these strict schools, structured schools, private schools were like Lynda was describing. But as the public schools became more and more like Lynda was describing, then private schools became more and more structured. So there seems to be some kind of a balance in life. Would you say something like —

Lynda Chittenden: Well, what was happening in the private schools was in response to what was happening — yeah.

Stella Perone: Where'd you go on after Old Mill School? Talk a little more about your —

Lynda Chittenden: Career. So I left the Learnatorium. I wanted my own class, and I continued to have my own class. There was a period of time at Old Mill where we had a different principal every year. Every year, there'd be someone different. And, I remember, I had no idea what even a principal was supposed to do. Pat McDonald was our principal one year, and his job — I told him finally — was to make me laugh. Every day, he would come in, he would go around the school, and he would just come in, and he'd tell me a joke, or he'd come behind me and whisper, "Seventh-grade math." [laughs] In no way was I gonna teach seventh-grade math at the middle school. He would always threaten to put me there. The wonderful thing for me — I don't think I would've survived any place else but here. I'm not a rebel, but I do have trouble with rules. Mostly because I just don't pay attention to them. And here, both the administration and parents were supportive. If you could justify what you're doing, okay! I was left alone. Not one principal or one superintendent in the 30 years I was here ever got after me. I mean, Jim

Derich would say in June [speaking in the voice of Jim], "Lynda, you didn't teach electricity again this year."

Caroline Robinson: To fifth-graders?

Lynda Chittenden: Right. Yeah, that was part of the science curriculum. I always forgot. In the mid '70s, I became involved with the Bay Area Writing Project at Berkeley, and that changed my life. I learned *so* much. And I was one of the first — it began as a project of secondary English teachers, teaching one another; the principle being good teachers should teach other teachers, not textbooks. I mean, that's the way it used to be, textbook publishers had salespeople go out and sell their books, and this is how you'd use the book, and that teacher in-service. Our belief was not in textbooks, but in teachers. Anyway, the writing project was at first very, very excellent, secondary English teachers. And then as the writing project grew, they began to bring in a few elementary people. So I was one of those first elementary people. And it was just *fabulous*.

Stella Perone: Wait, so you presented this program at the elementary schools? I'm not sure what you did with that.

Lynda Chittenden: Okay. That started in '77 I think, '77 or '78 — '78. It was an eight-week summer invitational program at Berkeley, and you had one day where you taught everybody.[18] There were a few elementary people, there were some middle school teachers, lot of secondary teachers, and some college instructors, and you taught them — you showed them what you do in your classroom.[19] And then you became a teacher consultant when the writing project would go out and do in-services in schools.[20] You were one of the consultants that were brought during that time. But I learned so much from all these *fabulous teachers* — fabulous teachers. And I came back from the writing project summer, *so* enthused, and I had the *perfect* group of kids.[21] I wasn't doing second through sixth or anything like that anymore. I was just a fourth and fifth, so I had all these fifth graders that I had as fourth graders, and we had the freedom — curriculum freedom, I mean. We spent almost the whole year writing a textbook of marine mammals for kids. At that time, 1977, there were no books for kids on marine mammals.[22]

Stella Perone: You still did math and everything, right?

Lynda Chittenden: Oh yeah! I mean, we did math, sort of classic — usually, that was the only textbook I really used. Otherwise, I would create our resources for whatever curriculum we were doing, which might be a few textbooks from here and there, but

[18] That is, you presented a writing lesson from your own classroom to the whole group..
[19] The other part of a BAWP model was to also be part of a writing group. We wrote daily, shared our writing, responded to the writing of others and later published some of our writing.
[20] BAWP would go out to schools and do in-service, six or eight weeks of BAWP teacher consultants who would present writing lessons from their own classrooms to that school's teachers.
[21] By then I was teaching only 4/5 combination classes.
[22] Kids were so easily engaged in this topic. Commercial whaling was still taking places in all the oceans of the world!

there'd be other materials as well. We spent a year.[23] That was our science, social studies, language arts, and we wrote this really good textbook[24] for kids. It's over there.

Stella Perone: Really?

Lynda Chittenden: Yeah.

Stella Perone: So it's actually published and everything.

Lynda Chittenden: We published it ourselves. This was pre-computers.[25]

Stella Perone: Right.

Lynda Chittenden: I had one electric typewriter in the room. Actually, there's an account of that project I wrote up, but we just wanted to study marine mammals.[26] And to do that we needed to go on fieldtrips. So my teacher's aide at the time, who's a close friend, Sue Wright, and her kid, Whitney, was in the class, and her grandmother was a quilter, so grandma gave us a quilt to raffle off. We sold tickets and somebody would win it. And we raised a lot of money selling that quilt for fieldtrips.[27] And we took fieldtrips — God, we were learning. We brought in *so* many resources. Here kids are reading Rachel Carson, here kids are reading anything from *National Geographic*. This was pre-*National Geographic* with the humpback whale songs and Roger Payne's study. Oh, we were learning so much. So we had some leftover money, and we brought somebody in from Greenpeace. Oh! It was so exciting [laughs], you know. This woman comes in, very earnest, and she's prepared to tell us that there are toothed whales and there are baleen whales — well *duh*! [laughs] And so she gives us a simplistic, 10-minute talk. The kids are sitting there amazed, and this I'll never forget – Jason Begley – remember the Begley twins? — Jason Begley, who by then had changed his name to Oliver Orca —

Stella Perone: Orca?

Lynda Chittenden: [laughs] He raises his hand as she finishes her little spiel [Lynda imitates the Greenpeace speaker], "Any questions?" So he raises his hand, and he says [imitating Jason], "When a baby baleen whale is born, how does it nurse? 'Cause it's got this baleen here, how does it get the nipple in his mouth to nurse?" Now that's a really sophisticated question, and she looked at him, and she had *no* idea how to answer.

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[23] It was a year spent on the study of marine mammals, on their evolution, morphology, anatomy, behaviors, distribution, etc.

[24] The textbook is titled *Our Friends in the Waters*. Our title choice was influenced by one our resources *Mind in the Waters* by Joan McIntyre (Scribner 1974).

[25] There was no word-processing, no internet.

[26] I wrote the account for a BAWP publication, *What If All the Whales Are Gone Before We Become Friends?* which was later included in *What's going on: Language learning episodes in British and American classrooms, grades 4-13,* by Mary Barr, Pat D'Arcy & Mary K. Healy (Boynton/Cook 1982).

[27] We wanted to go outside the classroom to as many nearby sources for learning about marine mammals: e.g. migrating gray whales at Point Reyes, elephant seals at Año Nuevo, Marine World, which was then in the South Bay, etc.

Caroline Robinson: I don't either.

Lynda Chittenden: They pump. The mother expresses the milk.

Stella Perone: You're kidding.

Lynda Chittenden: Yeah. The breast is inside this flap and the baby goes up to it — I supposed there is a nipple, but anyway — the milk is expressed and gets into the —

Caroline Robinson: But they're nursing in the water, I suppose.

Lynda Chittenden: Yeah.

Stella Perone: And it doesn't get diffused.

Lynda Chittenden: Yeah. That woman was not able to answer one question the kids had. Their questions were so sophisticated. And so she left. She cost us $50 or something. The kids were just, oh, so exercised and indignant.

Caroline Robinson: Well that's a little lesson in life.

Lynda Chittenden: Yes. It was the perfect. Because I'd been thinking, "What am I going to do, with all this learned information?" What I knew I didn't want to do for the writing project was to have them write reports, the classic report where they copy from various sources, and so forth. I didn't want to do that. So I wasn't sure exactly what we were going to do, but the Greenpeace lady left, and the kids were so — just irritated. Anyway, the discussion was, "Look how much you already know." And one of the things by then we were doing was lots of charting — on chart paper.[28] "Look at all this information that you have here. I think that we should write a book. Right! That's what we should do." So we brainstormed the table of contents. It was perfect. Part of teaching is manipulation. [laughs] This is the really difficult part. Our table of contents were all questions to be answered. So each job that the individual kid had was simply to write an extended response to a question. And it just took off like — here.

Stella Perone: I'll get the book.

Caroline Robinson: Lynda, is this — ?

Stella Perone: Okay, you were talking about the book you wrote, which is called — not that you wrote, but your class wrote.

Lynda Chittenden: Okay, *Our Friends in the Waters*. And again, to enable the kids to write what they know, they needed the structure of a long response to a focused question that deals with an important concept within the knowledge. And what also made this

[28] The walls of the room were covered with them.

clear to them is they knew they were writing this for a reading audience of other kids. They weren't writing it for me as a teacher to correct. It was, "I know this information and I'm going to write it to this kid who wants to know this information." So that was very, very clear. Our table of contents began — well, we would have a chapter on cetaceans. There's baleen whales and tooth whales, so let's have a chapter on whales and then a separate chapter on dolphins. Then we needed a chapter for seals and walruses and so forth, and then pinnipeds, and we needed a chapter on sirenians, the manatees and dugongs. Then sea otters, which are carnivores; and that was where we started. As it went on, kids would say, "Well, I think our book needs such and such." And we needed an introductory chapter on what would the sea be like as a home, and what is a mammal and so forth; all that needed to go before information on marine mammals. And then, after that, information on the history of man and marine mammals.

So that's how we structured it. And the kids simply started writing. There were no computers. I had an electric typewriter. When they had a draft — by then they were well-trained to read and respond to one another — a kid may have a draft here and have an idea in his or her head of what they have done, but they have to know, "Have I succeeded? Is it here?" Everybody knew how to work in response partners with somebody else to clarify what you're doing and so forth. And all of this is before issues of correctness of spelling and so forth come in. But one of the things in reports — non-fiction writing, information writing — that always comes up is that students must be taught topic sentences. I didn't approach it like that. They had a structure within which to write, but they would come up against the need for a topic sentence. My favorite story is Oliver Orca, who is writing about — let's see, where is it, geez — [Lynda flips through the book] I think he's an English teacher now.

Stella Perone: Did he ever go by Oliver Orca outside the class?

Lynda Chittenden: I'm not sure. Probably.

Stella Perone: So what year was this book?

Lynda Chittenden: By now this is spring of '78. I've evolved 10 years from '67. Oh, right, Oliver Orca had the question, "How do toothed whales feed?" Okay. And he found the perfect topic sentence: "All whales feed *one* way, *or the other*." [laughs]

Caroline Robinson: No, or *another.*

Lynda Chittenden: Another, another. Right. So then, he could handle the task of structuring his writing. But it didn't come from my being up at the board saying, "This is a topic sentence, and this is why you need them." He couldn't figure out how to structure it, and then I remember talking to him about topic sentences, and he just went [imitating a child's excited voice], "*Yeah!*" And proceeded to write. I had them keep learning logs.[29]

[29] I had students write in learning logs where the task was to make sense of what they were learning. Not factual note-taking, but written reflections on the questions, confusions and fantasies that are integral to active, involved learning.

They're writing their information, but then we would do various activities and then I would have them do a learning log and that would let me know what's going on; more information about what's going on. Let's see, oh [laughs] in our book — and I did the picking — I picked some learning log entries to include in the margins of our book, and then *of course* they're drawing all the time.[30] They're drawing what we're studying. And I'm reading to them. Oh, we read *A Whale for the Killing* by Farley Mowat. I read Sally Carrighar's beautiful book about blue whales. We read — oh, I can't remember now. But all the time, I'm reading things that were basically above their reading level but had all this information.

Anyway, so, what are we going to do with the book? I knew about self-publishing, so we go to the Rotary Club, we go to one of their meetings. Peter Palchez was superintendent then, and Peter knew what we were doing, and he got us a gig at the Rotary Club. So at this point we were pretty much done. And kids dressed up; Whitney Wright wore a dress for the first time in her life [laughs], and we went over to the Rotary Club, and each kid would read them just a little bit of their portion of our book. Maybe we only had seven kids or eight kids. Each kid would step up to the podium, read from the beginning of their bit, and conclude by saying, "And if you want to know any more, you'll have to wait until the book is published," and turn around. So at the end of it I was able to say, "Well, we need money to publish this." And so the Rotary Club lent us some money — I forget how much; it wasn't much — and it paid for the printing. I don't even remember how many copies we made. But look at our bibliography. And oh! *Twilight Seas*, that was the Carrighar book I read to them. But these were all the books in the room that we were reading and learning from. And the kids knew who was doing what, because a part of that was on a big chart — who has the responsibility for what part in it. A kid would find information in one book, something that they didn't need but then say to another kid, "Oh, I bet you could use some of this!"

Stella Perrone: So how many did you publish?

Lynda Chittenden: I don't remember. But we sold them all.

Stella Perrone: Oh, you did?

Lynda Chittenden: Oh yeah. We sold them. We paid back the Rotary Club.

Stella Perrone: Oh, awesome!

Lynda Chittenden: [laughs] We sold them for $5 a piece. We had a book — there's pictures in there at the Depot Bookstore of the book party that we had. And there were some for sale at the Marine Mammal Center; some grandmother took a bunch to the Smithsonian; and they sold some.

Stella Perrone: So, what else did you do in your career? Just summarize it.

[30] Again, the format of our book was influenced by *Mind and Waters.*

Lynda Chittenden: After that year — I mean this was very, very successful, within the writing project and beyond. So I did many, many presentations on that process. I had a friend who was getting a PhD in psychology right at this point, and when I showed her the cover drawing, she just looked at that and she said, "Freud lives." [laughs] Isn't that hilarious? So, the success of this and what I was doing in the writing project enabled me to be selected for — I went and did a Fulbright exchange in England. Wiltshire.

And I was picked to be on a state assessment committee from the mid '80s through to the early '90s that was all about "Direct, authentic assessment," was what it was then called.[31] Away from multiple choice standardized testing. The first was a direct writing assessment where you actually — and that still takes place in many areas — students are given prompts and they write, and there are rubrics that can be used that are standardized in the sense that the readers have to be trained, but where you have many, many sample responses and on, say, a scale of one to six, you're trained with so many papers that show what a six looks like, what a five looks like, what a three, so that trained readers can simply read it and — "Well it's a four!" And that still takes place but I was on a group that was — we did succeed in creating, statewide, an integrated direct reading and writing test – so it was a three-day test of reading real text, where the students take real text from real books, not something generated by test makers, and write responses to open-ended questions.[32] The students were invited to take notes, to comment on the reading as they went along and we had a rubric that measured the thought, the kind of thinking, that was taking place. That took almost five years to create.

Stella Perrone: Now were you teaching —

Lynda Chittenden: Yeah.

Stella Perrone: OK, at the same time. Extra-curricular jobs.

Lynda Chittenden: Right.[33]

Stella Perrone: You were still at Old Mill?

Lynda Chittenden: Yeah, I was at Old Mill during part of that and then – I was at Old Mill for 20 years and then went to Park. And while I was at Park I was still going to Sacramento, for working on that. That particular test became part of the culture wars as well.

Stella Perrone: Did that test have a name?

[31] A state law called for a team of elementary and secondary teachers to create this kind of statewide assessment. Imagine that!
[32] That is, not questions with only right or wrong answers, but ones that invite students to interpret and use textual evidence to explain their thoughts.
[33] My involvement here was like all the BAWP consulting I did.

Lynda Chittenden: Yeah. It was the CLASS. It was an acronym: C-L-A-S-S. I don't remember what those letters stood for but —

Caroline Robinson: Could you define the culture war?

Lynda Chittenden: No. I mean, probably not very well off the top of my head right now. But what I mean by that is it was different. We weren't as statistically consistent with our reading test as we were with the writing. The testing method of direct writing assessment worked and still is being used.[34] Took us a long time to get that rubric right. And there were some text selections that probably were not politically wise; they were a little too controversial or provocative or — of course, I think that's how you get responses, meaning good reading responses. But the whole reading assessment was — actually, if you want, I wrote one. These are letters I got from students.

Stella Perrone: And this is after the —

Lynda Chittenden: After that "Ol Mill" video, right. Oh, I was telling Mark bits of them are better.[35] Because he's a professor at Penn State now and he wrote to me about the metrics of current assessment and how we don't measure what's important. Oh, he said something about the "Industrial educational metrics that the data gatherers now assemble," and articulating what's important in education is so difficult. Quantifying it is even harder. And my involvement in the authentic assessment — helping us construct statewide direct writing assessments and literacy portfolios and even the reading comprehension tests where kids were asked to write, constructing their own meaning from text, using a rubric that evaluated thinking rather than right answers. Because we didn't have right and wrong answers. But that was *very* controversial. It was only — I guess it was Pete Wilson, when he became governor, he killed it. But there were enough of the very conservative statewide assembly and senators that, anyway some people got very, very exercised over what we were doing. And in retrospect, what made sense to me was that our basic assumption was that truth — right answers — truth does not reside in the text. We felt it to be instead in the meaning made between text and reader. But if truth does not reside in text, then that puts aside any biblical belief in that kind of truth that is only in text. I think that's why it was so controversial. Anyway, that's what I did for the next few years.

Stella Perrone: And you retired when?

Lynda Chittenden: '97. My involvement in assessment was statewide.[36] But it was also — I think I was just *hated* by some teachers because I was always coming up with, "Let's have a new report card." [laughs] And oh! Just within Mill Valley, the school district, the report card traumas we had. All the way from when Jim Collins was still superintendent. I talked everybody into having a "narrative" report card. Wrong name:

[34] Creating direct reading assessments that were statistically consistent was a lot more difficult.
[35] Mark Ballora was a student of mine back in the late '60s at Old Mill School.
[36] What I learned obviously influenced my thinking about how I and my colleagues assess the students in our own classrooms.

narrative is story. But it was blank paper where the teacher simply wrote to the parents what the student was learning and doing. Well, that was too hard for everybody. But that was the direction that led to benchmark state standards, core curriculum; all of that came from efforts to report learning in a way that isn't represented solely by summative letter grades.[37]

Caroline Robinson: When I was a health educator — health counselor — at Redwood High School, and my concerns were things like anorexia, drug addiction, venereal disease, things like that — sex education — I found that the official films from the companies that got contracts with Washington on these subjects — the kids were much too sophisticated. This was in the '70s. That they didn't fall for any of that official — things that were handed down. And to reach the students, my goal was to change behavior, because much of children's illnesses comes from their behavior. And I would have to get a recovered drug addict or somebody — I'd have someone real for them to really have validity with the kids. So they were already becoming more sophisticated. You were at the beginning of something that maybe the officials didn't recognize but the kids were already at that level of understanding, I think.

Lynda Chittenden: They respond to being respected and to being treated as individuals with minds and opinions.

Stella Perrone: Yeah. Do you have any comments on special friendships or teachers, principals you totally admired, who had an impact on you?

Lynda Chittenden: Well, I love Jim Derich, who has either taught or been principal at every school, elementary school in the district. He was *my* student teacher in 1968, I think we remember, and he's been wonderful. His first principal job was at Park and that's why I left Old Mill, was to go to Park. And there were some years there that were better than any Old Mill years where we really had a staff, an entire very professional staff that worked together. I mean, we changed a lousy report card into a really good report card and we came up with a set of characteristics. We called them, "Characteristics of a Successful Learner." We made that a part of the report card and it was adopted by the whole district. Yeah, the years with Jim were wonderful. And my last few years of teaching — then usually just 5th grade because we stopped having mixed grades — and I taught with Kathy Fischer from Green Gulch and we were a perfect pair.

Caroline Robinson: Sounds like you had a lot of joy in your classroom.

Lynda Chittenden: Oh I loved it, I loved it, *I loved it*. But I knew I didn't want to stay too long, 'cause you look around and you see tired and cranky teachers that stayed too long. And when I realized — the kids, I didn't have as much excitement and joy with what the kids were doing — that told me it was time to go. I didn't want to stay too long.

[37] I believe that such summative letter grades should never be part of an elementary student's experience of learning. In Fran Claggert's *A Measure of Success* (Boynton Cook, 1996), I wrote up an account of introducing our new report card to my students by ritualistically burning the old one.

Stella Perrone: Students that you particularly remember?

Lynda Chittenden: Oliver Orca. [laughs] Ah yes, every one of these kids, very clearly. Many. I love walking into the Mill Valley Market and Brenda Cherk, the clerk, Brenda was in my — Brenda was in one — she's in those pictures. I love seeing her. I love running into kids.

Caroline Robinson: Well we parents were also part of the joy. There was a group of supportive parents that we resonated with what you brought to —

Lynda Chittenden: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. Wonderful parents.

Caroline Robinson: Like Dart Cherk, who built a whole playground separate for kindergarten kids so they could feel safer.

Lynda Chittenden: Yeah. And it saddens me so much that at Old Mill, you can't even go in that lower door anymore. When they redid the school, because every classroom had a backdoor, you could just go outside. Those doors are gone. Can't have that anymore. You can't be in a school without wearing a name tag and without signing in at the office.

Caroline Robinson: For security.

Lynda Chittenden: Yeah.

[Interview ends abruptly]