

A Conversation with Sylvan Dell Publishing Owners, Donna and Lee German!



Where did the idea for Sylvan Dell come from?

DONNA: My husband, Lee, and I have three daughters (Rachel, Katie, & Helen) in college and high school. I started reading to each of the girls when they were a few days old. I remember visiting my parents when Rachel, my oldest, was four months old. I reached for a Dr. Seuss book, and my mother actually asked why I was reading to her, that she couldn't possibly understand anything at such a young age. Now, I confess that I was shocked. Didn't my parents read to me? When did they start? Didn't all parents start reading to their children at an early age? I showed my mother that as soon as I picked the book up, Rachel's little arms and legs started waving and kicking. There was real excitement and there was real understanding. She probably didn't understand the words, but she did understand being held and read to, and she did understand the rhythm. Years later, I had a morning to go shopping with a friend (a very rare occurrence!). I said that I needed to stop at a store to get a few birthday presents. I pulled up in front of a teacher's store, but my friend wouldn't even go in. She sat there and said, "We can't go in there, we aren't teachers." I admit that to this day, that statement still shocks me. If parents aren't the very first teachers in their children's lives, then who is?

Whether you know it (or like it) or not, you are your children's teacher. It is up to you, as the parent/teacher to instill a love or learning or not. By the time children start school, that feeling is already there—or not. There are now even television commercials geared toward parents to talk to their children, even if to just explain what they are doing. There are early literacy programs galore trying to reach out and help parents and their children at an early age—way before school starts. So what IS a busy parent to do? How DOES one find the time?

Lee and I started the company in the fall of 2004. He had retired from the US Navy, and even though I had written several best-selling cookbooks, my passion had always been in children's books. Like any idea, things come together from a variety of sources....

Military members, especially Navy, spend a good deal of time away from home. Ships are gone for six months at a time, but that doesn't count all the other "little" trips of a few weeks or months here or there, and it doesn't count extensions because of world conflicts. We made a decision to take some time off when he retired. We needed the family time before he moved on to another career. We rented out the house, put all our belongings in storage, and arranged to home school the children in order to travel. Our van and a pop-up camper became our home. We took off to explore the US in six months. We had family memberships at a zoo and at a science museum which allowed us to visit any other zoo/aquarium or science museum in the US. We ended up buying a National Park Pass, which gave us entrance to every US National Park. Even though it had seemed like a long time, it soon became very apparent that six months was a tiny scratch on the surface.

Going to zoos, aquariums, nature centers, and parks is a sure-fire way of getting children excited about learning. Young children are SPONGES for knowledge. Each visit turned into science, history, or math class. But what were really impressive were the Junior Ranger programs at the National Parks. Almost all parks (66 out of the 67 we visited that year) had these programs available at no or minimal cost. The program was a mini lesson about the park; it had fun facts and activities like scavenger hunts to find things in the park, matching activities, or vocabulary games to learn park-specific topics. Some programs required the children to attend ranger-led hikes or talks. The girls LOVED them, and I will add that Lee and I learned so much more, too!

The concept behind Sylvan Dell books is fairly simple—fun books to read with young children that have an underlying “learning” theme. The books are designed to get kids questioning and wanting to learn without being too “non-fictionish” or preachy. I equate the concept to a historical fiction novel—a great, fun read that teaches as it entertains. The fun facts and activities in the back of our books are designed for you to be able to point things out, work with your kids, and even to answer questions that you might not know answers to (adults can’t know everything, after all!). Each book is a mini “quality time” to spend with your children.

What has been the most challenging aspect of starting your own company?

DONNA: There are new challenges daily! From my perspective, it is a real challenge to select the right manuscripts and illustrators. Not a day goes by that I don’t turn down a cute story because it doesn’t quite match our goals and mission. As an author-turned-editor, it’s tough because I know how miserable it is to get those “rejections.” But, as a company, we have a clearly defined goal and mission to teach science and math through literature. The manuscript must match that goal. Once the manuscripts are selected, I then take several weeks to match the right illustrator to the job. I know how critical it is to have great art to draw kids’ attention. The illustrations are much more than a simple drawing of what the text says—they have to tell a story within a story. LEE: From the perspective of running the business, it is a constant battle of a variety of things that every start-up business deals with: cash flow, marketing, PR, production issues, adding personnel, and computer issues.

What has been the most rewarding/What are you most proud of?

I admit that when I look at the books, there’s a feeling of: “this is something that we made.” But, the absolute best is hearing a young child excited about reading the books and then sharing something they learned. That is what we are all about, after all.

What’s your #1 goal with this business?

To help get children excited about learning through reading. As an adult, I love reading historical fiction—fun reads that mix in education. That is what we are all about for children.

Where would you like to see the company in 5 years?

We hope to add a second imprint line as soon as we can. We envision a similar theme but with a character and moral-based (Christian) philosophy. Then there’s historical fiction...or possible jobs and careers... We’ll have to move into larger facilities someday, too.

Want to continue this conversation? Schedule an interview!

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