

Naomi Danis (class of 1964) tells us about her early years at SSSQ and some of her adventures since then on the way to publishing her two recent picture books for young kids, *While Grandpa Naps* and *I Hate Everyone*.

Tell us about your class:

My graduating class, the second in the history of the school—which met in those days at the Rego Park Jewish Center— had 22 students who grew up to become five rabbis, one academic in Bible and one in philosophy, an Israeli rockstar, social workers, teachers, writers, scientists and entrepreneurs—all in all, a creative and idealistic bunch. (No attorneys; and when last heard from, one still-aspiring physician.)

Your sisters and parents?

My older sister Marion Danis, a physician and medical ethicist at the National Institute of Health, graduated in the first class, in 1963, and I remember singing the Lewandowski Halleluyah for the recessional in a choir that was created for the occasion. Even though we were younger kids, we could feel how emotional and momentous it was to be graduating a first class of a school. My younger sister Debra Danis Seiden, who recently retired from an administrative position at the Media Law Resource Center, graduated in 1967. My parents, Seymour and Ruth Danis, were involved in the school, and my mom was one of the early PTA presidents.

Your beginnings as a writer?

There were many artistically talented people in my family and making things—creativity—was encouraged. Perhaps writing was a way I differentiated myself.

Folks at the Forest Hills Jewish Center daily *minyan* might not believe it because I am a speedy *davener* when I am asked to lead prayers—which I attribute to stage fright—but I've actually always been a slow reader which might be helpful to a writer.

Along with seven other classmates, I skipped from second grade to fourth, in a move that allowed SSSQ not to expand to two third grade classes in those early days. Language arts—though alas not penmanship—was probably one of the few subjects which didn't become overly challenging for me in that transition.

Several of my classmates recall how Mrs. Levine taught us to make an outline with a topic sentence, a body with a, b and c points, and a conclusion for our compositions.

I also skipped a year of English as a freshman at Forest Hills High School by getting the heading right on a humorous composition I wrote about holding onto a tall friend's hand to navigate around the unfamiliar crowded hallways between classes.

Your kids?

Introduced by friends because I always enjoyed having house guests, I met my American husband, Gil Oberfield, in Israel, and we returned to the States to marry and start a family. Sophie Oberfield (class of 1993) lives in Brooklyn, teaches English and Asian American literature at Stuyvesant high school, and is a musical theatre lyricist; Ezra Oberfield (1995) is an economist at Princeton, married to Amanda Agan, also an economist, at Rutgers, and they have two children; Talya Oberfield (1997) is director of outreach for Girls Who Code, married to Ari Lucas, a rabbi in West Caldwell NJ, where they live with their three children.

And your books?

While Grandpa Naps, illustrated by Junghwa Park, is my fifth book for kids, and is inspired by a family story my husband told me, about how when he was a little boy, his grandfather asked him to sit by his side and watch that no flies would bother him while he napped in the backyard hammock. This book has a special personal meaning to me

because it is about my husband (who died in 2000) so I was delighted the publisher felt it has universal appeal.

I Hate Everyone, illustrated by Cinta Arribas, which came out in 2018—also published by Pow! Kids Books—tells of a little girl at her birthday party who is a hot mess of feelings, tells everyone to go away, to leave her alone—and in the end changes her mind. I probably would not have written it or persisted in trying to find a publisher for a decade and 40 submissions without the years I engaged in therapy and psychoanalysis. It got a rave review in the New York Times.

Earlier books are, *Walk With Me*, *Splish Splash*, and *It's Tot Shabbat*.

I've been writing and submitting my stories for kids for about 35 years, and consider one of my main talents is persistence and resilience in the face of many rejections.

What else?

My day job is managing editor of Lilith magazine—“independent, Jewish and frankly feminist”—where I began working in 1988 when Talya started kindergarten. (She surprised her kindergarten teacher by answering in a class discussion that Adam's wife was named Lilith.)

I'm a gardener, an absolute beginner at ballet, an Israeli folk dancer, and I like cooking for family and friends.

Thanks for asking me to tell about myself. More info at www.naomidanis.com