

Sheila Donis: A Life of Giving

by Richard Whittaker

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Sheila Donis was born on the west side of Chicago in 1948 in an Irish Catholic neighborhood. There were nine children in the family living in a small two bedroom apartment above a tavern. When it was cold, several of the children slept on the floor near the gas stove. Whoever got to the one fur coat first had a better night. She joined the Sisters of Providence from Saint Mary-of-the- Woods as a teen-ager and remained a nun for nine years. Her final years as a nun were spent in inner-city Chicago, where her career as an educator took shape, first as a teacher and then as an administrator. She retired as a public school superintendent in 2010, the year after she recommitted to the Sisters of Providence, now as a Providence Associate. In the second grade, when Sheila returned from Christmas break, a new teacher appeared, sister John Michael, a young nun who made a deep impression on the seven-year-old girl.

Sheila Donis: She was beautiful. She prepared me for my first communion. She told me that Jesus said to feed the poor and clothe the hungry, visit the prisons and so forth. And I took her literally. So I often went down to skid row in downtown Chicago when I was seven or eight. I went to the county jail, too. I took the bus. I couldn't read the signs, but there was a big Turtle Wax icon and I knew to get off the bus there. I would sit in front of the jail and wave to the prisoners. I remember taking a whole bag of ten-cent cans of soup to the guys on skid row. I wanted to follow Jesus and we were getting ready for our First Communion.

We had to go to confession before Communion. Sister John Michael told us, you know, you can't sin. So I went to confession. The priest asked, what are your sins? And I said, "I don't have any." Because Sister told us we can't sin. And who were the poor? We were probably poor, but I didn't think of myself that way.

Richard Whittaker: And you're supposed to feed the poor, so where are they?

SD: Right. Somebody told me the bums were on Skid Row close to downtown. So I'd get on the bus. I wouldn't tell my mother, of course. And I'd bring Tootsie Rolls and Campbell's soup.

RW: How did you get them?

SD: I'd look in the bushes. You get two cents for each bottle. I'd buy a can or two and Tootsie Rolls, and I'd get on the bus. This is kind of sad, but my father would take me with him on his jobs, and I would actually buy 2x4s for him when I was eight and nine years old and take them with me on the bus if he needed more lumber. He was a railroad man and an alcoholic. I was little, but I knew the streets and I could go anywhere in the city.

RW: Wow. My gosh, what did he need the lumber for?

SD: He built two and three-story back stairways to make extra money. But he was a fireman on the on the railroad. But he got fired from there after 25 years because of his drinking. When he was drunk, it was bad. Two of my siblings died of alcoholism. I mean all of my father's siblings died—eight kids, a priest, an ex-nun, and six brothers in my father's family.

RW: Oh, my god. That's a whole story in itself. But you said you sometimes went down to the jail?

SD: Right. The Cook County Jail. Maybe I'd stay an hour. People were walking in and out and I'd just wave.

When my first Communion came up I was the happiest person in the whole world. I didn't know the word "transubstantiation," but I was like, okay, I've got Jesus inside. I went to Mass every day from then on for maybe the next 20 years.

RW: Really?

SD: Even in the summer when nobody went to Mass. I'd be there by myself. And this is something I didn't talk about. I'd be in the downstairs church where there was a statue of the Sacred Heart. I'd bring my Hostess cupcakes and Jay's Shoestring Potatoes and I'd be in front of the statue with my feet up on the bench, which you never do when you go in church. You know, you're just a holy little girl. But my feet were up and I was talking to the Sacred Heart. It was my favorite. I talked to the statue.

RW: Out loud?

SD: Yes, because nobody was there. I would dance and I'd lay on the concrete floor and go behind the altar. Altar boys would go back there, but never girls. I'd just make myself at home in the church.

RW: You were happy there.

SD: I didn't use the word holy at the time, but I felt like a holy little girl—like I was close to Jesus and he was close to me. I told him, "I did what you asked."

When I was in fifth grade, I won a basket shooting contest. I remember that no family members came and there were hundreds of people up in the bleachers watching. I'm on my way home with my little trophy and guess who I showed it to?

RW: Who?

SD: The Sacred Heart of Jesus in the chapel. You see, that was my home.

RW: That's a sad thing.

SD: There's a sadness about it when you have to talk to a statue. But I liked my life a lot. Nobody controlled me. Nobody really ever cared. My mother knew I was going to be a nun, so she left me alone. I'd be out on the streets at night until late hours.

RW: So am I right in guessing that you came to no harm?

SD: Never came to any harm, ever. Later in life when I went back to the ghetto to work, where it was all black, I was almost raped twice, but I talked them out of it.

RW: That's a great skill.

SD: Yeah. I know this skill.

RW: You've grown up with the poor, the destitute and desperate or unhappy people and...

SD: There's no bad; they're good. Because I just love people. I knew my life was different and I knew better than to share with my siblings what I was doing.

RW: Were the nuns good to you?

SD: The nuns were very nice to me, especially this one. She's about 80 now and to this day she is one of the most radical women I know. I wanted to be a nun since the time I was seven.

In fourth grade I remember that the nuns were telling us how this terrible Nikita Khrushchev was like the evil of the world. I saw a picture of him in the Chicago Tribune and I cut it out. I had a little plastic purse from the dime store with the fake lipstick and a plastic little mirror for little girls. I put Nikita's picture, all in little tiny folds in there so nobody could find it. And I thought, "I'm going to pray for him."

I couldn't tell my mother that I had Khrushchev's picture, or the nuns or anybody, But I knew I could pray for this evil person, Khrushchev. I didn't know the difference between Russia and Ireland, but I knew that this man was evil. So I put him in my pocket to pray for him. So see? That nun's influence was so strong. So then at 13, I entered the convent. That's when I got my first comfortable pairs of shoes, some penny loafers. My toes are all ruined, because of my childhood.

RW: What happened?

SD: I never had good shoes. And then, "Oh my gosh, my feet don't hurt!"

RW: You mean your feet hurt before?

SD: I didn't know they hurt until I got the good shoes. I was neglected. But look at all the gifts I got from that. I feel that I got more because I was alone and chose what I wanted. You know, I'd sing at the stop lights. I made up songs.

RW: There must be something profoundly true that suffering can create compassion, you know?

SD: Compassion is my favorite word. It really is because you walk with whomever. And I've learned that if you have it for yourself, you can give it to others. I never felt sorry for myself.

RW: I can see that.

SD: And I saw some real bad things over the years in the ghetto. This one boy had shot somebody when he was ten. I was close to the black people. When you develop compassion, you can never go back.

RW: Once you have it, you have it, you're saying.

SD: You either have it, or you don't. So each person and each thing from then on was part of that same story for me.

RW: Would you say what that story is?

SD: The story of seeing life, not judging good or bad or ugly, just moving through it. Serving when you can. You just keep on the path. And you should continue to give because once you see, you're responsible. So once I saw that there is no evil in people, I couldn't do otherwise. I've seen a lot of bad things, so it's not like I'm Pollyanna about this. I still feel like I'm doing the same thing. Service is service.

RW: It's amazing that you've been able to stay true to this path and you're in your 60s.

SD: Sixty-six. I always had that, you know. In schools, with one of the worse teachers sometimes, I'd ask everybody, what can he or she do? Is there any good here? There was a terrible teacher, but she was a good singer. I said, "I heard you're a great singer. Is there any way you could lead a song?" She'd puff up and then I could ask, "Would you not yell so much at the kids?"

RW: That's wonderful.

SD: You make everybody feel as good as you can.

RW: If you give a person recognition for a talent they have, it opens something up and then you can help them. Other things start to develop. Right?

SD: Sure. There was this boy. His name was Javel, a black student, a senior and a great ball player. He was from a farm in southern Illinois, where there was a large community of blacks. Three years after I retired, the office called and said Javel wants you to sit in his

mother's place at his graduation. Is there any way you can come? His mother had died, see? Now why would a beautiful black young man living four hours away want a white older lady to come and sit in his mother's chair? Why is that?

RW: Tell me why.

SD: I think it's because I loved him. And when his mother died, he came to school and he was mad. He was mean, and he'd get in trouble. He was in 10th grade then, But he was very intelligent.

RW: So you were his teacher?

SD: I was the superintendent of the school district. So when he got real bad, they'd bring him to me.

RW: I see, I see.

SD: I had a goal of all kids go to college come hell or high water, especially the black students. Because hardly anyone ever cared whether they went. So back to this boy. He was angry a lot. Often staff and administration have no real understanding of students, and certainly very little love. When the administration couldn't handle some of the high school kids, they would send them to my office. And first, I'd give them a hug. I'd say, "You must be so mad." And I'd just hug them.

RW: So how did that work?

SD: It always works for me. I've never been refused when I offer affection. It has never not worked.

RW: He was willing to accept that.

SD: Yes. And they had a tobacco-chewing, white contingent there, too. Those kids got in trouble, too. In the district schools there were regular kids —you know, the ball players; there was the chewing tobacco group; and the third group were the blacks, 35 percent.

This one kid would come in every day. He got in a lot of trouble. He had his leather jacket and his cowboy boots and he'd be chewing tobacco. And every day he'd bring cereal and milk to my office. I knew it was just so he could see me. Do you know what I mean?

RW: That's so beautiful.

SD: So what is that? It's the simple attention they need. Real love. Here's another story. There was this drug-dealing black kid, and he was a genius with words and eventually we got him into college. The kid was really brilliant, and he was a bad kid. But he was fair. He came into class late one day, so they wrote him up. Two white girls came in late and they didn't write them up. He said it's not fair. And he told his father. So his sick and very frail father comes into the school to defend his son. There were two white administrators just berating the father. They were standing up to yell at him. I said, "Sit down and then we'll talk." I was not going to sit there and listen to

the dehumanizing of a parent.

Afterwards they said, "How come you didn't stand up for us?"

I said, "I'll stand up for you when you treat people like humans in my office. We're people." So even though I'm sweet, I can also call a card real quickly.

RW: Okay. So when did you move into the convent?

SD: Eighteen. There were four years of convent high school and then you go into the novitiate.

RW: And you worked in a bar you told me earlier, right?

SD: I was probably 16. I worked at a couple of different places. I was at the bar a lot.

RW: That's kind of an interesting juxtaposition.

SD: I had to get enough money. I remember thinking I'll shorten my skirt to work in the bar and then I'll get a long one in a couple of months. I was kind of joking with myself. This gentleman from the Masons would come in. He knew I was going to be a sister, and he gave me \$20 tips all the time. You kind of get to know the guys, you know? When they'd get real drunk, I used to drive them home so their wives wouldn't kill them the next day. There was this one construction worker who had a family, and he reminded me of my father, so I'd drive him home. Or else I'd put them in a taxi and put a note in their pockets.

RW: So at 18, you enter the convent. Was it connected with a teaching institution?

SD: Yes, Saint Mary-of-the-Woods, the oldest female Catholic college in the United States. So then I was a canonical novice. Which means you study canon law. The Vatican II came out at that time. Pope John XXIII opened the window and all the changes started then.

RW: People got very excited about that, didn't they?

SD: Yeah. That was a great big change. He was great. I loved him.

RW: And then it got closed down again.

SD: The others came back in. So when I was a scholastic novice, I wanted to major in theology. They had theology courses, but they wouldn't let you major in theology unless you were a man or you were going into education, or you quit your program, so out of stubbornness, I started to be a cook for 3 or 4 months.

RW: Basically, you dropped out of school?

SD: Yes. And never in the history of the nuns, had anyone ever left as a novice. I was the first. What happened was, there was a nun in Oklahoma who got sick.

RW: You weren't a nun anymore?

SD: I was still a nun, with a whole outfit, but I left Saint Mary-of-the-Woods and went to Oklahoma. They said they just needed me for two weeks, but it turned into six months.

RW: Were you teaching?

SD: Yes. Elementary, K-8; reading and religion and P.E. But I got kind of bored, so I got a job at Billy Lee Pies in Oklahoma. I even became the manager. Then the Mother Superior called me and said, "Honey, you're a novice. You can't work at Billy Lee Pies." In the meantime, a lot of the nuns were leaving the convent, anyway. But I was ready to be a nun the rest of my life. A huge number of nuns left. In Oklahoma I taught myself how to drive. I had fun there. Then I went back to Saint Mary-of-the-Woods. I majored in theology, eventually, and education. I ended up with a bachelor's in religious studies and education. Then I got a master's in education, and a doctorate in administration.

RW: So were you still a nun?

SD: No. I left when I was 22. I went to teach in the ghetto as a nun, back in my old neighborhood. But it had changed significantly. I stayed there nine years, but I was a nun only for the first one or two years.

RW: I know you became a principal and then later a school superintendent. Isn't that right?

SD: Yes. Of my 41 years in education, I was an administrator for 39.

RW: How did you get into administration so quickly?

SD: When I went back to the inner city the principal was African American. He sent a letter to my classroom for me to send to parents. There were so many grammar errors I sent it back to him. I told him I'd teach him grammar if he would teach me about inner city lifestyles, about being African American and what I needed to know to be a good principal in the African American community. He taught me about black literature and who Malcolm X was. We took students to Jesse Jackson's Saturday Bread Basket Programs, and much more. So he asked me to be his assistant principal my second year and we just got along really well.

RW: That's beautiful.

SD: Later I said, "Why don't you become a Catholic? You could be a deacon and preach in the church." And he did. Now there's a center dedicated to him for African American preachers, both Catholic and multiple denominations.

RW: You have an intuitive wisdom about teaching.

SD: What I learned mostly is that children need lots and lots of freedom. And you know, there are several kinds of intelligence.

RW: Can you say more about that?

SD: Gosh, there's mathematics, language arts, kinesthetic, moving, musical, some people are more audio-visual, there's intra-personal where you can meet people, greet people, talk to people. Some people are naturally dancers and some are musicians; some are visual artists—and there's spiritual. So I always felt that with children we have to let them be smart wherever, whenever and however they are.

RW: It seems that one of the big problems in our schools is that there's not a broad enough understanding about intelligence and what the development of the child needs to be.

SD: Right. It's still "skill, drill and kill" with reading, writing and arithmetic, which is nonsense for a totally musical and wonderful human being. We steal their intelligence.

RW: What's that?

SD: I think we steal from them. We take away what they could do. We take away their possibilities. Some of us teachers are crooks. We think it's okay to steal from them and drill them and kill them. It's not okay. It's bad. And as principals, we blame it on the teachers. The teachers blame the principal. We're wrong when we don't provide equal opportunity for equal intelligences.

RW: I've heard that with dyslexia, almost without exception, those kids have incredible capacities in many different areas that the schools do not recognize. So that's an example of what you're talking about.

SD: Yes. And a lot of people just don't care.

RW: It's clear that you care. And not only that, but you're going to do something about it. You were pretty tough as a principal; tough on teachers you thought weren't doing their jobs.

SD: I was. And they didn't like it real well, but the ones who really cared, they loved it. If they were spinning on their head out in the yard, I didn't care. I tried to support the teachers who really made a difference in the child's life, no matter how they did it. For example, in pre-school and kindergarten and first grade, we have to let kids play.

I told you the story of the little boy who was psychologically having a lot of problems. I let him do art everyday for a couple of months. Another boy, ran away several times in the public schools in Indianapolis. He never came to school. But I finally got a hold of him. I said you're always in the woods. What do you want to do?

He said, "All I like is nature." So I asked our teacher who is a naturalist, the one who didn't pass math in seventh grade. I asked her if she would take this boy. She said, "I'll take him, if you get him some snakes and any critters he may need." She said, "He's got to have all these materials to do well." So she took him in her class for eight weeks. He won first place with his snakes in the science contest.

In the nine years that I was principal there I let the children do what they had to do to survive.

RW: But sometimes that would put you at odds with the system, right?

SD: It put me at odds with the system very often. The decisions I make are not the ones that the world would normally make. And there's a little bit of aloneness in that. So when I meet people like you, it's like, "Oh, good."

RW: Something made you sad right there. What was that?

SD: It's lonely sometimes, when people around you are, "What are you crazy? You're too nice to these black kids." It makes you feel like you don't have anybody to talk to. I have a couple of friends who get it; they're very kind. Compassion is a lonely life, in general. You wish it was more pervasive. I just wish that the teachers understood these black kids, too. The teachers should be the ones hugging the black kids.

I mean, I loved to do it and some of the elementary teachers where I worked got that, and they started to change. Enough where it really felt good, you know.

RW: I know you did a lot for the students, field trips; you created new programs, all kinds of things...

SD: I used to take the kids everywhere on buses. I took them to Chicago, Nashville; I took a staff of teachers to New York City. These were often poor, white, rural kids. I'd take them to Christmas at the zoo in Indianapolis. I'd take them to big stage plays like in downtown Chicago, and out to eat at - a big busload every month or so. I wanted to show them new things.

RW: To give them everything you could, really.

SD: Exactly. One year we took them all to a Cubs game. We were driving to Lakeshore and I used to go to that Oak Street beach. I know all the neighborhoods. It was really hot, so I said to bus driver, "We've got to park the bus."

He said, "We can't park here."

I said, "Let me talk to that cop over there." And minutes later we had 60 kids swimming at Lakeshore Drive. You know, I always kind of get what I want when it comes to kids' needs.

I'll never forget one of the girls. She raised her arms, looked at the city and said, "I'm going to be in a city like this someday ..." She ended up being a researcher at St. Louis University, brilliant. Her mother used to thank me. Do you know what I mean?

I do whatever I can do to get kids what they need and what they like. I met all the buses, all the 600 kids, every single day, and the parents.

RW: You would be out there when the buses pulled up?

SD: Yes. And I talked to each kid: "You got new shoes." "Your hair looks pretty." Every day for nine years.

RW: That's amazing.

SD: For me, it wasn't.

RW: It's what you wanted to do.

SD: Well, you have to meet the children. You have to get to know their names. You have to know if a kid comes in and doesn't have socks. If I didn't do this, I wouldn't have known all this stuff. There was one kid in my elementary until 6th grade and he was mildly mentally retarded. One day I noticed he was walking differently

than usual. And the next day he's walking slower. I said, "Come into the nurse's office."

Somebody said, "The nurse doesn't take care of the high school kids over here."

I said, "She's going to today. I want to see why he's walking so slowly."

She takes off his socks and his feet are frozen purple. I couldn't take him to the hospital without permission from the mother. The mother was very poor. She was real angry, "I can't go today. It's too cold. I'll slip on the ice."

I said, "I'll hold you. Get in the car!" I mean, I had to yell at her.

"Okay, Miss Donis."

We get to a doctor and he said, "Take him immediately to the pain clinic in Terre Haute. He has severe frostbite; he could lose his legs."

And the mother says to me, "I was wondering why he stopped eating the last couple of days."

RW: Oh, my God.

SD: One little kid had a father who hammered on his toes. One family had two kids who were preemies; they were so poor. There were seven kids and the babies were being thrown like baseballs back and forth between the mother and her boyfriend. Their 6th grader, a girl, was feeding them at night. I asked, "Why are you so tired?" I asked, because her teacher came told me she sleeps all day. I asked, and she told me she had to feed the babies all through the night, this 6th grade girl. And the girl told me they were throwing the babies. I thought well, maybe she had that wrong, so I called in the younger brother. I asked, "Do they throw the babies, like playing and having fun?"

"Oh, yeah, Miss Donis. They just throw them back and forth." So I called the welfare.

You never know. The trauma that people face is hidden almost all the time. Poverty, hunger. One guy brought in a gun one time, and the office went like crazy.

RW: Was this like a student?

SD: A parent. He was really mad about something. He had on a leather jacket with no undershirt. And in the office, everybody was shaking. I had a separate little office, and they brought him in. He had tattoos everywhere.

I said, "Before I talk to you or do anything, we've got to talk about the gun. But not right now. I want to know about this tattoo. Where in the heck did you get that?" I got out from behind my desk and went up to him. "Is that an eagle?" I was like, "Does it hurt to get a tattoo? I got him talking about his tattoos. I had a big yellow pad that I got out, and I said, "Oh, by the way, I want to hear everything that's bothering you. I want to write it down." I thanked him for the tattoo talk. "Okay, now let's write this all down. Oh, by the way, we've got to put that gun away. Let's do that first and then we'll come back and get this all written down."

He was okay with that. Do you know what I mean?

RW: Yes.

SD: I know how to act with these people. I know that the sweetest kindness is the only way to get through. Focusing on the tattoos was the best thing I could come up with.

RW: That's brilliant.

SD: He told me all these terrible things and I agreed with half of them, you know. Did I tell you about this kid who was out at recess? His name was Frank, a huge kid, like probably 250 pounds. So he's holding onto the fence not going back to class. And here come two male teachers. "This is a war. This kid is not obeying us." So another teacher comes to me, "Miss Donis, Frank won't get off the fence. They're getting all upset." So I go out there and, "Hey Frank, you've got to go to class now."

"Okay, Miss Donis."

Now who gets mad? The teachers. They were mad that my kindness was stronger than their meanness.

RW: Yes.

SD: I brought in talent shows, you know, I told that big kid, "You've got to learn an instrument, but you've got to get a big one." So he gets a tuba. The day of the talent show there were 800 people in this big gym, and he's going to do a single. Everybody had to be in the talent show. Nobody had a choice. Frank is playing the tuba and I warned the kids during the day, "Like I'll 'kill' you if you say one bad thing against this boy." Because, you know, he really didn't play so good. So nobody booed. The respect was crucial.

This boy's family didn't even have running water. His sister was the worst trouble maker. I noticed her down the hall humming a song one time. And I'm like,

"You can sing!"

"No I can't."

"Yes, you can."

She said, "Well my father entertains."

I said, "Well what song of his do you like?"

She said, "Daddy's Hands." It's kind of a country song. She was a little off key and I had her every day in my office.

RW: Did she get better at it?

SD: She did. And she was good. Then there was this great lady in town, Linda Gibson, a teacher. She was fairly wealthy. She loved what I was doing, so I said, "Jenny is going to sing in the talent show, but she doesn't have any dress clothes. You know how poor they are."

So this lady's husband bought her a \$400 outfit: belt, cowgirl boots, a beautiful cowgirl blouse. By the time she came back there was nobody better looking than this girl.

RW: What was this girl's ethnicity?

SD: She was white and dirt poor. They came into town with a wagon and horses to get their water. So the show went on and she was the star. From then on, she never had one discipline problem, ever. She joined the show choir. She married into a really nice family with horses, because she liked horses.

RW: That's an inspiring story.

SD: But if you're not looking, it will pass you by. You won't know at all what they're going through. A little girl was molested one time by her father because her mother died. The father started molesting her in the fourth grade. I called the welfare. "Oh, we'll take care of it tomorrow."

I said, "Read my lips. She's not going home to her father tonight."

RW: You really looked at these kids.

SD: And they tell you, eventually—or you ask, "Are you okay?" So if you don't see them at the buses, you won't see them until the end of the day when you say good night to them. I mean, I also said good night to them at the end of the day.

RW: Really? Oh, my gosh.

SD: All the time. Here's a little bus story. The teachers knew that this little boy stole a teacher's watch. The teachers came to me. "Go get that watch from him, Miss Donis."

I said. "I'm not going to get that watch from him until he admits he took the watch." But it was almost time for the buses to leave. They're all standing there like, "What are you going to do Miss Donis?"

I saw him and said, "Good night Johnny, we'll see you tomorrow." I'm thinking, "If it doesn't work, I'll pay for the watch."

The boy gets to the bus, then he comes back to me with the watch, "Here's the watch, Miss Donis."

Now, I didn't yell at him. I didn't talk to him. I didn't do anything, but I told the teachers I would not make him tell the truth. That wasn't my style. "It's only her style. Here's her style again." So do you see how it upset people? They're worried about the watch, and I'm worried about the life of the child.

RW: They should be bowing down to you.

SD: Hey, I don't want anybody bowing. But that's how I lived every day of my administration. There's another thing I have to tell you. I wrote grants all the time.

RW: You told me earlier you got a grant to send some teachers to get computer training. I mean, you realized computers were going to be important early on.

SD: I took six to eight hours every Sunday to teach myself. The superintendent said they were a fad.

RW: So you were the principal and you decided we need these things. This is the future.

SD: I mean it was kind of obvious.

RW: Did you ask the superintendent to get computers for the kids?

SD: Yes. And he said, "No. It's a fad." He told me if I got the money myself I could do it. So I got an Apple grant. It all goes back to the nuns teaching me how to write. It allowed five teachers to come to Novato, California. They paid everything. It was like the Taj Mahal of a workshop.

I told our art teacher, "This would be really something for you to learn."

She said, "I'm not learning computers for art. I do my painting."

I said, "Too bad. We're going to California."

She came with us and when she got back home she refinanced her house and bought an Amiga?

RW: That goes way back.

SD: Yes. So I always got the top of the line Apple computers for the school. We had 45 Apple laser printers when I left the elementary school. The highest quality, that's what you have to go for. So if I saw the phrase "streaming video" and nobody around here knows it, you put that in your grant.

RW: And you were very successful at getting grants.

SD: I was a very successful writer. And I realized that you can't get the grant if you're a step too slow. The people at the State Department knew me by then and they were like, she will follow through.

RW: You established a trust and they knew it.

SD: I loved to see little kids learning all this. We taught PageMaker to 80 second graders. I had a big, beautiful screen and a high-end projector. I had three labs in the elementary and four or five computers in every room.

RW: And this is a poor district. Right?

SD: Yes. 80 to 90 percent poverty, all the time.

RW: It's pretty amazing, really.

SD: Well, it's more fun for me if you're in a poor school. So I had a lot of fun. It was a lot of work, but it was great when we had the money to do it. I'd gotten money for the talent shows and for science fairs and for everything anybody needed. I never said no to the teachers. What do you want? You want a whiteboard? How many of you want whiteboards? You know, by fall they would all have a whiteboard. But then I'd have

to hustle for it. Over a period of 17 years, I averaged \$500,000 a year in grant money.