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Not Terrible! The writing life of Judith Viorst, author of 'Alexander' books

By Meg Buzbee
and Naomi Todd

When we arrived at the Cleveland Park home of 80-year-old Judith Viorst, the famous writer of books for kids welcomed us and led us to an orderly sitting room.

The walls were covered with beautiful paintings, and there was a majestic stairway leading to upper floors. We sat down on a squishy couch. She offered us candy corn, and our interview began.

"I wrote all the time when I was a kid," she remembered. "All I wanted to be was an author." Mrs. Viorst said that she writes "at the doctor's office if he's running late, at the airport, in the airplane, in my hotel room and sometimes even at a red light."

Her work gets done, she said, because "I have a very special writing system. I write one page a day, and if I am sick one day and can't write, then I owe two pages the next day. It really works."

Mrs. Viorst has written 36 books. They are about evenly divided between adult and children's books. They range from short picture books for kids, like the Alexander series—the first and most famous one being *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*—to big psychology books, such as



Judith Viorst signing books recently at the Tenleytown-Friendship Public Library.

Necessary Losses.

Her ideas for stories, she said, came "from my kids a lot of the time. Anthony, my oldest son, used to pick on Nick, my middle child, all the time. So I wrote *I'll Fix Anthony* for Nick, where he gets revenge.

"Nick also worried about monsters for a while, so I wrote *My Mama Says There Aren't Any Zombies, Ghosts, Vampires, Creatures, Demons, Monsters, Fiends, Goblins, or Things* for Nick. It is about how you can't always believe what your mama says because she makes
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Word lovers compete in Scrabble tournament

By Josh Landweber

NEREIDS and BANTIES and DEMENTS, oh my!

Those were some of the crazy words played in a fierce battle of Scrabble in a tournament at Janney in November. Fifty-nine kids from eight schools participated in the event, which was called the D.C. School Scrabble Fall Classic.

The atmosphere was tense under the two-story-tall ceiling in the school cafeteria. The room was silent except for the clattering of tiles. There were 14 tables arranged in two columns, with one or two games at each table. Each game was contested by two teams of two players and lasted up to 45 minutes. Each duo played four games.

The players, all in the 4th through 8th grades, came from Janney, Deal Middle School and Hardy Middle School in D.C., and from schools in Virginia and New Jersey. They were spread across three divisions—A, B and C—based on experience.

Sixteen of the players in the tournament were Janney students. Fourth-

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Janney kids take stage in 'Oliver!'



Naomi Todd (far left) with fellow Janney 'orphans' Fiona Martone, Emily Oliphant and Charlie Thompson.

One orphan's story: 'Totally freaking out'

By Naomi Todd

At our first performance, I was totally freaking out.

I knew that I didn't even have a big part. I was just one of 24 orphans performing. Even though I'd been in musicals before, I was really nervous.

Emily Oliphant, another 5th-grader in *Oliver!*, was trying to calm me by saying, "It's OK, Naomi, we are only on for 10 minutes."

When the lights dimmed, and everybody got quiet, I heard our director, Harriet Bronstein, make a short speech. Then the curtains opened and two lines later, the orphans

turn to ORPHAN on page 2

By Chloe Fatsis

Did you know that there were *orphans* at Janney?

Seven Janney fifth-graders sang, danced and acted in Wilson Senior High School's fall production of the musical *Oliver!*

The students appeared in the first scene of the play, dancing and singing "Food, Glorious Food" and "Oliver." They were on stage when the main character, Oliver Twist, dares to ask Mr. Bumble, the man in charge of the orphanage, for more food: "Please sir, I want some more."

The play was performed five times in November in Wilson's new auditorium. The Janney students rehearsed almost every day after school and on Saturdays for about a month. Sometimes they rehearsed their songs on the playground during recess.

Finally, it was opening night, when the students got to "perform and release all of your anxiety," Caroline Katzive said. "And staying up till 10 o'clock was really nice."

Usha Hippenstiel, another Janney "orphan," said that being in a play with older kids was "kind of weird because we were all short compared to the Wilson kids. But it was also fun."

Gabriella Anifantis, who acted in last year's Janney production of *Willy Wonka Junior*, said that the Wilson production involved much more practice, a bigger auditorium and "lots of sets and music and choreography."

There were 24 orphans in all. They came from

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GO JAGUARS!



Fifth-grader Edmee Brown-Egue takes a shot during the first basketball game in the new gym in December. Janney has girls' and boys' teams for the first time in three years. Through Jan. 10, the girls had a record of 3-2 and the boys were 1-1. Look for stories about the teams in the next issue of the Jaguar Journal!

Sports

Janney celebrates new field with soccer tourney

By Nicholas Spasojevic

Janney celebrated its brand-new turf field with a daylong school soccer tournament in November.

The 3rd-, 4th- and 5th-grade teams that compete in D.C. Stoddert Soccer, the city league, played short games against each other. Many parents and siblings cheered from the sidelines, which made it very LOUD. The weather was mostly sunny and warm, a beautiful day to play soccer.

The girls' teams—the Tigers (3rd), the Power (4th), the Speed (4th) and the Honey Badgers (5th)—played in the morning. The boys' teams—the Jaguars (3rd), the Thunderbolts (4th), the Jaguars (4th) and the Jaguars (5th)—played in the afternoon.

Students who were not on one of the Janney teams but wanted to play in the tournament joined a team in their grade. More than 100 students participated.

Fourth-grader Max Karp of the Thunderbolts said he liked running on the field because “it’s bouncy and you can jump high.” Eamon Gill Crouter, a 5th-grader, was happy about having a home soccer field. “It was great playing with other Janney teams,” he added.

Fourth-grader Madelyn Shapiro of the Power said she liked the competition. “My favorite team to play against was the Tigers,” she said.

Before his team, the Thunderbolts, played its first game, 4th-grader Nate Lieber said, “I am very excited for the tournament because I like to get together with my friends and play soccer. I also like that you can slide on the field. But the field is bit too small.”

The size of the field is 45 yards by 30 yards. That is too small for Janney’s 4th- and 5th-grade teams to use for Stoddert games. But the league does plan to use the field for games in its



3rd-grade girls division. Janney teams will practice on it starting in the spring.

One of the parents, Nick Alten, who just got his referee license, refereed all the tournament games (except one when he went to have lunch).

Janney parent and Power coach Stefan Fatsis helped organize the tournament. He said that putting it together was not hard. “All I had to do was to send an email to the coaches,” he said. They agreed and Principal Norah Lycknell was happy to approve it.

Players, coaches and parents said they

hope that having a soccer tournament at the end of every season becomes a Janney tradition.

Above: Gabby Bagnoli (3) of the Power races for the ball with Solomiya Kosylo of the Honey Badgers.

Left: Lilian Alten, Sami Watson (7) and Hannah Dorosin (2) of the Speed celebrate after a goal.

The Jaguar Journal

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Motto

Thou Shalt Not Bore the Reader



Winter Wonderland Winners



The Janney hallways turned into a snow-filled wonderland in December. Every class decorated its door as part of school-wide contest. Students voted for their favorite designs. The first-floor winner was Ms. Rockwell’s kindergarten class, which used cotton balls to make a snowman (left). Ms. McCrackin’s 1st-grade class won on the second floor with a snow globe made out of clear plastic (center). The third-floor winner was Ms. Freedenberg’s 4th-grade class, which made a snowy scene featuring ice-skating penguins (right). Congratulations to all of our contestants! —Emily Oliphant

Orphan

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made their appearance onstage.

We started singing our first number, “Food, Glorious Food” (“Is it worth the waiting for/If we live ’til eighty-four/All we ever get is guh-RU-el!), and when I looked at the audience, it felt as if my heart stopped. I couldn’t actually see the people, but I could see the shapes of their bodies.

Before I knew it, “Food, Glorious Food” was over, and Mr. Bumble and Widow Corney made their scary appearance. We orphans did our dance and second song, “Oliver,” and Widow Corney ordered us to bed.

My act was over.

Oliver

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different elementary and middle schools. The orphans wore light brown, long-sleeve shirts and light brown pants and makeup to make their faces look dirty.

They performed a complicated dance using their metal eating bowls as instruments. They also sang with English accents, which was hard for many of them.

“It was fun because we got to use our talent and show people what we can do,” Gabriella said.

The other Janney orphans were Fiona Martone, Emily Oliphant, Charlie Thompson and Naomi Todd.

STANDARDIZED TESTING is a big deal at Janney and other schools. In some grades, it uses up a lot of classroom time. But it's also important for teachers. Two Jaguar Journal writers have different opinions about testing. Here is what they think:

PRO: Shows what kids know

By Meg Buzbee

A lot of kids don't like testing. They think it's boring and stressful. But there are a lot of good sides to testing.

"ANET [Achievement Network, the standardized test we take] helps in a lot of ways," Assistant Principal Linda Sell said. "It tells teachers what kids know well and what they need some work on."

Gina Kassai, a 5th-grade teacher, said she uses the results she gets from tests "to see what students have learned and what we need to go back and reteach."

Some kids really enjoy the tests. A 5th-grade student, Quin Ohlson, said, "I like reading all the stories in the English section of ANET."

Maya Horn, a 3rd-grader, also reacted favorably: "I like standardized testing because if you finish early you get to draw or read or play games."

Sure, there are a lot of kids who think that we have too much testing. There certainly is a lot more testing in elementary schools than there used to be.

"I didn't start having standardized tests until I was in high school," recalled Karen Langford, a 4th-grade teacher.

Testing might be sometimes boring but it still has its good sides. So the next time standardized testing is coming up and you're dreading it, stop thinking about all the bad things about testing and start thinking of the good stuff.

CON: Takes time from class

By Emily Oliphant

Despite the candy, the break from homework and the excitement surrounding standardized testing, I don't like it.

There are a few reasons why I say that.

It takes time away from actual learning. We sometimes have little or no time for subjects like music and art because they are not subjects included on the standardized tests. Subjects like math and reading are pushed aside because testing is "more important."

In the end, I think this is unfair because we are graded on these subjects on our report cards too, are we not?

Also, most students who take the tests think they are incredibly boring.

And after the students finish, what do some of them end up doing? Most of the time, they just sit and wait until most of their peers are done and their teacher gives the all-clear, allowing them to pull out a book and read.

When students take the tests, I frequently see them yawning and sitting idly and sometimes even looking into far-off space.

So if it isn't fun, eliminates time from learning and is boring, something just isn't right.

Scrabble

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graders Chloe Fatsis and Zara Hall finished second out of 10 teams in Division B with a record of 3-1. They were the only 4th-graders in the division!

"I feel pretty good about the tournament because we placed well and got some money," Chloe said. She and Zara each won \$30. Their best play was MITTENS, which was a bingo—a word that uses up all seven of the tiles on your rack.

Nicholas Spasojevic and Ryan Cheney, also 4th-graders, took the fourth-place spot in Division C. "I think we did the best we could," Ryan said.

The winners of Division A were Thomas Draper, a 6th-grader at Montgomery Lower Middle School in Skillman, New Jersey, and Nicky Vasquez, an 8th-grader at Heritage School in Livingston, New Jersey. They had a perfect record of 4-0. Each won \$60 and a prize.

Janney alumni Ben Page and Bryson Torgovitsky,



Above: 4th-graders Lucy Levenson (left) and Madelyn Shapiro make a play.

Below: A bird's-eye view of the Scrabble tournament taken from the second floor of Janney.



who are 6th-graders at Deal, won Division B with a record of 3-1. (Even though Chloe and Zara had the same record, Ben and Bryson won because their point spread over the four games was bigger.) Tanner Iverson and Ethan Pham, 4th-graders at Churchill Road Elementary School in McLean, Virginia, won

Division C with a record of 4-0.

A total of \$580 was awarded to the top three teams in the divisions. (The money came from a \$10 entry fee from each player.) Other prizes included the games Super Scrabble and Scrabble Flash; colored Scrabble tiles; and the books *The Fingertips of Duncan Dorfman*, a novel about a School Scrabble championship, and *Word Freak* by Janney parent Stefan Fatsis, who directed the tournament and runs the Scrabble club for 4th- and 5th-graders.

"Scrabble is a fantastic game for kids because it teaches a lot of important things, like vocabulary, math and strategy," Mr. Fatsis said. "Trying to make words out of a jumble of letters really challenges you to use your brain in a creative way. But mostly, playing Scrabble is just a lot of fun."

By the way, NEREIDS are sea nymphs. BANTIES are small chickens. And DEMENTS means to make insane.

All of these Scrabble words might dement you!

Travel

The Colosseum in Rome: Creepy and fascinating

Story and illustration by Anna Warner

When I first saw the Colosseum last summer, I thought that it was really big, really tall and sort of scary. But as I was walking through the building with my family, I realized that it wasn't so scary. It was actually fascinating.

Before I got there, I knew that the Colosseum was somewhere in Rome, Italy. I didn't know that even though it is in Rome, its hundreds of columns are Greek-styled. They are called Ionic, Doric and Corinthian. The Ionic column is the most simple. It has a square on top. The Doric looks like a scroll on the top of a column.



The last and the most complicated is the Corinthian column. It has all sorts of flowers and decorations on it, as well as a square on top. The Corinthian column is my favorite because I love a lot of details.

The Colosseum was built in less than 10 years for the entertainment of the ancient Roman people. Mostly it was used for watching an animal fight a human. The human was a prisoner, a criminal or a gladiator. A gladiator was a man who was trained to fight with weapons against somebody else.

Before any fight took place, nine inches of sand was put on the wooden plank floor to soak up blood. I can't believe that people way back then actually thought that watching people and animals die was fun. It gives me the creeps.

Viorst

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dumb mistakes, too.”

And, she said, she got her inspiration for the *Alexander* trilogy from her son Alexander “because he had the most bad days of anybody I knew.”

Once, according to Mrs. Viorst, Alexander’s arm was broken when he fell from a tree. Another time there was the problem of what to do about Alexander’s allergy to the family’s cat. Alexander voted to give the cat away. But his brothers outvoted him. They wanted to give Alexander away.

Mrs. Viorst graduated from Rutgers University in New Jersey with a degree in history. She had many jobs before becoming a writer.

“I was a model for suits, coats and dresses in the garment district. I didn’t like it that much, so I practiced my typing and became a secretary. Then I became a children’s book editor, and then a science book editor.

“I published my first book, *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney*, for my son Anthony. I was 40 years old.” It’s about a family cat that dies. “It is a good story for younger kids who are learning to accept death.”

Mrs. Viorst is a big reader, and gets a lot of ideas from other authors. One of her favorite books is *The Secret Garden*.

“The main character in *The Secret Garden*, Mary, is very snotty and rude. I like how even though Mary is disliked, people are still rooting for her. So, in the *Lulu* books, I did the same thing with my main character,” Mrs. Viorst said.

In the first *Lulu* book, for example, Lulu even gets upset when her parents tell her she could not get a pet brontosaurus for her birthday.

Which of her children’s books does she like best? “It’s like choosing which child you love the most,” she replied. “One day, I’ll favor one book, and the next day I’ll

By Meg Buzbee

Judith Viorst shaped her *Alexander* books around the bad experiences of her son. “Alexander” is now 44 years old and the father of three former Janney students. I interviewed him about being the star of the books.

When you were a kid how did you feel about being the topic of the best-selling *Alexander* books?

My mom claims that when she first read me the book when I was about six years old, I was very unhappy that I was the main character of a book in which all these bad things happened.

According to my mom, she offered to change the name of the main character to Stanley, and said, “But then your name won’t be in big letters on the cover.” Well, I think you know what I decided. So I guess the answer is that it was really neat to be the main character, but I wish his day could have gone a little better.

How do you feel about it now?

Now that I’m older, I have only positive feelings about the character in the book. He’s like an old friend I’ve known my whole life and who I’m rooting for but who keeps having really rotten days.

Do you think that the fictional Alexander is an accurate portrayal of you?

My mom claims that the character in the book is a very accurate portrayal of me at about five years old. I don’t remember getting gum stuck in my hair or drawing an invisible castle (although I wish I had thought of that for art class), but I can’t rule it out. My guess is that my mom took a few real-life events and then she let her active imagination run wild from there.

appreciate another. It depends on the day.”

More Viorst books are on the way. Can you believe one of them was sparked right here at Janney?



I grew up in Washington near the Uptown Theater. I went to Georgetown Day School from kindergarten through high school. But I wish I had gone to Janney!

Above: Alexander Viorst as a child.

Below: Mr. Viorst today.



Mrs. Viorst said her inspiration came when her granddaughter Olivia, a former Janney student, told her that she (Olivia) had been performing in a student

talent show at Janney and “two boys booted.”

And so the new book will be titled *And Two Boys Booted*.

What a Horrible Day!

We all have bad days, just like Alexander. **Jaguar Journal** reporters Anna Warner and Zara Hall asked students to describe their worst day. Here is what they said:

“I couldn’t get a plastic airplane at the dentist because they ran out.”

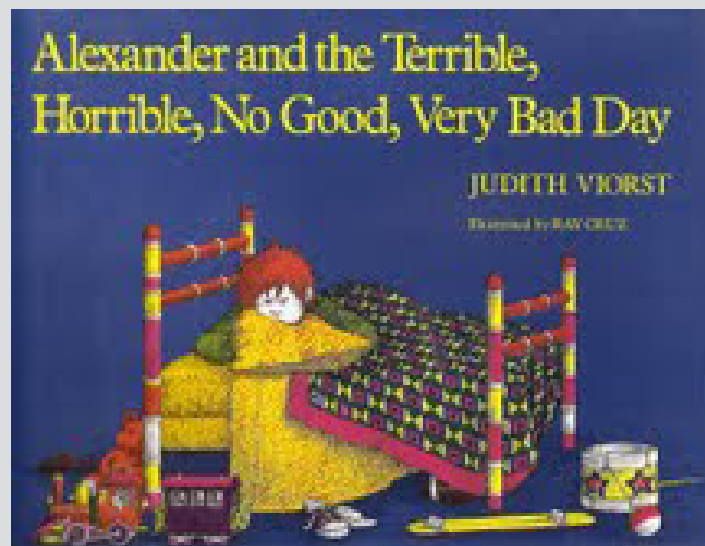
—Robert LeBlanc, 1st grade

“I had my pet snake for two months and I lost him. Four days later my dad found him in the backyard. He [the snake] started biting.”

—Charlie Smiles, 4th grade

“MY 8-YEAR-OLD BROTHER GOT MAD AT ME JUST BECAUSE I POKED HIM.”

—JACK DUVALL, 5TH GRADE



“I went to my friend’s house without checking my name off the JED list. When my brother came to pick me up, he had no idea where I was.”

—Killian Cervino, 5th grade

“I fell off the monkey bars onto my back.”

—America Williams, 4th grade

“My godmother’s dog died.”

—Sophie Andersen, 3rd grade

“My brother cracked his head open.”

—Ella Cheney, 2nd grade