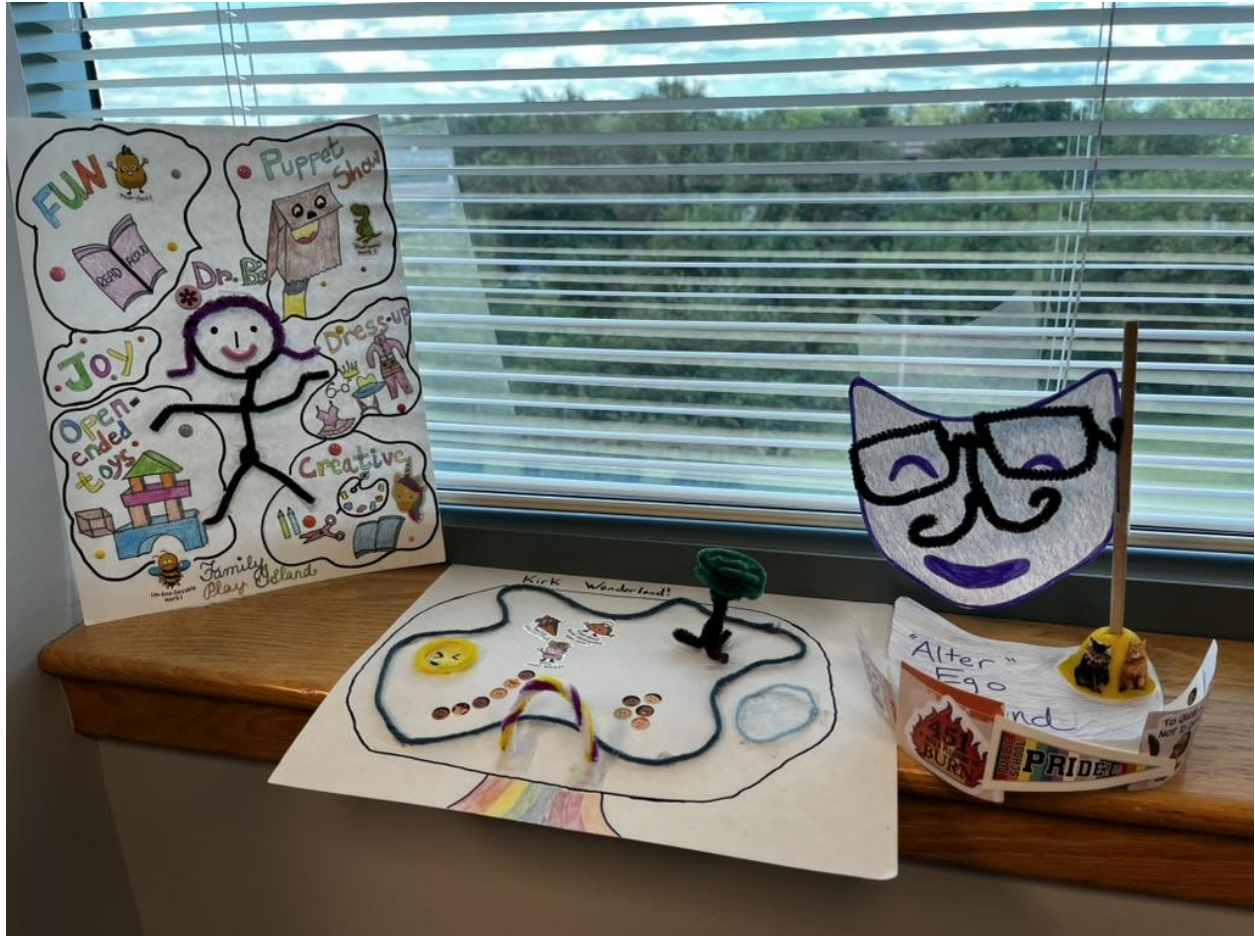




**West Chester Writing Project
Summer Institute 2026**



To the Tenacious Trio -

Trials and tribulations did not deter your participation in the WCWP Summer Institute this year! You all brought such a determined and dedicated focus to the work, to your writing, and to each other and it was my honor to be here as facilitator and guide. While you missed the opportunity to have a large group of thinking partners, I think you all took full advantage of each other's feedback and showed appreciation for those folks who showed up along the way. I hope that you take this experience into your professional lives and that you remain steadfast participants in the West Chester Writing Project community of learners.

All love & appreciation, Pauline

TABLE OF CONTENTS

SUBARNA BASU

Six Yards of Drape

A Pantoum

Teacher Personality Island

Squiggle of the Week

ABBY BOQUIST

Shell-Shucked: Introspection at an Oyster Farm

Shucking Oysters in Provincetown Harbor

Tend the Flame

COLIN KIRK

The Paw Prints on My Heart

Gratitude Heart Map

Teacher Personality Island

Squiggle of the Week

PAULINE SCHMIDT

Swiftie Infographic

Squiggle of the Week

Personal Narrative

Six Yards of Drape

Subarna Basu

A saree is not just six yards of fabric. It signifies womanhood, empowerment, beauty, style, and Southeast Asian culture. Each saree tells a story about its origin, the material with which it is woven, and most importantly, the expertise of the weaver and the unique designs. Being born and brought up in India, my love for sarees developed from seeing my mother dress up every evening in a new drape before my father came home from the office. I wanted to wear a saree just like her. I wanted to borrow her style and elegance. But how could I manage the pleats, the *anchol* (aa-chol: pleated, decorative, loose end of a saree draped over the shoulder that hangs down the back), the folds? Wrapping the saree by myself felt like an uphill task that my mother so easily accomplished, as if she had a pact with the fabric.

My relationship with sarees has not always been comfortable. Though I loved the look of it, especially on my mother, I resented having to wear it and manage it gracefully at the same time. I always thought that it was to be worn as a tradition, for weddings, or to impress the male counterpart. I was twenty-two when I first draped a saree with both my mother and my father's help, and two packs of safety pins. It was for a college function where all my friends decided to look "pretty." I walked awkwardly and was very self-conscious. "*Why don't I have my mother's charisma?*" I thought to myself.

As I was on my way to college, at that moment, my love and appreciation for sarees dwindled, and I couldn't help but wonder why I wore something that needed a "small army" to fix while the other ladies moved freely in jeans and skirts and still looked "pretty."

With age and practice, I finally mastered the art of draping a saree perfectly and without anyone's help, though occasionally my husband would lend a helping hand. This realization came knocking on the door on a Saturday morning in October, when I was getting ready for *Durga Puja* (dur-ga-poo-ja: a major Hindu festival honoring the goddess Durga and commemorating the victory of good over evil). I draped myself in an embroidered *tussar* saree (tuh-sar: a saree made from textured, wild silk). I confidently made the front six pleats of my saree and brought the six yards of weave under control. I pinned the saree without any difficulty and paired the saree with heavy silver jewelry to complete the look.

I had become more patient and willing.

In 2023, on our vacation to India, I asked my mother for a saree. An old saree, with her smell, love, and elegance wrapped in it. She opened her wardrobe and offered me a *Baluchori* (ba-loo-chuh-ree), a staple saree of West Bengal that illustrates Hindu mythological scenes, nature, folklore, legends, and historical events. This was a saree that she wore in her late forties.

Her wardrobe was a treasure cove of gorgeous fabrics. From soft *Bujhodi* cotton (bhu-jo-di: a traditional handwoven textile named after the village of Bhujodi in Kutch, Gujarat, famous for its raised geometric patterns), flowy dreamy *georgette* (jor-jet: a traditional Indian saree made from a lightweight, flowing fabric with crinkled texture which is breathable and easy to drape), to ceremonial *Kanjeevaram*, woven in 24-carat golden thread (kahn-jee-vah-rum: a type of silk saree made from pure mulberry silk, with a lustrous texture and intricate thread work, in the Kanchipuram region of Tamil Nadu, India). Her saree

collection represented all twenty-five states in India. When I told her that I wanted them all, she sweetly smiled and said, “*One drape at a time, shona* (show-na: refers to dear or darling in Bengali).”

Fast forward to 2025: as I was about to get ready for a *Puja*, a Hindu religious celebration, at my friend’s house, I decided to wear the *Baluchori* saree that my mother gifted me. At forty-nine years old, trying to hide the width of my hips and my mom-belly, the saree effortlessly draped around me. As I caught my reflection in the mirror, the brick-red saree on me felt like the soft and soothing touch of my mother. I looked exactly like her, twenty-one years ago, and for a little while I did not check whether it made me look “pretty” or acceptable. I realized that the saree had never been the problem. The idea of draping it and looking perfect had been.

The saree was mine now. I felt my mother’s warmth. I felt her love.



A Pantoum

Line 1: A saree is not just six yards of fabric

Line 2: It's womanhood, empowerment, and style.

Line 3: The pleats, the *anchol*, the folds

Line 4: Feel like a pact between the curves and the fabric.

Line 5: It's womanhood, empowerment, and style (repeat Line 2)

Line 6: My mother's *Tussar, Bhujodi, Georgette, and Kanjeevaram*, with flowing fabrics, lustrous textures, and intricate thread work.

Line 7: Feels like a pact between the curves and the fabric (repeat line 4)

Line 8: I feel my mother's warmth; I feel her love.

Line 9: My mother's *Tussar, Bhujodi, Georgette, and Kanjeevaram*, with flowing fabrics, lustrous textures, and intricate thread work (repeat Line 6)

Line 10: Mastering the art of draping, one drape at a time.

Line 11: I feel my mother's warmth; I feel her love (repeat Line 8)

Line 12: The six yards of weave is under control, and I am patient and willing now.

Line 13: Mastering the art of draping, one drape at a time (repeat Line 10)

Line 14: The pleats, the *anchol*, the folds. (repeat Line 1 or 3)

Line 15: The six yards of weave is under control, and I am patient and willing now (repeat Line 12)

Line 16: A saree is not just six yards of fabric. (repeat Line 3 or 1)

Subarna Basu



SQUIGGLE OF THE WEEK



The Play of Life starts in the year 1998 with Raj and
Subarna the "Two" lead actors. Life is happy, normal,
colorful. The actors are content. After four
years of "living" together, Raj and Subarna
welcomes a third actor on stage. Sweet boy
Sim. The oxygen of their lives, the golden
thread of their bond. The reason of their
EXISTANCE. The play continues; with
Compromises and sacrifices; the ups
and downs, tears and smiles, laughs
and melancholy moments. But the
"golden thread" keeps radiating pure love
and keeps all the actors doing their
part. In this play the actors are
committed. They breathe nothing but
love!

Shell-Shucked: Introspection at an Oyster Farm

By Abby Boquist

My partner Megan jokes that they did not order oysters on our first not-date solely because they did not want to scare me off. I was not opposed to shellfish, per say, but the process of cracking open a shell and messily slurping the meat out was not my first choice on any menu. But, Megan has a special talent for encouraging me to step out of my comfort zone. A few months into us dating, they ordered a dozen oysters at dinner and successfully convinced me to try them with a phrase I now hear whenever I enter one of my anxious tizzies: “You’re fine! It’s okay!”

Well, they were right (as they ~~often~~ always are), and we now make it a point to try all the varieties of oyster when we go to a new seafood spot. Over the past two years, we have developed a 15-point oyster rating scale (5 points each for brine, texture, and shell-ability), learned to distinguish between west coast and east coast oysters (west coast are larger), and can predict which oyster from a lineup the other person will enjoy best based on its taste and texture (Megan likes an earthy, meaty oyster with mignonette, and I like the salty, petite variety with cocktail sauce). I’ve grown to love oysters both for the taste and for their importance to our relationship, but oysters were the last thing on my mind when we arrived for a tour of Mermaid Menu oyster farm in Provincetown, Massachusetts last week.

First of all, I was convinced this tour was a hoax. Red flag number one: I couldn’t tell whether “Mermaid Menu” was the name of the farm, or a restaurant, or a supplier, or simply an oyster fan club. Red flag number two: I discovered Mermaid Menu through a year-old Facebook comment. Not a page, not a post, but a one-sentence comment responding to a stranger’s anonymous request for Cape Cod oyster farm experiences. Red flag number three: absolutely no address for the tour existed online. Mermaid Menu’s website named a general location—Provincetown, MA—but nothing more. Same thing on our tickets. A quick search for Mermaid Menu in Google Maps dropped a pin in the middle of the ocean, which did not seem like a place Megan and I should attempt to go on our own.

I wound up emailing the contact listed on the website and received a detailed response: “Thor will meet you on the beach near the West End rotary.” Cool, cool, cool. My lack of expectations were replaced by the mental image of Avengers Thor wearing waders and carrying a rake, which was somehow worse than having no expectations at all. Regardless, as we drove to the beach and Megan gleefully speculated about the things we’d learn on the tour (“Oh man, it would be so cool if we learned to shuck oysters ourselves”), I gripped the steering wheel as if it were the life preserver we would definitely not have access to when Thor took us out to sea.

At this point, it is important to note that I’ve been working myself into more anxious tizzies than usual. I was scratched, lightly, by an affectionate barn cat a month ago, so of course now I have rabies. I was bitten by a tick, and even with a near-immediate double dose of doxycycline, I certainly have Lyme disease. We have plans to go white-water rafting, and I’m most definitely going to pop out of the raft and get stuck under a rock and drown. So when the location for the

oyster farm tour initially displayed as the middle of the ocean, I knew in my bones that Thor was going to take us out to sea and dump us overboard and leave us to the sharks.

My fears seemed to come immediately true when I nearly broke my toe before the tour even started. After we met Thor (actually pronounced Tor) on the beach, he prompted me to leave my sneakers in the car because we were going to walk barefoot through Provincetown Harbor at low tide. He warned us to tread carefully because otherwise an oyster shell could slice through the side of our foot if we turned the wrong way. “And we don’t want that to happen, because fun fact! Here, you are the furthest away from a hospital that you’ll ever be on the east coast,” Thor said. Adding *bleeding out* to my list of worries, I leaned down to deposit my sneakers in the trunk. THUD! My phone fell edge-first onto my middle toe, old-man-style folio wallet and all. I said a word I won’t repeat here and watched a bulging purple welt immediately spring up under my skin. Rabies, Lyme disease, and now a broken toe. Great. But I could still walk just fine, so after a few short test steps, I waddled back across the sand to where Megan and Thor were standing discussing the landscape of aquatic grasses, sandbars, and gently rippling water that stretched into a horizon punctuated with a gray belt of sandy Provincetown coastline.

After an enthusiastic lesson about the three types of grasses present in this one ecosystem (a rare phenomenon and the subject of many of Thor’s marine biology studies), Thor led us into the bay, wading in the clear, ankle-deep water. Naked hermit crabs scuttled past our toes, absolutely duking it out over empty shells nestled in the sand. Thor, in his broad sun hat, narrated the conflict with gusto. I was pondering the natural order of things when Megan asked, “Why are there so many dead squid over there?”

I followed their finger and shuddered at the sight of what must have been a hundred limp, pale bodies of squid the size of a shorti hoagie draped across the wet sandbar in front of us. Thor laughed. “That is the result of a squid reproductive event!” he said. “It’s the time of year when squid want to repopulate. A group of them will get super close to the surface, squirt out all of their eggs and such, and die because they have nothing else to accomplish in their lifetime. Basically, they fuck and die” (exact quote).

Megan and I laughed. “Squid orgy!”

We picked our way across the sandbar, being careful not to step on the eternally blissed-out squid. Megan, ever the gentleman, offered me their watershoes, but I didn’t really feel like lingering on the site of the squid reproductive event, so I trekked forward in my bare feet valiantly, zigzagging between the bodies until we reached a patch of clean water and I could confess, “Okay, that was gross.”

“What, you didn’t want to hang out with the lovers?” Megan teased.

The water now up to our calves, we neared the towering boulders of the breakwater and Thor launched into a lesson about algae. He pointed out the layers of algae that had rooted themselves to the boulders and picked off two types of edible seaweed. He held delicate strips

of bright green Nori up to the sunlight, and Megan and I oohed and ahed over its glittering, gossamer surface. “Try it!” he encouraged us.

The seaweed was salty, slightly fatty, and definitely stuck to my teeth. The pod he handed us next was a little fuzzy on the outside with a rough skin, but crisp and bright when I bit into it. On my own, I’d probably have taken a small nibble and declared it the extent of my taste-test. But Megan’s eyes were bright with delight and looking for my approval, so I chewed and let myself enjoy the briny taste and crunchy texture, the same way I learned to let myself enjoy oysters, or sleeping in on Sunday mornings, or choosing a moment of spontaneous joy instead of following my mental script about what I was “supposed” to do.

We waded away from the breakwater and headed toward the oyster farm, which was in the middle of the bay and from this distance looked like a series of black boxes on the horizon. We alternated between water and sandbar, water and sandbar, water and sandbar as Thor explained the area’s tide patterns, identified sea worms, and gave us the inside scoop on Provincetown’s theme weeks. Megan and I were wistfully daydreaming about taking our future kids to Family Week when Thor, a few yards in front of us, began gathering a variety of shells with intent.

He laid them out on a sandbar, grouping them in curious clusters. We squatted next to him, bending over the display like schoolchildren investigating a worm on the playground.

“All of these shells are technically clams,” he explained. “Some of the locals will get furious if you call an oyster or mussel a clam, though. People around here have strong opinions about shellfish. To us marine biologists, they all fall under the clam umbrella. They all work as filter feeders, eating nutrients and bacteria and keeping the water around them clean. Even with their similarities, they are vastly different from one another.”

Thor first picked up a shell separated from the others. “Before we get to the clams, I need to make a quick interjection for the slipper shell snail, which is in its own category as a snail, not a clam. Multiple male snails will stack on top of the larger female shell. If she dies, the first male in line will take her place and change its sex to female. Nature has fun with gender,” he says.

“Awesome,” Megan marveled, and I thought back to the *Biology Was Never Binary!* pins we’d picked up during Pride the previous summer.

Thor turned back to the clusters and picked up the first group of shells, a razor clam and a white steamer, and began crumbling them in his fingers. “These guys are avoiders. Their shells are extremely brittle, so they use smooth membranes and muscular feet to propel themselves quickly into the sand to avoid predators.”

In the next pile was a scallop and a quahog clam. “These guys are also avoidant, but they have more defensive features,” Thor explained. “Scallops’ shells are more sturdy. They have eyes in

each of these ridges, and they can also propel themselves through the water by opening and closing their hinges, scooting in the same direction of their ‘mouths.’”

“Like Pac-Man,” I observed wisely, earning a laugh from Megan.

Thor went on, unfazed. “Quahog clams have much harder shells for protection, and they can avoid predators by burying themselves into the sand. If you feel something firm right under your feet, it’s probably a clam.”

In the last group was the star of the day: an oyster. Thor explained, “These guys are all defense because they can’t move around like the other clams. They pick a spot where they get constant access to water and cluster together in groups. Safety in numbers. They have wicked sharp edges that fend off predators.”

I felt a sense of kinship with the clams. Growing up, I adopted the subconscious belief that I, as the oldest of three siblings and the only one of us to whom the “traditional” life path came easily, needed to remain the “easy” kid, an uncomplicated, steady filter feeder for the family ecosystem. As much as I worked to shake this belief, and as much as my parents reassured me that I didn’t have to be “easy” for them, I continued to turn to defense and avoidance when confronted with emotions and choices that could disrupt the smooth, steady, and composed persona I had constructed.

Megan’s voice pulled me out of my pondering. “So, how do the sharp edges wear down before market?”

Thor grinned. “Let’s head to the farm.”

And off we went, trekking through the last stretch of calf-deep receding water into Mermaid Menu oyster farm. The farm was a grid of large, flat, algae-coated crates, the tops of which peeked out from above the calm, lapping waves. Here, in the middle of Provincetown Harbor, I felt like I was standing in the middle of a fishbowl. Dark blue water dusted with the sunset’s glowing orange hues stretched out in all directions, bumping into the graying silhouette of dunes and shoreline that wrapped around the Harbor like a loose embrace.

A few yards away from us, a woman and a man with large sunhats were bent over two crates that had been opened from the tops, picking through their contents with baskets by their sides. Thor introduced us to Mike and Kalliope, the farmers. Mike answered Megan’s question right away.

“In each crate are about 4 cages of baby oysters, or seeds,” he explained. He pulled out a black lattice cage containing about 200 tiny oysters, each about the size of a grape, and shook it around like he was panning for gold. “Shaking the cage smooths down the razor-sharp edges of the oysters. It also signals them to continue maturing to protect themselves against predators, like me. Once they reach a certain size, we send them out to deeper water, over there—” he

pointed to a series of cages further into the harbor “—so they are fully flooded with saltwater all the time. Then, we bring them back to this shallow area to finish maturing.”

Nearby, Kalliope was picking through the mature oysters and preparing a basket to go to market. “I forgot my shucking knives, or I’d offer to teach you,” she said. “You’re free to come back tomorrow evening, same time. I’ll put some oysters on ice for you both.”

Megan turned to me with glee. Their grin was radiant and infectious. “We don’t have anything going on, right?”

Even if we did, I would have cleared my entire calendar for a month so Megan could shuck an oyster fresh from the sea. “We’ll be here!”

We said our goodbyes to Thor, who wouldn’t be there with his vibrant narration the next day, much to Megan and I’s disappointment. We walked back to shore, hand in hand, basking in the vibrant orange and purple sunset stretched across the horizon before us. As we neared the beach, I realized that my anxieties and tizzies seemed to dissolve the further out into the water we had gone. But they didn’t come crashing back over me now, the way the waves splashed up onto the beach in front of us, the way I had expected them to. How could they, when Megan had been at my side all evening, cracking jokes about marine life when Thor couldn’t hear and exclaiming over the sea creatures? Everything was good. We hadn’t bled out, or been fed to the sharks, or gotten swept out to sea. I probably didn’t have Lyme disease or rabies. My toe, though still purple, actually felt better after bathing in saltwater for a couple of hours. And I had tomorrow’s prospect of freshly-shucked oysters to look forward to. I was fine, and everything had turned out more than okay.

Kalliope taught us the next evening that people put oysters on ice because it helps the muscles around their shells relax. This makes the oysters easier to pry open with a shucking knife. Under the glow of the setting sun, Megan and I took turns passing the knife back and forth, scooping oysters out of their ice bath and flipping their flat lids right into the bay before putting our lips to the shell and swallowing. The oysters were salty and briny, with just a little chew—scoring a perfect 15/15 on the rating scale.

As the tide of Provincetown Harbor lapped over my ankles, I realized that if I am an oyster, Megan is my ice bath. They can predict when I’m about to tizzy and tighten my shell, and with a joke or a smile or a reassurance, they remind me that I’m okay, and I relax. They’ve nudged me to experience aspects of life I never expected to, or even know existed: oyster farms, for starters, but also the type of love that makes me want to cut through all my defenses. Loving Megan has helped me to be vulnerable and drop the walls of a protective persona. And, most importantly, they remind me to choose joy, however unexpected.



Myself [left] and Megan [right] at Mermaid Menu oyster farm (2026)

Shucking Oysters in Provincetown Harbor

Pantoum inspired by “Shell-Shucked”

By Abby Boquist

Ankle-deep in the bay, amid
water and sandbars,
oysters are all defense
with wicked sharp edges.

Water and sandbar witness
the process of cracking open a shell
with wicked sharp edges
and briny taste.

Study the process of cracking open a shell:
slice through the side,
enjoy the briny taste,
ponder the natural order of things.

Slice through
all your defenses
and ponder the natural order of things,
ankle-deep in the bay.

Tend the Flame

By Abby Boquist



I WANT to let my students' writing stretch out across the page, luxurious and unafraid to take up space, like a cat who's found a sun-drenched rug and settles in for an afternoon snooze. I want them to experiment with prose, with poetry, with all sorts of wordplay the way a well-funded scientist plays with new ideas. I want them to use the "fancy" techniques and the everyday strategies in tandem, deftly swapping tools for their authentic purposes as writers.

I PRAISE first attempts at trying something new: a vocabulary word discovered in a thesaurus; a stumbling hook that, for the first time, isn't a question; an experimental format that has wrinkles, yes, but gloriously *exists*.

TOGETHER, WE can defend our students' access to a quality education, uplift the voices calling for peace and unity, celebrate HUMAN creativity and joy in the face of systems that seek to suck the power straight out of us.

The Paw Prints on My Heart

Unlike any other animal on the planet, dogs have a unique ability to change us. The lessons that they teach and the memories that we create with them can shape our personalities and transform our lives forever. Three special dogs in particular have certainly left an indelible mark on my life.

Ever since my wife Katelyn and I got married in November of 2019, she insisted on adopting a dog. Both of us grew up in households with pets, but the notion of welcoming a cuddly canine into our newly formed family excited her more than it did me. She would frequently raise the topic and, although I never harbored a negative attitude towards dogs, I simply had no interest in adopting one.

Several factors contributed to my stance on this issue. First, my work as a teacher already followed me home on a nearly daily basis, and my graduate-level courses proved to be demanding at times. I knew that I would need to learn how to navigate these challenges if I ever wanted to have children, but adopting a new and unpredictable pet at this time still did not feel ideal. Additionally, I knew that taking care of a dog would be expensive. The overall cost of food, toys, supplies, training, and veterinary appointments among other things worried me considering that both my wife and I earned only modest teacher salaries. Many pet owners could probably relate to these initial surface-level concerns, but I also held a deeper fear grounded in personal experience from my childhood.

In the middle of fourth grade, my family's first pet, a black lab and shepherd mix named Bear, died after 15 long years of life. As a 10 year-old child coping with loss for the first time, the wound in my heart certainly did not heal immediately. Bear had been a member of the Kirk family since before my birth, so suddenly saying goodbye to a friend who had always been a constant in my life felt incredibly painful. However, cherishing my happy memories with him, such as running around upstairs together and playing in the guestroom, made the healing process easier. My fond remembrance of Bear helped me make peace with my new reality.

Unfortunately, I cannot honestly say the same about Nittany. Not long after Bear's passing left a void in our hearts, my mom and dad bought a small black lab puppy from a nearby dog breeder. We named him Nittany, after Penn State University's mascot. Nittany and I lived in the same household up until I graduated high school and left for college in the fall of 2010, but I regretfully did not show the same level of interest in him as I did for Bear. As a teenager, I had to help take care of Nittany in ways that my parents did not expect me to do with Bear, such as feeding him at scheduled times and routinely taking him on long walks throughout the neighborhood. I fulfilled these responsibilities, albeit unenthusiastically, and began to perceive him less like a friend and more like an inconvenience. Since I spent most of my leisure time hanging out with friends, playing video games, and watching TV, I made no effort to play with or even interact with Nittany beyond feeding and walking him. At that time, I lacked the maturity to realize the countless potential precious moments that I wasted away by not giving him the attention that he deserved.

When Nittany passed away at age 12 during the winter of 2015, a different type of grief overcame me. While my heartache for the loss of Bear stemmed from love, my sadness for Nittany's death had been rooted in guilt. Rarely did I ever play with him, hug him, or say to him something as simple, yet powerful as "I love you." By not devoting the time to truly bond with Nittany and treat him as

a member of our family, I felt that I had robbed him of a happier and more fulfilling life. This self-reflection may seem overly harsh, but it feels true to me. Even if I wanted to eventually adopt another dog, I did not believe that I deserved the chance.

Nevertheless, Katelyn persisted. In the fall of 2020, after we moved from our dog-free apartment complex to our townhouse, her pleas became increasingly frequent and passionate. I stood my ground and tried persuading her to volunteer at a nearby dog shelter, but this proposal did not suffice for her. Katelyn continued to claim that adopting a dog had been something that she always wanted to do with her own family and added that it would be beneficial for our collective mental health. Ultimately, I succumbed to pressure and agreed to at least be open to the idea. Without realizing it at the time, a part of me also wanted to redeem myself after failing Nittany.

One Friday afternoon in the following July, Katelyn and I drove to the Brandywine Valley SPCA to find a compatible companion for our home. In the lobby, we spoke with the staff member at the front desk about our interest in dog adoption. She then directed us to a large room behind her where they housed the dogs. When we opened the door, a chorus of deafening barks from what felt like over a hundred dogs of various breeds and sizes startled us. Comparable to the size of an elementary school gymnasium, the room had bright lights, a tall ceiling, and enclosures organized in a grid-like pattern. Katelyn and I began winding through the long aisles with numerous dogs flanking us on both sides. Each dog had their own modest living space with a cot, food bowl, and water bowl. Outside of their enclosures hung laminated information sheets displaying their names, breeds, health conditions, and needed medications. Katelyn and I could barely hear each other over the noise, so we decided to split up to cover more ground, especially since the shelter had been busy that day with dozens of potential adopters and we did not want to compete for a dog with someone else. As I slowly walked around the kennel, I studied any dog that caught my interest and read their information sheet. I hesitated to spend too much time interacting with any dog in particular though. If they ended up not being the right fit for whatever reason, I did not want to give them false hope of a new home.

About 15 minutes later, Katelyn called me over from the opposite corner of the room to ask for my thoughts on a dog that caught her attention. When I walked over to the enclosure, I saw a small, thin, and subdued mutt with yellowish-tan fur, pointy ears, big brown eyes, and a long pink and gray-colored tongue sticking out of her mouth. Her name was Riley, and according to her information sheet, she was two years-old and came to the BVSPCA all the way from Alabama. A staff member told us that Riley had been flown up to the east coast along with hundreds of other dogs so that they could be adopted. Otherwise, they risked being placed in kill shelters. Her information sheet also stated that she had been in the BVSPCA for about two weeks and contracted kennel cough, which explained her calmer demeanor.

Katelyn expressed to me that she had a strong feeling about Riley, so we notified a nearby staff member. He gave us a leash and allowed us to take her on a brief walk around the outside of the facility. When we came back inside, the staff member led us to a small, warmly-lit, quiet, and comfortable “meet-and-greet” room with a window and chairs. He said that he would return in about 10-15 minutes after we had a chance to become more acquainted with Riley. Katelyn and I then sat down and began petting Riley and talking to her. We both liked her, although I still had my reservations. When the staff

member returned, we asked him several questions about Riley’s history. He confirmed that she had already been spayed and microchipped, but did not know the circumstances of her separation from her

previous owner. We also asked if Riley had been house-trained, and he claimed that she had. Immediately after he answered this question, Riley urinated on the floor in front of us. Two thoughts instantly occurred to me: This staff member had either been dishonest or he did not know Riley as well as he thought, and Riley's bladder had perfect comedic timing.

After answering our questions, the staff member left the room again to give Katelyn, Riley, and I some privacy while we made a decision. Katelyn reaffirmed to me that she genuinely felt Riley would be the perfect addition to our family. A twister of emotions began swirling around in my head. All of my fears about dog adoption, both big and small, began to resurface. At the same time, I felt frustration and anger towards Katelyn and blamed her for placing me in what seemed like an impossible situation. A part of me wanted to run out of the building to escape the negative emotions clouding my mind. I looked down at Riley, and she looked up at both of us, likely wondering to herself what would happen next. Pausing and taking a deep breath, I thought to myself "Fuck it. Let's take her home."

We completed the required paperwork and the BVSPCA officially granted us custody of Riley. Before walking back out to the parking lot together, the staff gave us her collar, a leash, and a small bag of food. When we got to Katelyn's car, I lifted Riley into the trunk and spread out a blanket for her to lay on during the ride. Before heading home, we drove to the PetSmart in Downingtown to purchase all of the necessities like food, water and food bowls, a crate, a dog bed, toys, and treats. Once we arrived at PetSmart, we opened the trunk and discovered that Riley pooped in transit. Katelyn and I cleaned up the mess as best as we could by picking up her droppings with a plastic grocery bag.

When we finally got home after shopping, we led Riley inside through the front door. Exploring her new surroundings, she made her way into the kitchen and peed directly in front of the oven. After soaking up the mess with paper towels and scrubbing the spot on the floor with soap and water, we fed Riley dinner. As a result of her kennel cough, Riley lacked an appetite and had to be hand-fed small amounts of kibble, which took nearly 20 minutes. Thankfully, she ate the medication that the BVSPCA prescribed, but hiding it in her food proved to be a struggle. Already, dog ownership felt exhausting and overwhelming.

Later in the evening, Katelyn and I relaxed with Riley in the living room. We gave her some of her new toys, fed her some treats, and cuddled next to her as she laid in her new dog bed. Before going to sleep, I decided to do something different with Riley that I had rarely done with Nittany and even Bear. I told myself that, every night, I would give Riley a "good night cuddle", kiss her on the forehead, and look her in the eyes to tell her that I loved her. Although a small gesture, it would be the first step in making her feel like she belonged.

Almost five years have passed since then, and I can say without question that adopting Riley has been one of the best decisions we ever made. Despite now being seven years-old, she consistently greets us at the front door with a burst of friendly puppy energy that nearly knocks us onto the ground. Her love of play and the outdoors keeps everyone in the family active. Riley eagerly anticipates our

leisurely strolls together through the neighborhood, local parks, and nearby trails. On a rainy day, she thoroughly enjoys gnawing on her Nylabones and playing fetch with her rubber toys in the basement. Witnessing the heartwarming affection that my daughter Harper has developed for Riley over these last three years has been magical. And, unlike her first day home with us, Riley now eats voraciously and

does not let the inedibility of something stop her. While she certainly relishes her kibble meals and assortment of treats like “Kong” cookies and doggie ice cream, she also snacks on freshly laid mulch and munches on grass like a cow. As Katelyn likes to say, “The world is Riley’s buffet.”

Of course, our new life with Riley has occasionally been comically turbulent. Tearing up couch cushions, ripping carpet from the staircase, swiping food from the kitchen table and counter, and eating the library’s blu-ray copy of “The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn - Part 2” serve as just some of the many examples in which she has tested our limits. Although, in Riley’s defense, she did the library a favor by eating that blu-ray disc. No one should be forced to endure that nearly two-hour long headache of a movie.

All of these minor hassles aside, Riley has become a wonderful friend. Caring for her has taught me the value of compassion, patience, forgiveness, and unconditional love in a way that nothing else ever has. She has been an abundant source of happiness over these last five years and has undoubtedly made me a more decent human being.

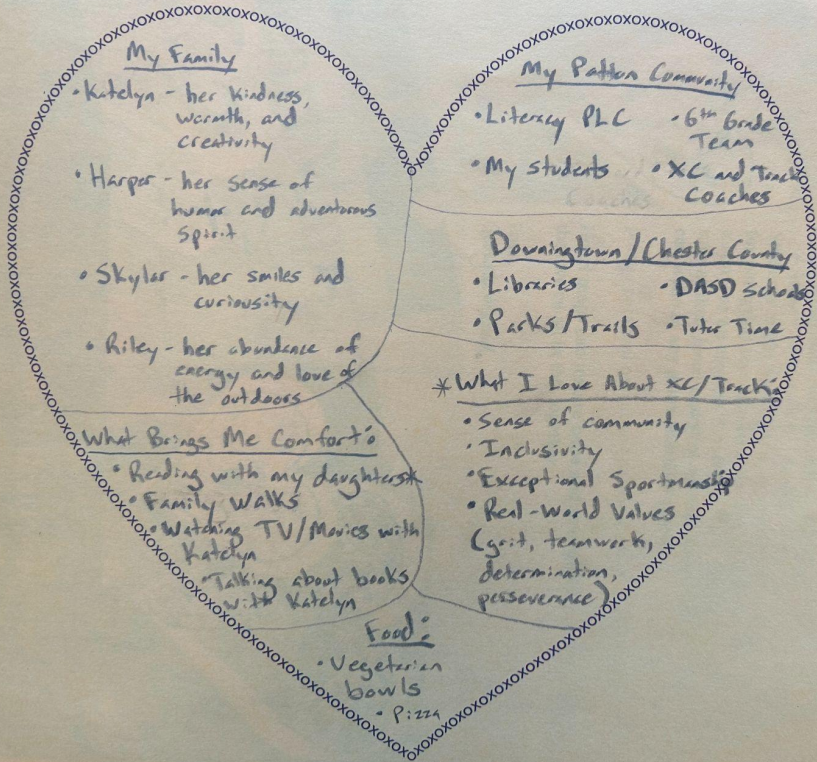
The distinct paw prints that Bear, Nittany, and Riley have left on my heart will last forever. Knowing them, growing with them, and learning from them has been an absolute privilege. They have all impacted my life for the better, and I am eternally grateful.



Katelyn, Harper, myself, and Riley

Name: _____

Date: _____



Gratitude Heart Map

Write what you're grateful for on your heart map. For example:

- people you're grateful for—and why
- what makes you happy—and why
- what brings you comfort or peace of mind—and why
- whom and what you love
- things that inspire you
- things you love and observe in the world
- places you love
- events or experiences that were unexpected or surprising.

Also add things that are easy to take for granted in everyday life:

- family
- a place to sleep
- food
- friends.



SQUIGGLE OF THE WEEK



Frank, a freshman with ^{flying} floppy arms, legs, fingers, and feet, was new to the high school track and field team and had the most unique running form that anyone had ever seen. His limbs flew through the air like cooked strands of spaghetti, often knocking over competitors during a race. His no-nonsense coach would frequently shout, "Frank! Tuck your arms in! Control your legs! If you're flailing, you're failing!" Frank did not care that his flimsy form cost him every race though, for he was just in it for the fun.

Pauline Schmidt

52 year old Swiftie

Realized that becoming a Swiftie was going to be a journey I did not expect...

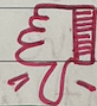
Buying the "Life of a Showgirl" album BEFORE a record player - no regrets. Five stars!

Seeking...

just ONE wedding photo!

I immediately reject something when...

it sounds like a negative comment or critique of Taylor Swift.



Appreciated!

the "color coded" TS syllabus - included film, music, + socials

About Me:

A pop culture fanatic, I was late to the "Swiftie" fandom.

Favorites:

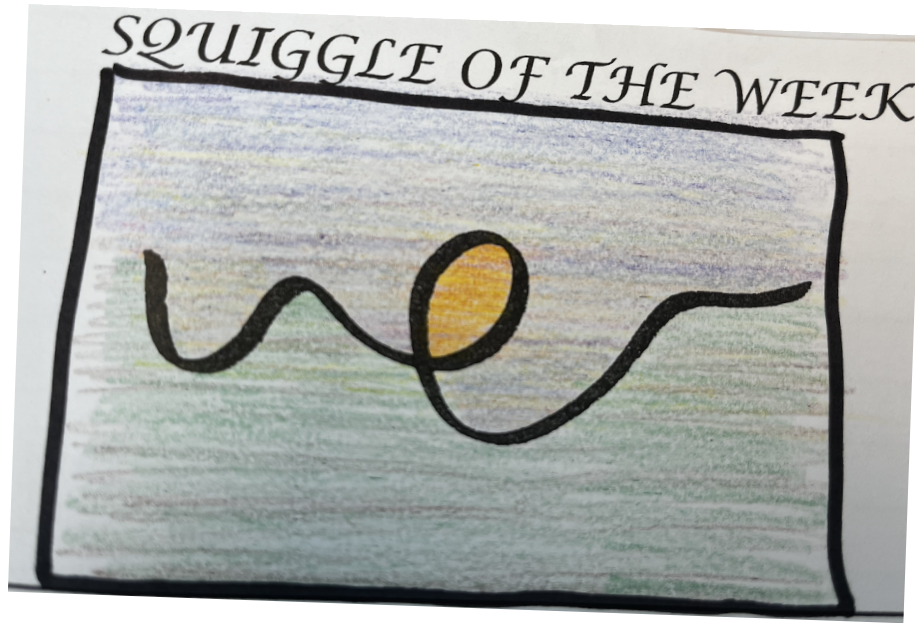
1. You Belong With Me
2. Eldest Daughter
3. All Too Well
4. This is Me Trying
5. illicit affairs
6. Out of the Woods
7. Lover

Mentors/Role Models:



Most proud of:

Throwing Emma's 18th birthday w/ a Taylor Swift theme.



I am so glad we took this trip...

Just the two of us.

Peace & quiet.

It's brief.

It's all we have.

But, we soak it in.

Silence.

Just the two of us.

Walking hand in hand, we turn the corner of the path.

Wow.

The sun is setting over the cranberry bog and the sky is filled with beautiful colors.

I don't want this sun to set.

I don't want this trip to end.

Calm washes over me.

Tomorrow, we return to the 'real world'.

About the Authors:

Subarna Basu



Subarna is an aspiring scholar and an Adjunct Professor in Early Childhood Education. She recently graduated with her Ed.D. in Curriculum and Instruction from West Chester University. Her research examines kindergarten teachers' perceptions on implementing purposeful play for children's academic and developmental learning. Subarna also earned her M.Ed. in Early Childhood Education from West Chester University. She has been a preschool and pre-K teacher and an ECE lecturer in the UK and the US. She has also been a Graduate Assistant for the West Chester Writing Project for 3 years and a co-investigator for the Library of Congress Grant on Teaching with Primary Sources. Subarna loves traveling and cooking and lives with her husband Raj and their son Tim.

Abby Boquist



Abby is an 8th-grade English teacher at Charles F. Patton Middle School in Unionville-Chadds Ford School District. She is also pursuing her Masters in English on the Writing, Teaching, & Criticism track at West Chester University. If she's not visiting a museum, she is probably writing about a museum, talking about a museum, or figuring out how to incorporate museums into her teaching. She recently learned how to shuck an oyster and is desperately trying to remember all the books she read last year after her Bookmory data was deleted. Always back up your files!

Colin Kirk



Colin is a 6th-grade Literacy teacher at Charles F. Patton Middle School in the Unionville-Chadds Ford School District. He earned his M. Ed. in Literacy and Reading Specialist certification in the spring of 2025. Throughout the school year, he can often be found on Patton's campus coaching the school's cross country and track and field teams. When not at school, Colin enjoys reading, listening to podcasts, and taking long walks outside with his wife Katelyn, his two daughters Harper and Skylar, and his dog Riley.

Pauline Schmidt



Pauline is a Professor of Secondary English Education and the Director of the West Chester Writing Project. She is the CEO of Shenanigans around here; carefully managing the personalities of her professional and personal life. She loves to travel, especially when it involves nerding out over her favorite books, authors, and pop culture locations! In 2022, she co-authored a book called *Reimagining Literacies in the Digital Age* and is now shifting her research to arts-based and place-based pedagogy. In 2025, she was the Principal Investigator on a Teaching with Primary Sources Grant from the Library of Congress. She hopes to continue this work through more grant-funded research!