

# PLANTING IDEAS AND HELPING THEM GROW

Demarest podcast producer matches creative kids with experienced authors

WRITTEN BY JORAM MUSHINSKE

**S**andhya Nankani has always been passionate about the written word, storytelling, and social justice. After studying history and International Affairs in college, she wrote for the United Nations magazine, *Africa Recovery*, and later taught College Composition at a women's college in Westchester. She even helped run her father's men's retail and import-export businesses.

In 2004, Nankani took a job at Weekly Reader, where she edited a magazine called *Writing for Teens*. She then went on to work for Scholastic, where she learned the ropes of educational publishing for schools.

"I have always been interested in the intersection between print and new media and how technological innovations can be used to create educational stories and interactive experiences for children and families that are rooted in equity, inclusion, and diversity," she says.

These interests led her to venture out on her own in 2008, when she started the editorial studio and consulting firm Literary Safari, producer of *The Story Seeds Podcast*.

**What is Literary Safari?** Literary Safari is my editorial studio and consulting firm. We create inclusive media for children and families rooted in an understanding of learning science, educational technology, curriculum standards, narrative design, and play.

I started Literary Safari in 2008 because I wanted to be a free bird in the world of children's media and be able to straddle the life of a mother and an entrepreneur. Over time, the company has evolved into a studio that provides work-for-hire services to entertainment and educational companies while also developing our own creations — from literacy apps like HangArt, which was selected Best of EdTech 2016 by Common Sense Media, to publishing our own books and podcasts.



## FAVORITE PODCASTS

### For Grownups:

*Song Exploder*  
*The Knowledge Project with Shane Parrish*  
*Poetry Unbound*  
*TED Radio Hour*  
*Stuff You Should Know*  
*10 Percent Happier*  
*Dare to Lead with Brené Brown*

### For Kids:

*Like You: Mindfulness for Kids*  
*Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls*  
*Brains On!*  
*The Past and the Curious*  
*The Story Seeds Podcast*

Our clients include McGraw Hill Education, Scholastic, Sesame Workshop, Corporation for Public Broadcasting, New York Times Learning Network, and UNESCO, for whom we have produced learning games, books, curriculum, and interactive educational experiences. Our office is

in Lincoln Square in New York City, but since the pandemic, I have made my home office very cozy and enjoyed working here with a view of my front yard, with its stream and greenery.

### What can you tell me about *The Story Seeds Podcast*?

In March 2020, just as the world was going into lockdown, my studio, Literary Safari, premiered *The Story Seeds Podcast*. In each episode, kids and authors meet up to grow a child's story idea; then authors go home and chronicle their writing process, and read-aloud stories they wrote inspired by the collaboration. The first season of our show — hosted by librarian, author, and blogger Betsy Bird — features authors Dan Gutman, Chris Grabenstein, Carlos Hernandez, Aram Kim, Tracey Baptiste, Susan Muaddi Darraj, Rajani LaRocca, Veera Hiranandani and the National Ambassador of Young People's Literature and award-winning author Jason Reynolds.

The podcast has a companion activity book, *Imagination Lab: Experiments in Creativity*, and we are running virtual summer camps and classes this summer to help kids explore their curiosities and grow podcasts of their own. It has been a joy for me as a producer to see *Story Seeds* featured on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, *The New York Times*, *Parents* magazine, Common Sense Media, *School Library Journal* and the learning platform Listenwise. It was *The Week Junior* magazine's 2020 Podcast of the Year and is one of *Wired* magazine's 2021 Best Podcasts for Kids. Fatherly also named it one of The Best Podcasts for Kids That Adults Will Like Too.

**How did the podcast come about?** In formal school settings, imagination and creativity often get put to the back burner as our systems of learning focus on measurable skills and standards. But as a parent, a producer and an educator, I am inspired by the work of Sir Ken Robinson, author and educator, whose life work was about creativity and education. I totally agree with his

## GET TO KNOW SANDHYA NANKANI

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**Age:** 47

**Born in:** Kumasi, Ghana

**Currently lives in:** Demarest

### Education:

- Northern Valley Regional High School, Demarest
- Columbia University, New York City (undergraduate)
- Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs, New York City (graduate)

### Recognition & Awards:

- *The Week Junior* magazine: 2020 Podcast of the Year for *The Story Seeds Podcast*
- Common Sense Media: Best of EdTech, 2016 for HangArt: A Literacy App
- Association of American Publishers: Golden Lamp and Distinguished Achievement Award for *Writing Magazine* (Weekly Reader)

### Summer Reading List:

- The Telephone Booth at the Edge of the World* by Laura Imai Messina
- Dial A for Aunties* by Jesse Q. Sutanto
- Between Two Kingdoms* by Suleka Jaouad
- You Are Your Best Thing: Vulnerability, Shame Resilience, And The Black Experience* an anthology edited by Tarana Burke and Brené Brown
- Thrivers: The Surprising Reasons Why Some Kids Struggle and Others Shine* by Michele Borba, Ed.D.
- Hercule Poirot's Early Cases: 18 Short Stories* by Agatha Christie

Sandhya Nankani at the Englewood Boat Basin.

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**GROUP EFFORT** (Clockwise from left) Sandhya Nankani watches as author and National Ambassador for Young People's Literature Jason Reynolds collaborates with 12-year-old Irthan for an episode of *The Story Seeds Podcast*; (from left) producer Anjali Sakhrani, podcast host Betsy Bird, Imagination Lab producer Alicia Zadrozny and Nankani photographed at Teaneck Sound in Teaneck, the recording studio where they taped the pilot episode of their podcast; (from left) author Rajani LaRocca, Nankani and Amrita, her daughter/*Story Seeds* child handler, Liyana (who was featured on the podcast) and producer Anjali Sakhrani.

argument and philosophy that children have incredible imaginations, and their creativity is where the solutions to world problems will come from.

I wanted to create a space where kids' imaginations could be centered and celebrated, and where we could listen to the magic that happens when grownups give them an equal place at the table to share their ideas and thoughts, and make time to collaborate with them.

When my daughter was 3 and 4 years old (she is now almost 12), we used to do what I called "studio" time, where we would collaborate. She would tell me a story or the beginning of a story, and I would ask her guiding questions, and she would talk and I would write and she would draw. I've always looked back on that experience and thought about how it was empowering for her as a child to be heard, to get to illustrate and think out loud even when she couldn't write, and what it meant for us to put our heads together and collaborate. All of those things definitely inspired the "seed" for *Story Seeds*.

As an editor of *Writing for Teens* magazine, I had also worked with lots of young writers and authors. There was one project I'd helped launch called *The Weekly Writer*, where an author started a story and kids helped them continue it on a weekly basis. We would pick a paragraph each week. This was a web-based project, but I've always thought about the collaborative nature of it and loved working on it.

Then, a few years ago, Literary Safari worked with an educational publisher, Benchmark, on a project where we commissioned diverse trade authors to write leveled chapter books for the

classroom market. Ideas (what I called story seeds) were provided to us by the publisher and I worked closely with authors to help them grow the seed into a story. During this project — we created more than 75 books, including graphic novels — I started thinking about this wonderful author network that I had built over the years and what joy I derived from it, as well as about how the seeds were sometimes not that great. One day I remember saying to myself, 'I wonder whether kids would have better ideas than this!'

When we finished the project, I was eager to continue working closely with authors. I had enjoyed it so much, especially the process and challenge of matching authors to story ideas. We worked with award-winning children's authors on that project and I was eager to find a way to do that for a wider audience.

All of these past experiences came together to jump-start my idea for producing a podcast called *Story Seeds*. And the subsequent work, our book and our summer camps, are all designed to give children space and opportunity to amplify their thoughts, ideas, and imagination.

**How has the pandemic and virtual learning changed your studio's approach?** We certainly had to pivot in terms of our own production style and process. We began producing episodes of *Story Seeds* that involved remote collaboration between kids and authors. For example, even though one of our featured authors, Tracey Baptiste, lives in Englewood, and her kid match, Amalia, age 13, lives in Central Jersey, we brought them together to develop their story using a platform called Squadcast. Like all media

## FAVORITE FOLLOWS

**@thekidshouldeethis** Lots of inspiring and fun books and other things for kids.

**@kidslisten** Loads of kids podcasts and lots of parent tips.

**@zaisdessertery** I love her bakery dances on TikTok.

**@drmicheleborba** Dr. Michele Borba is an educational psychologist and author of many books and her feed is filled with interesting research and parenting tips.

**@wannabeechef** I have known Chef Rama since we were teens and enjoy following her culinary adventures and healthy recipes and ideas for cooking as a family.

**@bellebarcelona** My cousin in Barcelona is a lifestyle blogger and I love following her explorations and Zen shares, especially this past year as we have all traveled less in person.

**@demarestlibrary** I'm the president of the Board of Trustees of the Demarest Free Public Library and am loving the innovation of family and adult programs that our librarians and new director, Parinda Desai, are bringing to our community.

**@hereweeread**, **@weneeddiversebooks** and **@desibookaunty** My work is heavily focused on equity, inclusion, and diversity, and there are lots of social media accounts I follow that highlight diverse children's books.

**ladyfingersletterpress.com** I love all things stationery, so this is my drool station.

**aldaily.com** A sprinkling of articles from the field of humanities — nicely curated.

**brainpickings.org** Interesting and inspiring articles across art, science, philosophy, creativity, children's books, and other strands of our search for truth, beauty, and meaning.

**onbeing.org** Always inspiring.

**thejuggernaut.com** Smart and well-produced news on South Asians and South Asia to keep me connected to the subcontinent.

**facebook.com/mylocalheroesbk** My friend Eleanor, who lives in Brooklyn, started this website during the pandemic and I love seeing the local individuals she profiles. Would love someone to start something similar here in Bergen County.

creators, there was experimentation and adaptation involved. Our podcast producer left New York City for several months to go visit her family in Miami and Suriname, so we learned to adapt and work remotely for over a year.

But apart from the logistics of production, the heart of what we do hasn't changed. We continued to focus on creating meaningful media for children, families, and educators and looked at the effects of the pandemic — homeschooling, increased screen time, the increased awareness of social justice issues — and developed content that filled gaps for families and educators. For example, we have been working with Stride Learning and McGraw Hill on developing culturally responsive lessons and curriculum that support

teachers in creating inclusive, equitable and anti-racist classrooms.

We also began to develop downloadable activity kits to accompany each episode of *The Story Seeds Podcast* as a supplement to remote learning. We thought that having creative writing, research, and indoor and outdoor STEM activities to tie to the listening would be a valuable way to make podcast listening more engaging, and make the experience more interactive. We called these kits the Imagination Lab, and I am quite sure that they would not have been born without the pandemic.

### Can you talk about the podcast's companion book?

*Imagination Lab: Experiments in Creativity* is an activity book that we published that grew out of the activity kits I mentioned above. It is a wonderful companion to *The Story Seeds Podcast*, as it has write-on pages and features QR codes that kids can scan to listen to an episode of the podcast, then launch their own creative experiments in writing, reading, and STEAM indoor and outdoor activities and crafts. It's techie, yet screen-free.

For each episode, we have created activities and printables that go hand-in-hand and showcase themes, author's craft and tips, and draw listeners into their own imaginations. We tried to tie the activities to different disciplines because we strongly believe that storytelling is a doorway to learn about EVERYTHING in the world. It has made me immensely happy to hear early praise for the book from teachers, parents and several publications including *Parents* magazine.

**What is the Summer of Podcasts?** This summer, we are running virtual camps on podcasting. The educator-led Summer of Podcasts classes are designed to inspire young people's imaginations through virtual meet-ups with expert podcasters and equip them with the tools they need to grow their own shows.

Our June camp was an introductory workshop that taught kids about the history of podcasting and invited them to play games and listen to different shows while putting on their producer's hat to design a show. In our July mini-camp, youth podcasters shared their techniques and processes and inspired kids to make their own shows, and our August immersive camp will feature a mix of guest presenters and hands-on activities to get kids to create their own audio experiments.

I believe podcasting gets kids to explore their curiosities while building research, listening, writing, organizational, and public speaking skills. It offers a perfect opportunity to engage children in project-based learning and STEAM education while combating the summer learning slide. More information is available at [storyseeds.com/camp](http://storyseeds.com/camp).

**What does a typical day in your week look like?** There is no typical day, really. Some weeks, I'm spending my days deeply immersed in client



**INSPIRATION** Newbery Honor-winning author of *The Night Diary*, Veera Hiranandani, collaborates with Willa at the library of Blue School in lower Manhattan.

work. Other days, I find myself working on proposals for new client work or reading the most current research on play and learning science. And other days, I'm working on producing new content or marketing and outreach plans for Literary Safari's own products, such as *The Story Seeds Podcast*.

This is why I love what I do. I love building strong teams, finding talented storytellers and educators, learning about new topics and finding ways to make them accessible and interesting to young audiences. I geek out over new research about learning science and count myself lucky that I get to learn about new topics and content areas so deeply, and have the challenge of figuring out how to train writers to explain them simply to young audiences.

I'm currently working from home most of the time, so I am also involved in my school district's Cultural Arts Committee, thinking about how to make the arts more connected to learning, and I'm also finishing out my term as president of the Demarest Free Public Library Board of Trustees. So there are weekly responsibilities on that front, as we are engaged in our strategic planning process at the moment and thinking about ways to make the library a more meaningful part of our community.

**What are your future aspirations?** The way I see it: storytelling and the arts are a doorway through which children and families can explore all sorts of topics, from science and mathematics to civics and geography.

I am excited about continuing my journey as a children's media producer and creating experiences for children and families that are grounded in the 4 C's of 21st-century education — creativity, critical thinking, communication and collaboration — as well as celebrating diversity, inclusion, and global citizenship. It's what we need now more than ever. ■

## FAVORITE THINGS TO DO IN BERGEN

### Allison Park, Englewood Cliffs

A little hidden gem with amazing views of the Hudson.

**Cooper's Pond, Bergenfield** As a history buff, it's neat to walk amongst some old buildings and discover Bergen County history.

### Demarest Nature Center, Demarest and Closter Nature Center, Closter

**Francy's Ice Cream, Bergenfield** The owners are of Filipino descent and create unique flavors like roasted pineapple with lime and a dizzying variety of tropical fruit sorbets.

**G&T Deli, Bergenfield** They make a popular street food from Trinidad called doubles. It's basically curried chickpeas (or channa) sandwiched between two small pooris (Indian deep-fried flatbread) with a kickin' hot sauce. Trinidad has a long history of connection to India, and this food is inspired by that.

**Dulce De Leche, Englewood** This Argentinian cafe is our favorite for pastries, cakes and delicious open-faced tatin sandwiches.

**Noches de Colombia, Englewood** Great for smoothies and cheesy pan de bono.

**Subzi Bazaar, Rochelle Park** People often ask me where I like to eat my Indian food. This tiny takeout place makes real authentic desi food.

**Sadhya, Englewood** They specialize in cuisine from the southern state of Kerala.

**Madison Avenue Cafe, Cresskill** Great service and incredible Lebanese food. I love their Zatar bread with labneh breakfast.