



T H E L A S T I N G

Menlo Park's Jan and Carey Cook have taken a passion for words and turned it into an extraordinary learning tool for children. Gentry reports.



J O Y O F W O R D S

TEXT BY ELYCE MELMON • PHOTOGRAPHY BY RIO COSTANTINI, WWW.RIOPHOTO.NET



hen I was your age, we . . ." How many generational conversations begin with that phrase? Grandparents insist that in "their day" school was the happy hub of social involvement, scholarly achievement, and youthful romance. Octogenarian memories are laced with long after-school walks, football games, Sadie

Hawkins' Day dances, fiery debates, and devoted community service. Have they simply forgotten the perils of performing below average, of missing deadlines? Have they mitigated the threat of fierce competition, the anguish of stringent exams, or is it true that school used to be a worthwhile escape, used to be more fun? It is all too apparent in 2003 that California schools have suffered an embarrassing decline. After school activities are often measured by the way they contribute to a transcript. Today's youth are stressed by the prospect of batteries of tests. There is a society plagued by scores.

The Scholastic Aptitude Test, introduced in 1926 by Princeton psychology professor Carl Brigham, was at first an innovative tool that carried little clout. While the admirable intent of the SAT was to create a democratic meritocracy for prestigious colleges by obviating the bias of diverse backgrounds, the result has been quite the contrary. As the SAT has become an important measurement of ability and widely used indicator of potential, it



Creating interactive activities and puzzles that are both grade level and thematically organized, they began to realize their personal and professional goals of immersing participants in "the joy of discovering and learning new words and their relationship with one another."

has also become big business in America. The routinely required exam triggered test preparation companies that give the academic advantage to those who can afford the high cost of tutoring. In New York City, coaches are available ranging from \$150 to \$450 per hour. Their promise of elevated scores garners approximately \$25,000 a year per student, translating to a multi-million-dollar business. The Kaplan and Princeton Review courses, popular in California, are considerably less expensive at \$799 and \$899 for

14 to 16 sessions. Clearly, the advantage is to students of affluent families. Squeezing tedious three-hour lessons into weekend activities quickly demolishes the "fun" of schools so fondly remembered by elders.

Many enter the controversy over inequities of our educational system. Two people, however, in the midst of Menlo Park, have done much more than converse or complain. An institutional stock broker with an innate passion for words and fascination



with cartoons, and his wife, a dedicated teacher with years of experience helping students master a foreign language, developed a program that invites youngsters around the world to enjoy the lively art of vocabulary building. In May of 1997, Jan and Carey Cook opened the doors of Vocabulary University, admitted anyone with a computer. Tuition? Zero. Creating interactive activities and puzzles that are both grade level and thematically organized, they began to realize their personal and professional goals of immersing participants in "the joy of discovering and learning new words and their relationship with one another." A few self-motivated moments here or there can do wonders to improve the skills promulgated in the classroom. Their motto is to put the fun back into education; a fringe benefit is improved test scores. Anyone can log on to the free sessions taught by a whimsical faculty, including such luminaries as Dick Shinary, Canny Nym, and Etta Molly



many books, CDs, computers, and sentimental memorabilia of an active family life.

Carey Orr Cook reflects the inspiration of a multi-generational childhood. He grew up in his grandfather's Illinois home with his divorced mother and older brother. It was a newspaper family. His grandfather Carey Orr won a Pulitzer Prize for his popular political cartoons that appeared in full color on the front pages of *The Chicago Tribune*. Dinner conversations frequently

brought children into the world of semantics, journalism, and politics. Bampa, as he was fondly known, imprinted his love of words upon his grandsons; they were surrounded by books exploring classic, historic, and contemporary relevance. They learned to intimately respect the value of concision and precision as they witnessed Bampa's struggle to find just the right caption. They gained a reverence for Mark Twain's wisdom:

"The difference between the right word and almost the right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug."

While his brother carried out family tradition by attending Yale University, Carey Cook expressed his desire to "go west." Upon graduation from the prestigious prep school Andover, he chose to attend Stanford University. Besides the usual freshman courses and a heavy dose of mathematics, he enrolled in art classes, rightening his link to his maternal grandfather. At the same time, Jan Beutell was attending Northwestern, majoring in French

ROOTONYM
by Jan and Carey Orr Cook

1. A tumultuous state of affairs; any overwhelming situation (noun); from Dutch

M _ _ _ S _ _ _

Root "malen & strom" = grind & stream

2. A place of great happiness and joy; heaven, as the final abode of the righteous (noun); from Persian

P _ _ _ _ D _ _ _

Root "para & daaza" = around & wall

3. To cheat out of money or other assets; to obtain by fraud or deceit (verb); from German

S _ _ _ _ _ _ _

Root "schwindeln" = to defraud

4. Any seemingly magical process of changing ordinary materials into objects of merit (noun); from Arabic

A _ _ _ _ _ _ _

Root "al-kimiya" = art of transmuting

DIRECTIONS:
To solve the puzzle use the clues given in each box as well as in the sentences. Each hidden word uses all or part of the **MASTER ROOT**.

HINT (each hidden word comes almost directly or exactly from a foreign language into English):

- Do you think that during the Presidential Election 2000, the press encouraged a _____ of rabid feelings?
- Vacationers rave about a true American _____ the lovely islands of Hawaii whose diversity appeals to all.
- If you are not cautious, that innocent-looking lady vendor will _____ you by giving you back a counterfeit bill.
- Did you know that _____, popular until about 1700, is a blend of magic, religion and science?

Gee. Over-worked teachers and stressed students find humorous enhancement to lessons on such diverse topics as gold mines, the stock market, health and fitness, geology, Greek myths, and the rain forests.

One might imagine a large staff of researchers in a Silicon Valley glass tower industriously comparing notes. The reality is remarkably humbling. The staff consists of husband and wife engaged in a happy division of labors from their charming home in Sharon Heights. A small room off the garden houses their

with a minor in Spanish. They met while skiing in Aspen, married in June of 1966, and decided to settle in California. Cook claims he had the smell of eucalyptus in his blood as well as a desire to follow the Giants. Although he had majored in economics and became a stockbroker working as a researcher and an institutional funds specialist, he never abandoned his romantic attachment to words and graphics that was nurtured in his grandfather's home.

to welcome people of diverse ages and backgrounds to Vocabulary University.

By 1995, the puzzles were published in three Midwest newspapers and by 1997, the ideas began to grow into an independent non-profit business. They broadened their scope, thematically highlighting holidays and current events focusing on what is meaningful to young people. When research indicated that one learns a word after he encounters it twenty times, it became clear

that seven different activities stressing one set of root words was not too much. Dinner conversations at the Cook household became brainstorming sessions. "Harry Potter is hot! Let's do wizards!"

By 2001, after designing internet compatible puzzles, the fill-in-the-blank game of Rootonyms was syndicated. At the National Education Computer Conference the Cooks realized that educators currently included values in their lesson plans. With character development a new

ROOTONYM®
by Jan and Carey Orr Cook

1. A charm worn to protect the owner from evil or bring good fortune (noun)
A [] [] [] [] []
Root AMULETUM = defense

2. Magic practices performed with the supposed help from evil spirits; witchcraft (noun)
S [] [] [] [] [] []
Root SORS = fate, lot

3. A mystical word used to magically ward off misfortune, harm or illness; a magician's expression (noun)
A [] [] [] [] [] [] [] [] [] []
Root ABRAKAS = supreme being, God

4. Any object, design or symbol believed to exercise a powerful or magical influence (noun)
T [] [] [] [] [] [] [] []
Root TELOS = completion, end

DIRECTIONS:
To solve the puzzle use the clues given in each box as well as in the sentences. Each word uses part or all of the MASTER ROOT.

1. The competitor wore his _____, a red gemstone, for luck before he entered the arena.
2. The odd scientist practiced _____ by casting spells and chanting while he created potions.
3. When the magician waved his wand and said "_____", 11 rabbits jumped out of his hat!
4. King Arthur's magic sword, the Excalibur, was a significant _____ during his reign.

With three young sons, the Cook family routine was demanding—up and out of the house at 4:30 AM, commuting to the Financial District from his home in Menlo Park, returning to the Peninsula in time to serve as coach for his sons' teams. In 1994, when the youngest was in college, Jan Cook agreed to a role reversal, enabling her husband to pursue his first love. He took a year-and-a-half leave of absence and channeled his enthusiasm for wordsmithing toward a development of games and puzzles that would increase vocabulary skills of middle and high school students. He rapidly discovered that "it is the sound bite world."

ROOTONYM®
by Jan and Carey Orr Cook

1. A dessert of layered ice cream with fruit or syrup, served in a tall glass (noun)
P [] [] [] [] [] []
Root PERFECTUS = perfect

2. A frozen dessert made of fruit juices, sugar, milk and egg whites (noun)
S [] [] [] [] [] []
Root SHARBAT = a drink

3. A rich-flavored Italian-style ice cream that is very smooth and soft (noun)
G [] [] [] [] [] []
Root GELARE = freeze

4. A simple carbohydrate milk sugar naturally occurring in foods like ice cream (noun)
L [] [] [] [] [] []
Root LAC = milk

DIRECTIONS:
To solve the puzzle use the clues given in each box as well as in the sentences. Each hidden word uses all or part of the MASTER ROOT.

1. My grandmother served the delicious _____ with hot fudge sauce for my birthday.
2. The people ate a combination of orange _____ and vanilla ice cream on a stick.
3. At the Italian restaurant the rich chocolate _____ was a favorite dessert.
4. Ellen couldn't eat any dairy products after learning that she was _____ intolerant.

When research indicated that one learns a word after he or she encounters it twenty times, it became clear that seven different activities stressing one set of root words was not too much.

With Jan as mentor outlining the needs and constrictions of the average classroom teacher, Cook created user-friendly characters and stimulating interactivities to motivate students. Soon, Dick Shinary and Sam Mantics headed a colorful crew

topic in curricula, the memorable family of cartoon creatures began to stress integrity, honesty, and loyalty. In addition to puzzles and games, Etta Molly Gee thoughtfully offers vocabulary lists for classic texts to accompany classroom lessons. Often these



Carey and Jan Cook

lists are culled from various English teachers who are always given credit for their suggestions. Of course, attention is paid to the challenges of the SAT. Encouragement and mentoring similar to the Princeton Review without the cost of a private class helps students prepare for standardized tests. Perhaps most inviting to individuals is the flexibility and complete anonymity . . . they can click on, do the puzzles, try to come up with the right answers, or just enjoy the cartoons and let some new vocabulary gems seep in. It is a non-threatening, non-judgmental type of learning that attempts to level the playing field.

Teachers can suggest after school assignments, or they can download lesson plans. Cook is quick to insist this is not curriculum, it is simply a tool, a teacher's aid. She or he is free to use it however it best suits professional needs. A teacher can sign in and receive 39 weeks of vocabulary drills generally offering 16 words for every two roots. These are called RSVP—root specific vocabulary plans. In a free, playful, painless procedure,

college applicants can improve their SAT scores. By typing in www.vocabulary.com, the participant is immediately served an array of synonym and antonym encounters, true or false questions, crosswords, features on the most important SAT words, lists of words from classical texts, and ever popular Rootonym, a feature that has now been syndicated by both the Tribune Media Services and Universal Media/uclick.

The individual who comes off his own server, reviews the site and returns to it, is known as a unique visitor. Vocabulary University welcomes over 100,000 unique visitors a month. Participants in over 13,000 schools have registered. From the far reaches of urban America, people have expressed their gratitude. A couple in Enterprise, Alabama, who home school their daughters, a teacher of ESL adult classes in Plymouth, Michigan, a deacon in a church in Leedey, Oklahoma, who uses the exercises to entertain people waiting for dinner, are just a few who feel as though they have found a gold mine of information. Fan mail arrives electronically from all over the world. Teachers and individuals in Japan, China, Canada, England, Africa, Russia, and Argentina have clicked on and benefited from the thought-provoking lists and games. What was once a hobby has mushroomed into a time-consuming business. Jan does all the editing and responds to email. Carey comes up with cartoons, handles what little public relations they manage, and sees it as a business. It is only human for an observer to ask, "What's in it for you?" So far, it has required an outlay of capital that the Cooks have generously provided. Since the services are free, the Cooks refer to profit as "psychic income." "You can't eat steak on it, but it is real and rewarding," Carey proclaims. Clearly the project is a living model that giving is receiving.

Jan has retired from her teaching position at Sacred Heart School and considers this her full-time volunteerism, yet she is cautious not to let it consume a life that happily revolves around children and grandchildren. Carey has always been passionate about problem solving and finds vocabulary and root words a fascinating avocation. He is currently involved in three small businesses: the daily puzzles that run six days a week in newspapers in the Midwest, the www.vocabulary.com site with its games, tests, and word lists, and the syndication of Rootonym in Sunday newspapers and online.

While the future of the SAT is unpredictable, the enduring delight in language and value of vocabulary can be. If the trend to drop the SAT as a prime criterion for acceptance to college escalates, students now hooked on the Cooks' clever cartoons and puzzles may find it difficult to abandon their friendship with Sam Mantics and Cinnny Nym. Once the fun of learning and word-smithing is discovered, it becomes a life-long addiction. ■