

Behind the Scenes with Denise Kelley Transcript of Episode 403

Julie Walker: Hello, and welcome to the Arts of Language Podcast with Andrew Pudewa, founder of the Institute for Excellence in Writing or as many like to say, “IEW.” My name is Julie Walker, and I’m honored to serve Andrew and IEW as the chief marketing officer. Our goal is to equip teachers and teaching parents with methods and materials, which will aid them in training their students to become confident and competent communicators and thinkers.

Julie Walker: So, Andrew, on occasion, I will be at a homeschool convention or at a school convention and someone will come up to me and say, you're Julie Walker. You're on that podcast. This is a recent development for me and obviously it's because we do this podcast together. I know you get this all the time. I know you get stopped at airports. I know people are asking for your autograph. So it's kind of the public face of IEW. You more than me. I'm just the public voice, audio, of IEW.

Andrew Pudewa: I'm glad people notice and like you.

Julie Walker: Yeah, it is fun. It is fun. They sometimes say okay say something I'm gonna close my eyes, and then they'll know it's me because they recognize my voice, which is really fun. But you know, of course at a company, at a business, at I almost want to say ministry because so much of what we do, we're just giving and we just love to help people out, but there's so many behind the scenes people. And I wanted to take a moment to showcase just one of those behind the scenes people today.

Andrew Pudewa: She's been behind the scenes for a long, long time.

Julie Walker: And doing many, many different things. So we have in the studio with us all the way from Lynchburg, Virginia, my good friend, Denise Kelley. So welcome to our podcast, Denise.

Denise Kelley: Thank you. Wonderful to be here.

Julie Walker: So, I think it would be fun for our listeners to kind of hear your journey, how you even found out about Andrew Pudewa, and why you were interested in coming alongside and joining him in this great work that we're doing here.

Denise Kelley: Well, that was a long time ago. My oldest son is 34 right now, and I found IEW when he was in fourth grade. And it gave me so many answers to so many problems that I was immediately pulled into not only the writing program but also listening to Andrew as he did conference talks and found so many answers to questions in general about my philosophy of homeschooling. Only he was able to articulate them. And he really did shift my whole paradigm of education. I knew I didn't like the way I had been educated, but I didn't know what to do with that. And so there are many, many talks that I listened to many, many times.

And that helped me to be able to figure out how that was going to look in my own homeschool. And so that was really where it started from there because I attended the HEAV State Virginia Convention every year. So that was twenty-three consecutive years. And in that period of time, I wanted to volunteer in the IEW booth. And so I contacted IEW, asked

what I should do to be able to do that, was put in touch with the exhibitor of the booth for Virginia. And that began my journey of understanding more in depth the product that we were selling, and it was really through that that I met Andrew. I had already been in contact with Jill Pike. We called it the loop back then, but it was a group where people would ask questions about the product, and she allowed me to come on and help her answer those questions. And so that just all led to getting to know the company better. And Andrew, when he came to HEAV a couple years in a row, he was there for the whole time teaching many, many seminars, but that gave us an opportunity to get to know each other. And so when the Exhibitor Coordinator position was open through Jill Pike as well, I was invited to join the team as the Exhibitor Coordinator. Many years of setting up those events with the exhibitors that we had from Florida to Hawaii then led into being an event coordinator and Andrew's event coordinator. And from there I moved into the online classes.

We had just started our online class program and truth be told when Julie asked me if I would be interested in teaching online classes, I thought it was a terrible idea and it wouldn't go anywhere because I couldn't imagine not teaching in a classroom. I was so wrong, and I'm so glad that I didn't articulate that to her but took the position and fell in love just immediately with the students that we had and the teachers that I was working with and eventually, became the online class director. And in that period of time, there was also a shift for needing someone, a single individual, to oversee the product development. And so I moved out of the event coordinator position into product development manager. And from there have built a team of editors and designers. And we see product either, we either will revise products that we have, or we start from the, just the idea, the first concept of the product, and we see that, that whole process through to sending it to the shipping department for them to print and ship. So that's what I do now. It's been a really wonderful journey, and I can't even imagine what my life would have been like without IEW, who I would have been instead.

Andrew Pudewa: It's funny to think we've been doing this all together like a third of our entire lives. Basically, that gives away our ages. But it's interesting because you said the product. And when you first came on, we had about one product. It was *The Teaching Writing: Structure and Style*. We didn't really have anything in the way of the theme-based books, or we had this miserable little collection of source texts, but it was very much everybody needs to find their own source texts, and that worked for some people, like you, Julie. So I'm just curious you learned the structure and style system, you started to work with your son, I assume, and did you have to find all your own source texts?

Denise Kelley: I did. And that was somewhat of a struggle. But like I said, I listened to your talks over and over. And so I feel like from that, I understood the concept of if you're doing this in science, then just use some of the material that you have for science; if you're doing this in history... So it was that whole idea of we're going to fit the writing into everything else that we're studying instead of making it a separate writing class. And I also am very thankful that I was homeschooling with some ladies that were older than I was, but they had children around the same ages as my children. And they also were very excited about IEW. And so we started a writing club. And in that writing club, though, the main purpose for it was audience. So whatever a child had written that month, they could bring it and they could read it at writing club. One of my dear friends, Debbie Bourgeois, was taking IEW and she was creating little lessons for us. And so I did learn some of it from the modeling that she did, she understood things much quicker than I did. And we were just all very excited and enthusiastic about some of the things that our kids were turning out for this writing club and in their own schoolwork.

Andrew Pudewa: And your son had some real challenges with the whole reading, writing world as well. Is that correct?

Denise Kelley: One of my sons did, and it's very interesting, again, that the program worked on all levels of the different students that I've worked with over the years, whether there was any kind of struggle or whether things came naturally. And, but at the same time, some children, when things come naturally, they're not as inclined to work as hard. And so by having that clear direction for this is what you're going to do. This is how we're going to do it. They don't have to face a blank page. They have the checklist. It produced better writing with any type of student that I used it with.

Andrew Pudewa: So over the years, you have worked on many projects. What is your favorite one? Of all the things we've done, and you've had your fingers in the cooking.

Julie Walker: Well, before you even ask that question, I just would love to hear a list. I think our listeners would appreciate a list of products that her fingerprints are on.

Andrew Pudewa: We just don't have that much time. Okay, go ahead. But keep it quick. And then tell us of all those, which was your favorite project to do and why.

Denise Kelley: It's funny that you pointed out that I said the product because in my mind, everything that we do really does tie back to *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style*. That is the product. So when I became the product manager, we were working on some theme based books. And one of my main goals when I first came on, and we're still doing it some, but we don't need to as much, was aligning everything with **the** product.

So taking things that had been out there that maybe some innovations had crept in and we were Taking everything back to your teaching of the *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style* and aligning the theme based books to that so that there wasn't confusion. we certify IEW teachers.

We wanted them all to understand how to use the program correctly so that they could get the most out of it. So theme based books was what I started with as I brought on my team of editors. Heidi Thomas and Sabrina Cardinale have just been rock solid in the work that they've done with me. And so then from there we had the video courses. *Structure and Style for Students* had been already recorded or were being recorded. And so we were taking those video courses and creating curriculum to go with the video part. And that's just been a huge project where we still continue to work on that.

And *Fix It*. We decided to take a program that was winning awards and say, we can make this better. And that was something that I was a little scary because everybody loved *Fix It!* And rightly so. It's a beautiful grammar program and. We spent a couple of years together as a team, working through creating a more user friendly and really more solid grammar program, and that's our *Fix It! Grammar*, and that was very intense.

That took a lot of work, but we are just so pleased with the results of that. So I don't know, I just feel like there's lots of bits and pieces.

Andrew Pudewa: It's like your children, you can't really pick a favorite and get away with it, right?

Denise Kelley: Yeah, I love the theme based books. I love the, I feel again, just the user friendly products that we develop and give to teachers and homeschool teachers that I know

it's going to make a huge difference. Way, way back when I was first homeschooling my students in grade school, I remember my brother, I homeschooled with my brother and sister-in-law. And I remember my brother just kept saying, just, Remember reading, writing, and arithmetic because so many of us homeschool moms were so concerned about everything everybody else was doing and feeling inadequate. And he just kept saying reading, writing, and arithmetic. And really wasn't until my boys went to college that I found out how true that was and how important the writing part of education was going to be to them when they went to college. There were lots and lots of other things that I got all worked up about and wanted to make sure that they had this course or that course. And when it came down, all of those things could have been left undone as long as they were learning to write well. And I feel like even definitely into their adult life.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, I just finished a book called *Reading for the Long Run*, which is about the importance of written communication and that when children struggle with reading through a visual or attention or processing issues, it's worth the battle because of the world that it opens up. And. The author talked a little bit about how writing really crystallizes thinking in a way that no other activity will do. Jordan Peterson also talks about this, that writing does something that we just never encounter in any other activity. We can talk all day, but when we have to write something down, it changes the way in which we think about the thing that we're thinking about in a very good way. We're in this world of everybody saying, Oh, nobody's going to have to learn these basic skills anymore because you can just tell your, your computer can just read stuff to you, and then you can just ask ChatGPT to write stuff for you, and who needs to know math because you can just have a computer do math. And the level of humanity that we face losing in this abdication of teaching basic skills. A lot of young, newer homeschool moms come into this world in this battle between technology and the brain, essentially, that the technology will atrophy the skills which it replaces and in doing so it will fail to develop the human potential of the brain. But it's interesting because you also were pioneering the establishment of these online classes, which I also, in the beginning, was somewhat opposed to. I really didn't want to do it for various reasons, mostly philosophical rather than logistical or business. But that's interface of technology with the cultivation of the basic skills. So I'd be fascinated for you to talk a little bit about how you perceive. And we've had thousands and thousands and thousands of students going through this for years and years now. How does our system balance those things? How do we use technology but also draw out the maximum benefits for the students who are engaged in these online classes? How does that work?

Denise Kelley: I would say that one of the things I was concerned about was that I wouldn't be able to get to know my students the same.

Andrew Pudewa: The personal relationship, that part that's so important when you look someone in the face.

Denise Kelley: Yes. And, and I still, I'm not quite sure how it happens. I guess it shows the power of the written word, because when I'm teaching a live class, my eyes are always watching chat. And so there's interaction with the students as they're using chat to ask questions

Andrew Pudewa: not chat GPT. The chat function so that there's communication in the classroom.

Denise Kelley: Yes. So, so, and they can see me. I have my video camera on and they can see me and hear me, but they're putting their answers to questions in the chat function. And it's just, there are some times where they just they make me laugh. They ask great questions. They need things that we're going over. They need more information. They need me to clarify for them. And so, yeah. I feel like if I had had that, when, especially when I was starting out with IEW, I feel like I would have gotten further along in the program a lot faster. We use Toolbox as our platform, and so it has messaging, it's called messages, and it's email, basically, but they're always sending messages to the teachers, getting clarification. Mom also will sometimes jump in or, or even email directly if she needs more information or help with something, or just wants to give some insight into what's going on with the students. So the relational part is something that I think is very important. I will say with our online classes as the online class director, one of my biggest, most important parts of the job, I think, is my interaction with the instructors that we have. Our instructors are vetted carefully, and they're all certified instructors. But there's a sense in which just working with them so that they also are having this relational experience with the students, and they're just wonderful. They're just a wonderful group of educators who care about their students, and our program gives us all the tools that we need to be teaching this well. It actually makes it easy to be a good instructor when you have such good, good tools to work with.

Andrew Pudewa: I'm always very frustrated when I do meet someone, and it's fairly rare, but I'll meet someone who said, Oh, we tried that and, and it didn't work. And of course I want to, without being, giving the fifth degree interrogation, I would like to find out how did this happen? That you tried IEW and it didn't work? And almost always it was some other teacher, either online or in some co-op somewhere, who, at least in the stories I would get, just wasn't doing it with fidelity. And without criticizing some random person I don't know, I always want to say, well, maybe if you tried again in a different way, you would have a better experience. Have you had any people that fall into that category of like, I tried it, but I didn't like it, but I'm willing to try again and then kind of a better experience, a conversion even?

Denise Kelley: Yes, absolutely. Because we do have people that come to IEW online thinking that they already know the system. They understand the system. Maybe their child's been like in a co-op for a couple of years. And what we find out in working with the student is that it hasn't been taught with fidelity. So there's a disconnect for what was the real purpose. And we are Structure and Style. And it seems like I know when I first started the style was such a big deal for me because it just was fun, cool things to play with those words, but the structure is the beauty of the program. And I feel like that's a lot of times if somebody has not gone through the *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style* course for the teacher training to understand the program well, they miss sometimes why the structure is important and that we're not squashing the creativity of their child to not allow them to just write however they want. We're giving them the structure that will then help them to become better writers.

Andrew Pudewa: That is such a key point. I think everybody comes in and they get a dress up checklist and then suddenly their kid's writing is more interesting and they think, well, that's the magic. But if you stick with it for a few years, you see it's the structural models that increase the skill. Of the thinking, because the questions that are required for the student to ask themselves in order to create the content, to invent the content, that's what really forms a cognitive process in a bigger way. You can tell people that all day, but I don't think they get it until they persist with it a few years and start to see those profound good results.

The other thing I would comment on what you just said is recently we had on our podcast Scott Newstock, who wrote a book called *How to Think Like Shakespeare*. And one of the chapters is on constraint, I believe. And this idea that in the classical and Renaissance education model, when you had forms to follow, it actually creates greater creativity. That's something that our modern freedom-obsessed mentality doesn't necessarily grasp. Is that—you mean I have to follow your rules? And I can't do anything I want. But then what happens is you find out that the whole invention process becomes easier, and you can go deeper and you get a better quality of thought and writing because of the constraint as opposed to say just go anywhere with it. But I've used this in other talks, the analogy of the mile wide and a quarter inch versus a chasm, which you can fill up and you get a whole lot more and a whole lot more lasting because your quarter-inch deep will evaporate, but you'll have content of substance remaining in your deeper well, and that's because it's focused. It's bringing all that into one place

Denise Kelley: I know that there's been many times where when something I've written has been better because of a word count that I had to get it down to a lower word count.

Andrew Pudewa: And we don't use word count with students, just to clarify, but yeah,

Denise Kelley: No, I mean in my life personally.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, and then, that constraint, that focus, that direction that it gives,

Julie Walker: Well, Denise and I have been having conversations this week with some of our team members about specifically those constraints in Unit 3. It's a three paragraph model. Well, what if a student wants to write a 10 paragraph model? Well, that's not a Unit 3, that's something that you might be able to do later on as a Unit 3, or it's something that you can do outside of the Unit 3 class.

And I think, Denise, and it's kind of back to the curriculum that you work on, that you're so good at saying, no, this is, this is what we're going to provide to the instructor so that the instructor can appropriately convey our methodology to the student in a way that's dealt out at the right speed. It's not too fast, we're not dumping things on all at once, it's easy plus one, but it's clear. And I think when Andrew you were saying it didn't work, I wonder were they using curriculum that either someone else came up with outside of IEW? Were they trying to write their own lessons? And Denise and I, we've also had the conversation of, it's actually really hard to write your own source text.

And so I think that's something that we want to be able to provide to teachers and parents is something that we know will work for these units.

Andrew Pudewa: I have said many times in the process of teaching the TWSS, anything the child can read will work as a source text. That is a true statement, but it's also a case where that is more possible with the greater experience of the teacher.

And now we have with the growth of homeschooling and charter schools and hybrid schools and pods and cottage and all of this, we find a lot of people moving into this realm of we want to teach this, but we don't have any background. And we have to learn it now and teach it tomorrow. And so, yes, that's why the theme-based books and the SSS source texts and all these things are so helpful to get the teacher going successfully. And then I think teachers can

say, Oh, we're reading about this or we're studying that or talking about this. I could take that and use it in place of this. And get the same good result, but you can't just go there from zero.

Denise Kelley: Our, our product really does set people up for success. Initially, if they learn it from our product, then they really can go anywhere with it and using other things. So we set them up for success.

Julie Walker: One thing that Denise and I have always appreciated, Andrew, over the years is our 100%. She said success. And I'm like, yeah, we guarantee it. We have a 100 percent satisfaction guarantee on everything we sell. And that means that we had better be pretty confident in what we're putting out there to make sure it will be successful. So that kind of

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and that was an idea that I had at the very inception is, I don't want anyone to ever buy this and wish they hadn't. Statistically, because I do look at some numbers, our returns rate is phenomenally low for the publishing industry, even with that guarantee. So that's a good one. Well, I guess the question would be—maybe there's people listening to us today, and they have heard about IEW or not, and they wonder. Well, what's the best thing to do? Okay, I'm sold. I want to try this, especially because it's guaranteed. I want to try it. What is, in your decades of, decades, oh gosh, that does make us sound old, doesn't it? Because it's at least two, so it's plural. But in your couple decades of seeing us go through all this and everything and being on the cutting edge of what we're doing right now, What's your best recommendation for people to get just, okay, I want to start. I got a 10 year old. He doesn't like writing.

Denise Kelley: Well, the student.

Andrew Pudewa: And I got a 12 year old who's crazy about writing.

Denise Kelley: The *Structure and Style for Students* is an excellent place to get started because you teach the lessons on the video, so there's that pressure is taken off of the instructor, all of the lessons are laid out, the source materials already there for you. So I love the using the SSS to get people started.

Andrew Pudewa: And we, we use the SSS in the online classes, correct?

Denise Kelley: We've expanded in the teaching, like, clarification for anything that was taught in the lessons, and we also use *Fix It! Grammar*. We have a grammar component in our weekly classes. So, so, and that's a great place to start too if you want to sign up for online classes.

Andrew Pudewa: I got this cute little email from some girl. I don't know. She's probably when she say seventh grade and she goes. Pudewa, the king of *Fix It!*

Julie Walker: Oh, wow.

Andrew Pudewa: I thought, that's dumb, because other than having the original idea, I was not very involved in the creation of this curriculum.

Julie Walker: I would be remiss if I did not say we actually have a bundle where we bundle together the *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style*, that teacher training course that we've

talked about incessantly, the *Structure and Style for Students*, and a level of *Fix It! Grammar*, all bundled together. And you actually save a significant amount of money.

Andrew Pudewa: Then you can enroll in an online class if you really, really want to.

Julie Walker: If you really need the most help, we've got you covered.

Andrew Pudewa: What are some sneak peeks of things that you are excited about in the next few years?

Denise Kelley: Well, I love the fact that in our idea of a well rounded education, we've already been doing things that have to do with speech. That's a beautiful product. Um, the university writing course that you, you also finished not too long ago recording. We have ideas for a poetry program that I'm very excited about. So I just feel like the good ideas just keep rolling.

Andrew Pudewa: I think one of the best things about being a business that's also really a ministry to people that its very easy to talk to people with true, genuine desire to help them. Not just to sell something because there's other things out there we're competing with. But this, it works and we know that if people will just step in the water then they will have a good experience, and we don't have to be afraid about sharing that with everyone. And you're particularly good at that, I think, Denise. I remember the old days at the booth, and I would kind of hang out and overhear you and other people working these conventions and thinking, she just said that so well. And the fact that she's this homeschool mom who's doing it works even better than if I were to say it, because yeah maybe I'm trying to sell something. I'm not, but it's that personal mom to mom connection, and now we're seeing it in the schools that teacher to teacher connection that I think is so valuable.

Julie Walker: Well, Denise, it's always a pleasure to have you here in Oklahoma. I always beg to have her move here, but she's not.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, why not?

Julie Walker: Because she loves her family in Virginia.

Denise Kelley: I love being here. Thank you.

Julie Walker: Thank you, Denise, so much for being here.

Julie Walker: Thanks so much for joining us. If you enjoyed this episode and want to hear more, please subscribe to our podcast in iTunes, Google podcasts, Stitcher, or Spotify. Or just visit us each week at IEW.com/podcast. Here you can also find show notes and relevant links from today's broadcast. One last thing: would you mind going to iTunes to rate and review our podcast? This really helps other smart, caring listeners like you find us. Thanks so much.