

Sandra Helmig: Founding Member of SENIA Talks 20 Years of SENIA

1. Please give our SENIA Community a brief introduction about yourself?

Like many special educators I stumbled into our field quite by accident, I was originally a High School Geography teacher in the UK at a time when streaming in schools was common. At that time it was almost traditional that new teachers to the profession were given what was then known as the “bottom sets.” Even at that time I was horrified by this exclusivity and fought to raise the profile of the students in my classes who were dismissed as students who could not pass exams. To this day, I think I became a more creative educator because I had to learn to engage a range of learners. However, one particular student, who had regular violent outbursts, ultimately led me to pursue a postgraduate qualification in emotional and behavioral difficulties and it was this which led me on the path to learning support. I sensed that I needed to understand behavior and emotions associated with learning as much as I needed to understand learning and this is still at the center of my work with students.

I have been lucky to work internationally and in the past 25 years have worked in Tanzania, China, Thailand, Switzerland and from next year will add Singapore to that list.

2. Could you give us the back story on how SENIA started and how you became a part of SENIA (SENIC)?

SENIA is to this day, one of my proudest professional achievements. In 2002, I was living in China and working at the Western Academy of Beijing (WAB) when the admissions department put me in touch with a family who was seeking a school for their daughter with Downs Syndrome. Dolores van Dongen was a Dutch national and had been living in Beijing for a long time. She wanted to find a school for her daughter but came across many roadblocks in this pursuit. Ultimately, she decided that she wanted to set up a ‘facility’ for children with specific needs and to support their parents to allow their children to thrive socially, emotionally and educationally. She sought out the expertise of professionals in Beijing to set up the Sunshine School in Beijing which ultimately became an integrated unit within the Montessori School of Beijing, led by Angie Chen. The wonderful by-product of this is that Dolores brought together many LS professionals and parents of children with LS needs, which ultimately became the Special Education Network in China (SENIC). Tanya Farrol, a current SENIA Board Member and my WAB colleague at the time, was also one of the original founders. She and I saw the opportunity to expand this into a professional resource, and ran our first conference from WAB with teachers from other

Chinese international schools. I think our first conference had around 23 participants in 2003.

3. What was your favorite memory of SENIA?

Our first meeting was in a basement and it literally felt like an ‘underground meeting.’ Setting up organizations in China at that time was a delicate proposition and had to be handled as such. The development of those early organic ideas was so exciting. Seeing ideas turn into reality was incredibly fulfilling. I remember attending a SENIA conference in Thailand where the participants filled a whole school auditorium. There was an activity where we all stood at the beginning and were asked “who was at the conference in 2015, remained standing if you were at the conference in 2014?” and so on. I was one of a few left standing at the end when the participants were asked “who was at the first conference in 2003?” I realized that I was one small piece of jigsaw of all different shapes and sizes of enthusiastic people who made SENIA happen and keep SENIA going.

4. What do you see as the biggest accomplishment of SENIA that you’re proud of?

I am so proud to have seen the organization grow from the eight of us in a basement in someone’s house in Beijing in 2002 to it being a global organization supporting educators, parents, students, specialists and so many others across the world. Together, we are advancing a mission of inclusivity for the young people we have contact with in our various roles.

5. What is your biggest “lesson learned” or “take away” that you could see to be useful even after 20 years?

As an educator, it is easy for me to project the importance of learning as an academic pursuit, but it was my student way back in 1995, who used violence as an output to express his frustration, that helped me to realize that developing relationships beyond academic conversations with students is at the center of all I do. Developing relationships with students takes precedence over teaching academic content and skills. That can mean the learning process can take longer than the time we have but there is no learning when positive relationships are not in place.

6. What is your biggest hope for SENIA in the next 20 years? In what ways do you see this organization growing?

I have loved seeing SENIA local chapters sprout up all over the world. A cafe conversation I had with April Remfrey, here in Switzerland three years ago, inspired April to set up SENIA Switzerland, a thriving group of special needs advocates.

However, one of our HUGEST SENIA advocates, Lori Boll has taken SENIA to new heights. Her committed leadership has been incredibly inspiring to witness.

Seeing Lori and her team develop the online conferences means SENIA has not only kept current but is actually thriving in this new reality. It will be great to get back to 'in-person' conferences as it is our real-life connections that all of us involved in the world of special education value so much, but it is great to know that not even a pandemic will stop our pursuit of inclusivity in the forums we all operate within!