
“C-H-I-H-U-A-H-U-A”



JENNIFER REINKE'S 1967 NATIONAL SPELLING BEE CHAMPIONSHIP

BY MARY ANN MAY-PUMPHREY

The year 1967 was the State of Nebraska's centennial. It was also the year that a Nebraskan—Deshler's fourteen-year-old Jennifer Reinke—won the National Spelling Bee.

The second of five children, Jennifer (Jennie) was born in Deshler, although her family lived for the first four years of her life just east of Byron. Her family then moved to Hebron, where Jennifer attended kindergarten and first grade. The family finally settled into a modest frame house in Deshler. After spending her second grade year in the Deshler Public Schools, Jennifer joined her older sister Pat at Peace Lutheran School, a fateful move as it turned out.

Peace Lutheran had just three combined-grade classrooms during Jennifer's years there: third-fourth grades, fifth-sixth grades, and seventh-eighth grades. The principal, Marvin Engel, was also the teacher for the seventh-eighth grades. A 1966 *Omaha World-Herald* article about the Midwest Spelling Bee labeled Engel "one of the area's top spelling teachers," due to six of the previous eight Thayer County Spelling Bees having been won by one of Engel's students. One of these six Engel students—Sharon Gerdes—had gone on to win the 1964 Midwest Spelling Bee but failed to capture the ultimate crown, the National Spelling Bee championship.¹ Mr. Engel's encouragement and Ms. Gerdes' win inspired Jennifer's interest in becoming a spelling champion herself.

The afternoon of Saturday, March 11, 1967, was the Thayer County Spelling Bee's competition for seventh and eighth graders, the latter of which included Jennifer. Ms. Reinke has an astonishingly good memory of the details of that day, recalling that her mother gave her a ride to Peace Lutheran School, during which she offered her usual advice—to be a good sport even if Jennifer didn't win. Mr. Engel then transported the four seventh and eighth grade contestants from Peace Lutheran to the County Courthouse in Hebron, where the Bee was held.²

Contestants sat on the courtroom benches, with only a piece of handheld cardboard to back their entry sheets. There were five rounds of ten words each in this all-written contest. After each round, students were allowed to ask questions about the words in that round before handing in their entries. However, no students were eliminated until after five rounds were completed. Individual rounds were held after this point. This format meant that even the winner could have a misspelled word. Jennifer misspelled just one—"talcum."³

After her win, Mr. Engel drove his four students to a local drive-in for an ice cream treat before returning to the school, where Jennifer called her mother to ask for a ride home. She recalls that although both her parents were proud of her, the family did not celebrate her win. After a day or two, she began preparing for the Midwest Spelling Bee, which was less than a month away.⁴

Saturday, April 8, 1967, was a lovely spring day in Omaha with temperatures hovering in the sixties and a light breeze. Jennifer's mother had sent the two youngest children in the family to stay with relatives, so that the rest of the family could get up early in the morning for the three-hour car trip to Omaha's Sheraton-Fontenelle Hotel where the Midwest Spelling Bee was slated to begin at 9:00 a.m. Jennifer was slightly worried that the family would oversleep.⁵

The Bee began with a written contest consisting of six ten-word rounds, which narrowed the field from seventy-three contestants to fifteen. After a brief break, the oral contest began.⁶ Each of the fifteen contestants was assigned a number displayed on a poster hung around each contestant's neck. Jennifer was assigned number 15 but this was not the largest number of any contestant—Bee officials assigned contestants numbers between 5 and 20, deliberately omitting the number 13.⁷

By the beginning of the twentieth round of the oral contest, just three contestants were left:

The modest home in Deshler where the Reinke family lived during Jennifer's spelling bee years. Reinke family



Jennifer, seventh grader Tom Vinton from Whitman, and eighth grader Jane Hanson from Arapahoe. After Tom Vinton misspelled “minatory,” the word “assimilated” was given to Jane Hanson, who misspelled it. Bee rules required a contestant to spell the last missed word correctly and also a new word in order to be crowned the champion. Jennifer had no problem dispatching first “assimilated,” and then her new word—“intermittent”—making her the 1967 Midwest Spelling Bee champion.⁸

A photo taken by the *Omaha World-Herald* shortly after her win shows a beaming Jennifer along with her parents—Richard and Edna Reinke, sister Pat, younger sister Sandi, and her teacher/principal Marvin Engel. The entire group, including Mr. Engel's wife, Leora, was present for the lunch sponsored by the *World-Herald* following the Bee.

Deshler's former Peace Lutheran School, where Jennifer attended grades 3-8. Bob Reinke



Afterward, Jennifer accompanied her mother and sisters on a shopping trip in the downtown Omaha area, but was too elated to select anything for herself. The family celebration continued that evening over a dinner at Omaha's Diplomat Hotel where her father often stayed on business trips. He ordered champagne for the occasion; Jennifer was allowed to taste it but didn't care for any more than that one sip!⁹

Back home in Deshler following her win, Jennifer began studying for the National Spelling Bee championship. Her father gave her three spelling dictionaries and a *Webster's Third International Dictionary* as study aids. She had just one day less than two months in which to prepare.¹⁰

Spelling contests of one form or another have been a part of the United States throughout its history. In the colonial era, spelling contests were part of the educational system. By the 1800s, they had become social events held at schoolhouses in the evenings, focused on fun rather than orthography. This frivolity concerned the Puritans, leading to the contests being called “spelling schools” in an effort to downplay their entertainment value. As New England left behind the colonial era, “spelling schools” came to be viewed as less relevant. However, generations of Yankee school teachers who joined the westward movement took the concept with them, leading to the advent of spelling contests in the West, including many outside the school system. As the West came to be more settled, these contests faded from popularity; by the end of the Civil War, Westerners viewed them as a thing of the past, just as New Englanders had done decades earlier.¹¹

The 1871 publication of *The Hoosier Schoolmaster*—a romantic novel in which a young schoolmaster bests the small town's champion speller then falls in love with his last competitor, a servant girl—catapulted spelling bees back into vogue.¹² It was during the 1870s that the term “spelling bee”—connoting amusement as well as education—became established.¹³

After the 1870s, the amusement value of spelling bees declined, while the educational value grew. The first nationwide spelling bee was held on June 29, 1908, in conjunction with a meeting of the National Education Association in Cleveland.¹⁴ Winner Marie Bolden, a fourteen-year-old black girl from Cleveland, addressed the crowd of six thousand attendees: “I did not enter the spelling contest for personal glory, but to try to help bring honor to my teacher and my school. I studied spelling all I could, and believe I have



Jennifer after her Midwest Spelling Bee win, with her parents, sisters, and teacher.
Reinke family

learned to spell from reading the newspapers. There are very few words in everyday use that do not appear continually in the papers."¹⁵

Perhaps Ms. Bolden's speech, especially the closing line, had some influence on the eventual establishment of a yearly national contest. The National Spelling Bee in existence today, began in 1925 as a collaboration of nine newspapers.¹⁶ Over two million children competed in local and state bees for one of the nine competitor spots in that first Bee held in Washington, DC.¹⁷ The *Omaha World-Herald* joined in 1929 with the introduction of the Midwest Spelling Bee. That first year of its sponsorship, the *World-Herald* was richly rewarded for its participation, when the Midwest Spelling Bee winner, Omaha's Virginia Hogan, went on to win the National Spelling Bee.¹⁸

In 1941, Scripps took over sponsorship of the National Spelling Bee. No National Spelling Bee was held during the World War II years of 1943-45, making the 1967 Bee won by Ms. Reinke the fortieth.¹⁹ Besides Ms. Hogan and Ms. Reinke, no other Midwestern Spelling Bee winner has ever won the National Spelling Bee.

For Jennifer, the 1967 National Spelling Bee began with a three-day car trip with her parents, the Engels, and her sister, Pat. On Sunday, June 4, they checked into Washington D.C.'s Mayflower Hotel where the Bee was to be held. The hotel lobby was hung with individual photos of each of the seventy-three contestants. A *World-Herald* reporter noted hopefully that the fact that both the Midwest Spelling Bee and the National Spelling Bee had the same number of contestants that year might be a "good omen."²⁰

After a couple days of sight-seeing and a get-acquainted party for all the spellers on Monday evening, the oral-only competition began Wednesday morning in the Mayflower Hotel's ballroom. All the spellers were seated on chairs on the stage. With so many spellers, each round took quite a bit of time. Jennifer sat next to Ralph Banasiak, a speller from Fort Wayne, Indiana, with whom she remained pen pals for several years after the Bee.²¹ By 4:00 that afternoon, after seven rounds, the Bee ended for the day with thirty-five spellers remaining in the competition. Jennifer had correctly spelled "lily," "icy," "leisurely," "applique," "acetate," "albino," and "episcopacy."²²

The contest resumed on Thursday morning, June 8. Jennifer was given words to spell that probably few people in the audience had ever



Jennifer at age four, around the time she first began talking.
Reinke family



2016 Thayer County Spelling champion Isaac Else, receiving a \$500 scholarship certificate from Jennifer Reinke. A. Ault, Hebron, Nebraska

heard of, including “demurrage,” “athodyd,” and “antimacassar.” By just short of two o’clock, only Jennifer and Anne Clark of Huntington, West Virginia, remained. Jennifer was given the word “spinnaker” but misspelled it. Anne Clark also misspelled it so was given a new word—“milline.” Anne also misspelled this word, after which Jennifer correctly spelled it, leaving her just one word away from the National Spelling Bee Championship. When the pronouncer gave her the word “chihuahua,” an audible gasp arose from the other spellers, most of whom knew how to spell the word and assumed Jennifer would too.²³ Jennifer beamed broadly, spelled it haltingly but correctly, and then burst into tears as runner-up Anne Clark gave her a big hug. The other contestants, her parents and sister, and her teacher and his wife all rushed up to the stage to congratulate her.²⁴

After numerous interviews were given and multiple photographs were taken, the spellers were escorted to the steps of the Capitol. Jennifer and Anne were photographed together with Vice-President Hubert Humphrey, Nebraska Congressman Robert V. Denney, and West Virginia Congressman Ken Hechler.

The next day, the *World-Herald* was over the top about Jennifer’s win, publishing “Our Centennial Jewel is Spelled: J-e-n-n-i-e” in the top left corner of the front page of the “Sunrise” edition. A large photo of Jennifer kissing her huge National Spelling Bee trophy accompanied the lengthy article.²⁵ The “Evening Home” edition

included the previous afternoon’s photo of Jennifer with runner-up Anne Clark on the Capitol steps along with Humphrey, Denney, and Hechler, under a headline of: “It’s Spelled C-o-n-g-r-a-t-u-l-a-t-i-o-n-s”; this photo with lengthy caption also appeared in the prestigious upper left corner of the newspaper’s front page.²⁶ Both editions included lengthy articles with multiple large photos in later sections as well. These latter articles were focused on the preparations being made for Jennifer’s homecoming; the evening article was entitled “Deshler Readies Road Signs Spelling Out Its Champion: J-E-N-N-I-F-E-R.”²⁷

That same Friday was the final event of Jennifer’s week in Washington—the Awards Banquet in the evening. All of the spellers were invited, with the top eight sitting together at the head table. The cash prizes awarded ranged from Jennifer’s one thousand dollars down to fifty dollars for all those below the top eight.²⁸ Jennifer also received an expense-paid trip for two to both New York City and Montreal’s Expo 67.

The Reinkes and Engels spent their first evening in New York City as guests in their Americana Hotel’s Royal Box nightclub, where entertainer Paul Anka was performing. Obtaining Mr. Anka’s autograph, along with having her photo taken with Mr. Anka and her sister, were highlights of the trip for Jennifer.²⁹

The Reinkes and Engels spent their first full day in New York attending church services, enjoying a sightseeing cruise, and then walking to the theater where *The Ed Sullivan Show* was held. From her seat in the audience, Jennifer was introduced by Mr. Sullivan to millions of Americans watching from their homes. Similar to the evening before, Mr. Sullivan’s autograph and the photo she had taken with him were highlights for Jennifer.³⁰

On Monday, the Engels drove the Reinke car back to Omaha while the Reinkes flew to Montreal to visit Expo 67. The trip marked another milestone for Jennifer as it was her first flight on a commercial airliner, although since she had flown in her father’s private plane a few times previously, she took it in stride. During the family’s three-night stay in Montreal, the Reinkes heard a lot of spoken French, leading Mr. Reinke to remark at one point that their next “project” might be learning French.³¹

Two full weeks after having left home, the Reinkes flew back to Des Moines on Thursday, June 15, where they stayed overnight. The next morning, they flew to Omaha, where a policeman and black limousine were waiting for them. Jennifer’s father—whose birthday it was—playfully said: “Jennifer,



Jennifer Reinke, Kris Meisner (Library Board), Bob Reinke, Pat Reinke Schardt, Sharon Baden (Library Board), and Lois Struve (donor of property on which library was built) at the May 12, 2015, groundbreaking ceremony for Deshler's new library. Deshler Rustler

you did something wrong! The police are waiting for you!”³²

Their police escort took them from Eppley Field to Omaha’s City Hall where Jennifer met with Mayor Ted Sorensen, who presented her with a key to the city. He asked Jennifer to give him a difficult word to spell, but not wanting to embarrass him, she gave him the relatively simple “rendezvous.”³³

Having retrieved the family car from where Marvin Engel had left it for them, Richard Reinke then drove his family back to Hebron where a crowd of family and friends were waiting. Jennifer moved into the back seat of a blue convertible for a sixty-car motorcade that wound its way the ten miles to Deshler—a town of just over nine hundred population,³⁴ where eight hundred people gathered for a ceremony at Washington Park to honor Jennifer’s championship.³⁵ Jennifer was presented with many gifts, her classmates sang “Hello Jennie” (“Hello Dolly” with the name changed), the new champ was asked to say a few words, and many photographs were taken.³⁶

Arriving back at their home for the first time in two weeks, the Reinkes were greeted with a huge “Welcome Home, Jennie” banner in front of their house. But the excitement wasn’t over. The very next day, Jennifer rode in the Byron Centennial Parade, the first of more than twenty parades in which she rode that summer. She had

to turn down some event organizers whose parade date conflicted with that of one to which she had already committed. She traveled over four hundred miles round-trip just to ride in Atkinson’s parade.³⁷

In addition to parades, in July, Jennifer appeared at the Nebraska Legislature where Governor Tiemann introduced her as “a distinguished Nebraskan.”³⁸ In September, the Nebraska Optometric Association presented her with their Eyes on Nebraska Award, presented to Nebraskans who made “outstanding contributions for the betterment of the state.”³⁹



The Jennifer Reinke Public Library in Deshler. Bob Reinke

Jennifer had three bagfuls of mail awaiting her when she returned to her Deshler home after the National Spelling Bee, and received lots more over the course of the summer. She replied to some of it, as well as writing an article about her win for the *Witness* periodical,⁴⁰ but she found it “was a little bit of a letdown” now that there were no more spelling bees for which to prepare.⁴¹

Some of the counties participating in the Midwest Spelling Bee each year award prizes beyond a plaque, medal, or ribbon to their winners. For example, Kearney and Knox Counties both provide financial assistance to help the family with travel, lodging, and food expenses for the trip to the Midwest Spelling Bee in Omaha. Boone County purchases several reference books such as a dictionary, rhyming dictionary, and thesaurus. The winner gets first pick from these books, the runner-up gets second pick, etc., until all of those students who made it to the oral round have a prize.⁴²


In 2001, after decades of a quiet life working in the office of her family’s business in Deshler, Ms. Reinke decided to create a five hundred dollar scholarship to be awarded the winner of each year’s Thayer County Spelling Bee. At the time of each year’s Bee, Ms. Reinke presents a certificate to the winner; the winner receives the money once she or he graduates from high school. Despite the four-year delay, Ms. Reinke reports that no winner has ever failed to collect the five hundred dollar scholarship.⁴³ Starting with the 2017 winner, Ms. Reinke increased the scholarship to one thousand dollars.⁴⁴

Ms. Reinke took her philanthropy to a new level in 2012. While chatting with her sister, Pat, and brother, Robert, an idea was hatched for her to fund a new library for the town of Deshler. The library at the time, built in the 1950s, was not just outdated—its location in the second story of a building with no elevators made it non-compliant with the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).⁴⁵

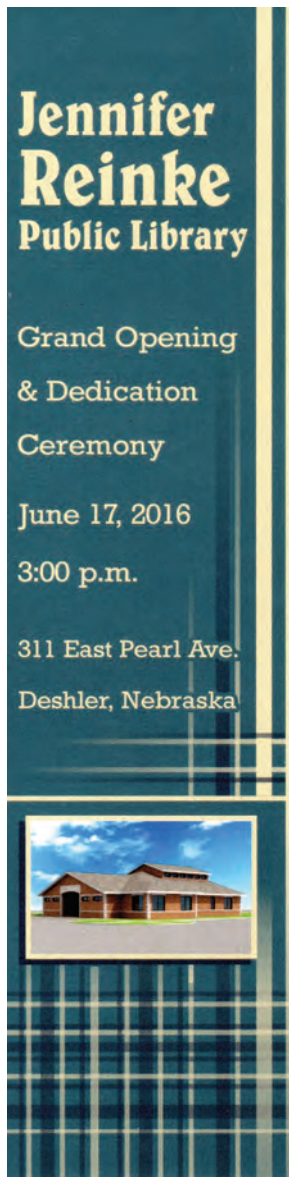
By May 2015, the plan for Deshler’s new library had advanced to the point of a formal groundbreaking ceremony. And in June 2016, the library was no longer a plan but a reality. The grand opening and dedication of the Jennifer Reinke Public Library, held on the seventeenth, was a community-wide event.

One of the most striking features of the library is a corner with a wall of words over an artificial fireplace, complete with soft chairs, loveseats, and end tables, the whole of which gives the impression of a cozy home study rather than a public library.

The wall of words includes “intermittent,” the final word Jennifer had to spell at the 1967 Midwest Spelling Bee as well as many of the words she spelled in the all-oral National Spelling Bee. One amusing incident during the construction of the library involved this wall of words. While on a drop-in visit during the final phase of construction, Ms. Reinke noticed that “mantelletta” had been misspelled as “manteletta.” Her sister, Pat, who sponsored this corner of the library, quickly ensured that this problem was resolved.⁴⁶

Nestled within the wall of words is a framed black-and-white photo of fifteen-year-old Jennifer holding Bee-Bee, her parents’ present to her that Christmas of 1967. Bee-Bee was a c-h-i-h-u-a-h-u-a. 

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The word wall inside the Jennifer Reinke Public Library. Bob Reinke

NOTES

¹ Fred Thomas, "For First Time, Boy Wins In Midwest Spelling Bee," *Omaha World-Herald*, April 30, 1966, Home edition, 1.

² Jennifer Reinke, in discussion with the author, October 2016 (hereafter, Reinke interview October 2016).

³ Reinke interview October 2016.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Gary Newman, "Jennie Reinke's 'Intermittent' Wins Spelling Bee," *Omaha World-Herald*, April 9, 1967, Home edition, 1-B.

⁷ Gary Newman, "Jennie Reinke Wins Midwest Spelling Bee with 'Intermittent,'" *Omaha World-Herald*, April 9, 1967, Home edition, 2-B.

⁸ Newman, "Jennie Reinke's 'Intermittent.'"

⁹ Reinke interview October 2016.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ James Maguire, "The Folk Tradition: The American Spelling Bee, from Plymouth Rock to Cable Television," part 2 in *American Bee: The National Spelling Bee and the Culture of Word Nerds* (Rodale, 2006), 55-58.

¹² Ibid., 58-59.

¹³ Ibid., 63.

¹⁴ Ibid., 65.

¹⁵ "Colored Girl Wins Spelling Bee," *New York Times*, June 30, 1908.

¹⁶ "History," Scripps National Spelling Bee, <http://spellingbee.com/history>, accessed July 8, 2016.

¹⁷ Maguire, *American Bee*, 68.

¹⁸ "Champions and Their Winning Words," Scripps National Spelling Bee, <http://spellingbee.com/champions-and-their-winning-words>, accessed July 8, 2016.

¹⁹ "History," Scripps National Spelling Bee.

²⁰ Darwin Olofson, "Jennie Reinke N-e-r-v-o-u-s But Our Speller's Confident," *Omaha World-Herald*, June 5, 1967, Evening Home edition, 5.

²¹ Jennifer Reinke, in discussion with the author, November 2016 (hereafter, Reinke interview November 2016).

²² Darwin Olofson, "Jennie Right Seven Times," *Omaha World-Herald*, June 8, 1967, Sunrise edition, 1.

²³ Anne Clark Beavers, e-mail message to Bob Reinke, June 26, 2016.

²⁴ Darwin Olofson, "Our Centennial Jewel Is Spelled: 'J-e-n-n-i-e,'" *Omaha World-Herald*, June 9, 1967, Sunrise edition, 1.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ "It's Spelled C-o-n-g-r-a-t-u-l-a-t-i-o-n-s," *Omaha World-Herald*, June 9, 1967, Evening Home edition, 1.

²⁷ Darwin Olofson, "Deshler Readies Road Signs Spelling Out Its Champion: J-E-N-N-I-F-E-R," *Omaha World-Herald*, June 9, 1967, Evening Home edition, 35.

²⁸ Associated Press, "Spelling Bee-niks Mind P's and Q's, I's and E's," *Utica Observer-Dispatch*, June 7, 1967, 10.

²⁹ Reinke interview November 2016.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Susan Harr, "Champion Speller Is Back; Key to City Brings Tears," *Omaha World-Herald*, June 16, 1967, Evening Home edition, 1.

³³ Reinke interview November 2016.

³⁴ "Census of Population and Housing," Census.gov, in "Deshler, Nebraska," en.wikipedia.org, accessed March 23, 2017.

³⁵ "800 Greet National Spelling Champ," *Omaha World-Herald*, June 18, 1967, Home edition, 4-B.

³⁶ Reinke interview November 2016.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Associated Press, "Spelling Champ Meets Governor, Legislators," *Omaha World-Herald*, July 14, 1967, Sunrise edition, 8.

³⁹ Associated Press, "Champion Speller Gets State Prize," *Omaha World-Herald*, September 3, 1967, Home edition, 6-B.

⁴⁰ Jennifer Reinke, "chihuahua, c-h-i-h-u-a-h-u-a, chihuahua," *Witness-Intermediate*, October 8, 1967.

⁴¹ Reinke interview November 2016.

⁴² Laurie Haight (2016 Midwest Spelling Bee Kearney County Coordinator), e-mail message to author, September 26, 2016; Joann M. Fischer (2016 Midwest Spelling Bee Knox County Coordinator), e-mail message to author, September 26, 2016; Gay L. Sandman (2016 Midwest Spelling Bee Boone County Coordinator), e-mail message to author, September 26, 2016.

⁴³ Jennifer Reinke, in discussion with the author, May and September 2016.

⁴⁴ Ibid., February 2017.

⁴⁵ Ibid., June 2016.

⁴⁶ Ibid., December 2016.

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"The new library will be a good place for children to go after school. Reading is a good pastime and educational too. It increases a child's vocabulary. Good spellers read a lot. I hope the children of Deshler enjoy the new library!"

-Jennifer Reinke, Donor



"Chihuahua"

**1967 Winning Word
at National Spelling Bee,
Washington, D.C.**