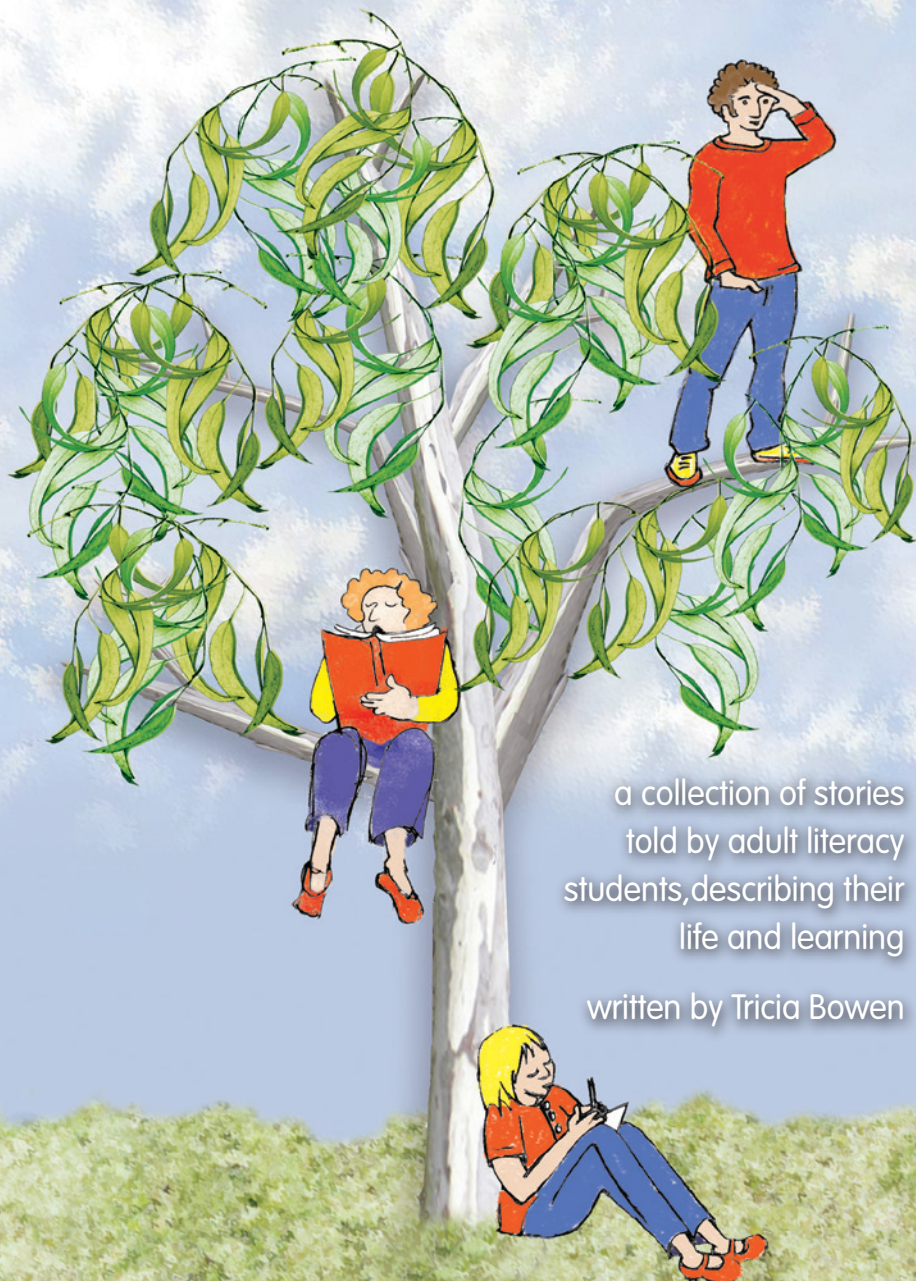


A Fuller Sense of Self



a collection of stories
told by adult literacy
students, describing their
life and learning

written by Tricia Bowen

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Foreword

In August 2010 I began this project of recording the stories of adult literacy students across Melbourne and regional Victoria. The aim of the project was to gather stories which illuminated the lives and learning experiences of these students, while describing the challenges they faced, the events that had provoked their decision to return to 'school', and ultimately how their lives had changed and shifted following that decision to undertake adult education. Their stories reflect a changing sense of personal identity and growth in self confidence to engage with the world.

I spoke with a number of people in a range of learning centres. They all shared poignant memories as they recounted their life stories and the watershed moments that had led them to this particular time and place. They used powerful metaphors to describe their frustrations with reading and writing. One described her inability to read as 'a palpable, gnawing hunger', another likened it to 'a crippling type of blindness', while another referred to the 'many masks she wore' in order to hide her sense of shame. They all suggested that their difficulties with reading and writing had taken them to a very lonely place where they felt disconnected from the community and the world at large.

More positively, everyone I spoke to suggested that improved literacy skills had rejuvenated and reinvigorated their sense of optimism about the future. They highlighted the important role that adult literacy teachers had played in ensuring they felt respected and listened to along the way. Many of them shared stories of new opportunities with work or study, all of which they saw as a direct result of their developing skills and confidence with literacy.

Each of these interviews was recorded with permission and from the pages and pages of transcribed conversations six stories have emerged. Each of these stories reveals profound insights into the power of literacy, the sense of powerlessness that exists when individuals cannot access the written word, and the sense of accomplishment and possibility that emerges when individuals are able to 'read the world' around them. As one of the storytellers suggested, being able to read and write simply means 'you end up with such a fuller sense of self.'

It is this concept of 'a fuller sense of self' that has created the framework for this publication. Each story begins with a quote drawn directly from the words of the storyteller. These quotes aim to highlight the tangible ways each of their lives have expanded and grown to create that 'fuller sense of self'. These quotes also frame and inform a larger narrative about the nature and power of literacy. They speak to the belief that improved literacy forges a sense of connection, possibility, awareness, community, self-belief and understanding. In so doing they reinforce the idea that improved literacy builds social capital, defined by the OECD (2001) as 'networks, shared norms, values and understandings which facilitate cooperation within or among groups,' an invaluable resource that contributes to the well being of individuals and communities. The storytellers refer to key people who have given them support, be they family members, friends or teachers, that has helped to build their confidence to reconnect and engage in adult education.

At the end of the story-gathering phase of this project, I had an opportunity to speak with a class group of five adult literacy students, based at a regional learning centre. There was not space in this collection for their individual stories, however the points they raised were pertinent to the other students' stories. They told me about their reasons for coming to class and described the importance of the relationships that existed amongst them. They identified the value of learning with a group of people they could trust. As one of the students said to me, 'we help each other get to where we want to go.'

Towards the end of that conversation we all talked about our hopes and desires for the future. I remember the sisters, Pat and Daphne, telling me that they just wanted to read a good book, the whole way through, from cover to cover. And I vividly recall Merv looking at me and explaining that he just wanted to be able to write his story down, so his kids could know how he felt about things, when he was gone.

On the train back to Melbourne I thought about this group of students and in fact all the extraordinary people I'd had the opportunity to meet in bringing this collection of stories to life. I thought about the intricate and complex chain of social, cultural and economic circumstances that had impacted on the quality and quantity of education they had received. I thought about the power of literacy to change and expand lives, despite the current tendency amongst some policy-makers to snare and corner literacy into a narrow 'vocational corral'. I also thought about the hopes and dreams that Pat, Daphne, Merv and all the other students had described to me: the desire to be heard and listened to; the desire to access information when required; the desire to feel part of a community and the desire to approach life with a sense of understanding, possibility and self-belief. I could only conclude that I wanted to live in a society where such hopes and desires were more accurately described as basic human rights.

Much thought, time and energy has gone into exploring the nature and scope of literacy, by researchers, committed educators and a host of government departments regularly offering definitions regarding literacy, and what it means to be literate in the 21st century. However, these explanations are generally provided by highly literate people, who are attempting to come to terms with representing what it means to be in the world, while not being able to read and write.

The stories in this collection aim to present an alternative view, told by those who understand the concepts of literacy and illiteracy at a very personal level. By offering candid and powerful insights as to the

everyday impact of not being able to read and write, these storytellers have made a significant and thought-provoking contribution to our understanding of the meaning and reach of literacy.

I offer my sincere thanks to all those who so generously trusted me with their stories, and for allowing me the opportunity to bring them to a wider audience.

Tricia Bowen
February 2011



A Sense of Connection

When you find some success in learning, you can be more open and involved in the community.

Suddenly I took note of what was going on.

I had never voted before, up until five years ago, which is precisely the time that I started coming to school. Learning gave me the confidence to want to vote and be interested in doing it. Previously,

I used to avoid coming up the street to do my shopping. I'd always had this feeling that people might be looking through me and into me.

I know with me, I am a different person now.





Sue's Story

I was born in the Mallee and I grew up in the area around Hamilton. I hated school. Looking back, sometimes it feels like I never went to school. It's almost like there was no school experience for me. It's all so very blurry. It was just hard for me to take a lot in. I didn't care either. I didn't think it was worth knowing. What I did learn, I think I probably blocked out. Even today I surprise myself with things that come out of my head. I wonder, where did that come from or how did I know that.



I got put into a home for girls as an uncontrollable child because I wouldn't stay at school. They had a school set up at the home but as long as you could add up, do long division, and write your name, in their view you had completed your schooling. So when I arrived they saw that I could write my name, I could complete long division, subtract and add. So it was decided I had completed my schooling and they promoted me to school monitor. My job was to go into each of the classrooms and mark off who was there. I certainly wasn't educated. I wasn't given books. None of that was encouraged.

When I finally left there, I went downhill in terms of my mental health. I cut myself off from my family and friends. I didn't want to speak to people. I would often pull the phone out of the wall. Finally, a friend broke through the barrier I had created and got me help. After two years of support, I was encouraged to go to Southern Grampians Adult

Education (SGAE). Initially, I didn't want to do it. I thought I would be a failure. I was sure I would be ridiculed because of my age. I didn't have any idea that I knew quite as much as I do know.

When I first started, as the tutors remind me, I would sit with my head bowed down. I wouldn't look at anyone. I was too scared to answer questions, for fear of being wrong. I was so frightened. I remember the first day very clearly. They needed to work out where I was, in terms of my reading and writing, so they got me to write the word CAT. I remember I shook so much you would look at that writing and think that a small child had written it. When I started I shook, and I shook, and I shook. I sat there the whole time with my head down.

Now I love reading, particularly the dictionary. I love to sit and watch documentaries. I would rather watch documentaries than comedies or dramas. Mum jokes and says she thinks there is something wrong with me. I often think to myself, I know that, I don't necessarily remember when or how I learned it. But I know I know it.

I have been coming to SGAE for a few years now. I even went out and bought a computer. I am still learning how to use it. It has opened up such a new world for me. I write down all the websites that we work on at school, and then take the list home, and I have the chance to look a bit further into things. I think improvement has happened for me through a lot of encouragement from the staff. I had been told all my life that I was stupid. I was scared of failure. I had made the choice to withdraw and I convinced myself that I didn't know any better.

I suppose I have always wanted encouragement. It's interesting, just when I think I might be unable to learn anymore, I do learn more. You are never too old. The learning is endless. I absorb so much. Sometimes I wish I could go to school every day. It seems so easy to learn. It's fun too.

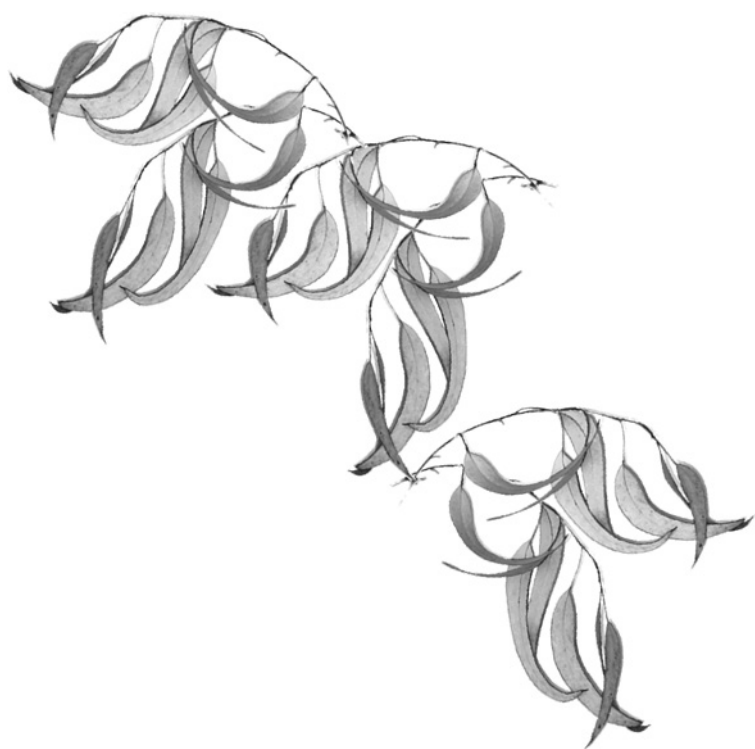
When you find some success in learning, you can be more open and involved in the community. Say for example with the election and

voting. I had never voted before, never, up until five years ago, which is precisely the time that I started coming here. Learning gave me the confidence to want to vote, and to be interested in doing it. Suddenly I took note of what was going on and why it was going on.

There was one activity that we did in class where we were encouraged to write a list of some of the issues that we thought our local Council should look into. So I started writing about people in wheelchairs because my Dad was in a wheelchair and my Mum is on a walker. The issue of footpaths that are raised or dangerous for the elderly or disabled was relevant to me. From there, I started looking at different issues around town that should be dealt with. Before I came here I wouldn't have even thought about those issues. My mind has been opened. Previously, I could not even read the newspaper. Now I can't wait to get it. I read it as I'm having my breakfast. I can be a bit of an ogre if I'm interrupted while reading the newspaper.

I want to do further education. I would love to do my HSC. It probably sounds silly at my age but I would like to try. There is still a little part of me that is scared of looking into it because I am fearful that I won't be able to do it. But it's something I've always wanted to do. It always seems to be there in the back of my head. Maybe it's time I moved it to the front of my head, and put the steps in motion.

I would just love to see more people take that step and come to places like SGAE. You just don't know what doors can be opened for you. I know with me, when I took that first step I never dreamed I would still be here, that I would still be learning. I am a different person now. I am happy. I love to learn. I look forward to coming. I suppose over time I felt I could trust the people here. I felt safe. I had never had that. It means I have come out of myself. I can't explain it. The teachers are fantastic and that makes learning so much easier. There is a great atmosphere in the class. Now I will go home and get straight on the computer, and think to myself, I know how to do this.



A Sense of Possibility

Not being able to read, there had always been a hunger in me that had never been fulfilled.

I remember one teacher at high school used to read aloud to us. I loved her class. I would get comfy on my chair and just wait to listen to her. I vividly remember her reading Jane Eyre. She read that story like you were right there. Her facial expressions, her voice, everything about her told you that story. It made me realise where books can take you.





Helen's Story

I grew up in West Heidelberg in Melbourne. My early memories of primary school are very negative. I can certainly remember being smacked over the head and told I was dumb. I grew to believe it. But there was one teacher in Year 3 or 4 who was concerned that what I was doing was just scribble. She arranged for me to have an eye test. They discovered that I was blind in one eye. So next minute, I was sent to a Special School. From there I never picked up a book. Life at that school wasn't about learning to read. Succeeding there was mainly about learning to brush your teeth, or doing the buttons up on your shirt. I wondered why I was there. All I knew was that I wanted to get along with the other kids. So I did. I helped with teaching them to comb their hair and to tie their shoelaces.



There were three girls from that school, including me, who were able to go to a mainstream high school. Eventually I fitted in at high school. I think it was because I wanted to fit in so badly. The other kids seemed to accept me. I made friends that knew that I couldn't read. They used to help me by just getting me to copy the work they had done. But I never wanted to copy their work because I wanted to struggle through myself and learn to read.

I remember one teacher used to read aloud to us. I loved her class so much. I would get comfy on my chair and just wait to listen to her. I

vividly remember her reading *Jane Eyre*. Her facial expressions, her voice, everything about her, told you that story. She read that story like you were right there. It made me realise where books can take you. There was such a hunger in me that had never been fulfilled.

There are so many obstacles placed in front of you when you can't read. Even going into a milk bar can cause difficulties. I might want a chocolate bar from behind the counter but I don't know what it is called because I can't read the label, so I figure I can't have it. You learn to miss out. Catching public transport is a nightmare. I remember I caught a bus once. I had no idea where I was. I couldn't read the street names. I couldn't read the signs. I didn't recognise the landmarks. I was terrified. I decided then and there I wasn't getting on a bus ever again.

I tried to hide this all the time from people. I made sure I was never in situations where I might have to read anything. If I had to read a document when I was out in public, I would explain that I had to take it home and think about it carefully. When I got home, I would give it to Mum and Dad to read. If I was in a position where I had to sign a document and there was no getting around it, then I just had to come out and say, 'I can't read that.' Imagine having to say that. Imagine someone behind a desk, usually younger than you, looking well dressed and important, and you have to tell them that you can't read.

I have a partner now and we have been together for over 20 years. But before I met him I had a son. From the moment my son was born I would buy him books. I was convinced that he was not going to be like me. Before he went to school I used to cut out letters and pictures and match the letters to the pictures with him. At that stage, I think I had knowledge of letters and sounds, but I simply couldn't put it all together. There were just bits and pieces jumbled in my head.

So when I met my partner, he would come over to my house in the evenings. I used to put my son to bed and I would read to him every

night. My partner would be in the lounge room listening. I would open these books and make up the whole mad story, using the pictures. But of course my partner started quizzing me. 'Did you just read Little Red Riding Hood? I didn't think it went like that.' It happened time after time, with different stories. Eventually he said to me, 'I'm sure you are not reading that story correctly. I'm sure that's not how it goes.' I protested and told him it was. But eventually I thought I have to tell him, even though I was sure he would leave me.

At first he didn't believe me. 'But what about all those times you read the menu when we were out to dinner,' he said. So I explained that I didn't read the menu. I just copied what he was having. Often I would close the menu, put it down on the table, wait a minute or two, and say something like, 'What was that fish dish again? I've forgotten.' I could be certain there was at least one fish dish on the menu. He would always tell me what it was. There were plenty of ways to get around it.

My partner was understanding and has supported me along the way. My son has always been so good to me as well. When I got my first mobile phone he encouraged me to send him a text message every day. I said to him, 'I can't do that. I can't write a text.' But he convinced me by saying that no one else was going to see it. When he got my text, he would write back to me. We did that all the time.

How did I get to the point of deciding to come to TAFE? I realised I had had enough of missing out. I had missed out on work. I had lived on the pension my whole life. I raised my son on the pension. I had gone without food. I know exactly what it feels like to go without all sorts of stuff. I think I made the decision to do something about this, to have the courage to change, because I was so sick of going without.

When we started together in class we were very nervous. Nobody wanted to read aloud. Everyone said, 'I can't do that.' But then I thought, bugger it, I will. I started reading aloud and it just continued from

there. I remember being terrified about entering the library. There were so many books in there. I couldn't imagine being able to pick one book, that I would be capable of reading.

As a student at BRIT, for the very first time in my life, I felt there was a place that wanted me. I had teachers that were willing to stop and answer my questions. They actually wanted to know about me. They took the time. I'm up at six o'clock in the morning, just to get to school. The desire to be there is very strong. I've now done a Food Handling Course and I work in hospitality part time. I love it. I love the customers. At some point in the future I would like to do further study. Eventually I would love to work with kids with disabilities and special needs. It's interesting isn't it, how life can take you full circle.



A Sense of Awareness

I learned to not take any notice of the words or signs in my environment. As far as I was concerned they simply weren't there. I didn't even try to read them. I was just looking at the pictures of life. But now, I'm consciously reading the paper every day, trying to broaden my literacy skills, while taking in the world. You feel part of things. It means I can take part in conversations about what is going on.





Sam's Story

I was born in Sydney. I think I was there for about a year. I lived in Adelaide, Melbourne, India, England and that was before I went to school. For pre-school and some of my primary schooling I was in England. I was also in Fremantle and Cairns. My parents moved so much. There was such constant changing of my environment. I had to reinvent myself every time I moved. It means you don't have a solid sense of self and where you come from. I believe that is where the literacy issues started for me.

I think I survived primary school by acting. I was cool and everybody seemed to like me, but at home I was crying because I couldn't face my homework. I was always feeling overwhelmed. I could talk to my Mum about it, she was at home and trying to help, but she was a single Mum with two other kids that needed feeding and looking after. I just didn't have the right support networks. They did have a special teacher for me but there was never enough of it. There just wasn't the time. I don't think it was anybody's fault. Everybody did the best they could do but if you have missed out on the basics you need an awful lot of time to catch up. I remember at the end of Year Seven, which was the last year of primary school for me, I had just learned how to spell my last name. My spelling and reading skills were not there but they let me go on into high school.

In my first year of high school I was instantly attracted to the naughty kids. I was only there for a year and I got asked to leave that school because of my behaviour. So in Year 8 I went from high school to a school that was for kids that didn't fit into the mainstream system. It was a very good school and they were very understanding. It did help.

It gave me a sense of stability, but in some ways it felt like another two and a half years of just mucking around.

From there, I started working in hospitality. I realised I could make money without having to know anything, so I just became a really good coffee maker. I think what happens with some people who have literacy issues, we compensate by being overly confident. I invented a character to be but underneath I don't think I really knew what was going on.

I worked in hospitality and played music for years and then I ended up in Melbourne at the age of 25. I realised I had to face these issues around my literacy. I got to the point where I decided I just couldn't run anymore. I couldn't pretend that I was coping. I knew I needed to go back to school and learn to read and write. It was a very confronting and painful time. I kept on thinking about these 'what if' scenarios. If only I could have been able to concentrate more, if only I could have worked a bit harder. It did bring up a lot of emotional baggage.

My Mum had found out about Carlton Neighbourhood Learning Centre (CNLC) and I went along and just faced it. It was probably the most confronting thing I have ever done. I say confronting because of the stigma around literacy. If you can't spell, you get laughed at. I still get it now, especially at work. People make jokes about my spelling. I think put downs are an element of our culture.

I remember the first day clearly. I sat with one of the teachers and she asked me to do some writing. I know that both my handwriting and my spelling were an absolute mess but her warmth was fantastic. Then I met my main teacher, and once again her understanding and patience was wonderful.

The basics of reading and writing started happening when I was studying there. Sure, I realise I need to do more. But I can read pretty well now. I still come across words I'm not sure of, but I can pronounce most things. I can write a range of documents and essays. I get by

at work too, and there is always spell check. When somebody else is around me, and I'm trying to write something, the anxiety surfaces again and I struggle. But when I am just working on an essay by myself, it all seems to come out.

Learning at CNLC was an interesting experience. I was sitting with new Australians, learning English for the first time, and there were also a couple of young guys just out of high school. I would say to anyone with this issue, jump in, because the fear involved in putting it off was an awful lot worse than actually being there and doing it. Once I was there I felt comfortable with the teacher and the class environment, and after one week I realised I was starting to learn. My confidence started to grow. Eventually I ended up with Certificate 2 in General Education for Adults.

I remember before I went along to CNLC, daily life was made just that much harder. Going to the Post Office or filling in forms, the thought of all those things was so overwhelming and so very time consuming. I would often call my Mum from the Post Office and ask her how to spell things. It can be such a heavy burden. Even now, when I hear the word literacy, it brings up a lot of anxiety and fear. I'm trying to learn to let go of those feelings. I think over the years I'd learned to not take any notice of the words or signs in my environment. I didn't even try to read them. As far as I was concerned they simply weren't there. I was just looking at the pictures of life.

I'm now consciously reading the paper every day, trying to broaden my literacy skills while taking in the world. Education is power. By just reading the paper it means I can take part in conversations about what is going on. You feel part of things. That is such progress for me. It's also made a big difference in terms of what I can actually access in the community. I went on to do a Diploma in Alcohol and Drug Support. From there I was able to work in the field. I can go to a library now and use the computers to look up books. I would love to go back and study more. People need to believe it is possible to learn and improve your

skills. I did it because I wanted things to change, and they have. If you can find that courage, the outcomes are worth so much more. You end up with such a fuller sense of self.



A Sense of Community

I was lonely. I wanted to feel connected
with other people. I didn't want to stare at four
walls, seven days a week. More than anything

I wanted to learn something, to meet
more people, to make friends. I know a
lot of people in the community now.

I guess I'm more interested,
so I'm more involved.





David's Story

I grew up in Broadmeadows and I went to school there. My memories of school are both negative and positive. I liked the fact that I went to school with people that I grew up with, with kids that lived in my neighbourhood. But the negative thing about school was that many of the kids put me down. That was really tough. A small minority of the teachers were helpful. The others, the majority, just didn't want to know me. I guess that was because I was a little slow. But it made it very tough for me.



After I left school, I worked at the Ford factory in Broadmeadows. It was hard work. I was assembling disc brakes and on my feet all day. Then I worked in construction for a short time. After that, there wasn't too much work for me until 1995, when I worked at a disability workshop. I enjoyed working there very much.

From there, I started getting into trouble down in Broadmeadows. I know it was the frustration of not having a job and being on my own. I was very lonely. I wanted to feel connected with other people.

I moved up to Glenthompson 11 years ago. Glenthompson is about 30 minutes drive east of Hamilton. My Mum was there. I know a lot of people in the community now. I got to know people through Mum. Once I moved up here, things started to snowball.

I came to Southern Grampians Adult Education (SGAE) in 2006. I wanted to learn something, to improve myself, to meet more people and to make friends. I didn't want to stare at four walls seven days a week. More than anything I wanted to get involved in studying. When I'm here they treat me the way I want to be treated, and I treat them the same way. Sure we stir each other up from time to time, but we treat each other with respect and we get the work done. I really enjoy coming.

Before I came here I had some difficulties with reading, not so much with writing, but reading caused me problems. I feel it has improved. I understand it's going to take a while. I know in the past, if I had to do some reading, and I couldn't do it, I just left it alone. I just didn't bother reading it. But I do like reading car magazines and cricket magazines. I play cricket up here. I'm part of a club. I bat and bowl. I am a medium swing bowler.

One of the best days I've had at SGAE was when I started talking about the town where I lived. Next minute the teacher said, 'how about we all go out there for the day and you can tell us about the place.' So for that day I was the teacher. I got the chance to talk to everybody about my town. We went for a tour of the brickworks. They showed us how they made the bricks. They described the different types of bricks they made. It was easy to get the tour happening because I know all of the blokes who work there from around town. We went on the trail of all the historic sites around town as well. We looked around the cemetery. We had lunch at the roadhouse and then we went to the railway station, which is our historic centre. Then we went to the house where I live, which is a famous old bush hospital. That's why I have so much knowledge of the place here. The house I live in is 105 years old. You know, I think I have learned more about Glenthompson than I ever learned about the place where I lived in Melbourne. I guess I'm more involved, so I'm more interested.

I know there are plenty of areas where I still need to improve. The intention is to try and get better at some of the things I'm not good at. My plan for the future is to continue improving myself.

A Sense of Self-Belief

Not being able to read and write was like I was way down at the bottom of the barrel. It felt like everyone was better than me. Now I can see the improvement. When a form comes for me at home, I can read it myself. Nobody else has to know my business. It makes me feel so good to know that I have made so much progress.





Linda's Story

I was born in Brunswick. When I was growing up we moved into a caravan, so I lived there with my sisters. It was so crowded. We lived there for 16 years until Mum and Dad bought a house. I don't remember much of school. I do remember I couldn't read much of the work. Not many good things happened at school. I'll leave it at that. I left in 1981 when I was in Year 9.



From there I had a few jobs but mainly I just stayed home. I tried to get into courses but it just didn't work for me, because it meant I had to read and write, and I would get so nervous. I just didn't want to do it.

When my daughter was born, I couldn't read a simple book to her. I learned a little bit from her when she was at school. Then when my grandson started school, he would come up to me with a book that he wanted me to read. I used to pretend that I knew the words. I didn't like doing that. I didn't like that feeling. That's when I decided to go back to school.

It's hard you know. I used to get letters in the mail and I wouldn't be able to understand them, so I had to go round to my Mum's place and get her to read them for me. I couldn't sign anything. I would have to tell people that I couldn't read, that I would get my Mum to read it to me, before I signed it. But I wanted to keep my things as personal as I

could. I wanted some privacy. I just wanted to read the things that were sent to me by myself. Not being able to read and write was like I was way down at the bottom of the barrel. It felt like everyone was better than me. I knew I had to do something about it.

In April 2009 I decided to go to the Glenroy Neighbourhood Learning Centre. I felt really nervous when I first went through the door. I wanted to run. I thought about cancelling, I can tell you. I was so nervous with those first classes. I felt like people would be putting me down because I couldn't read anything. But as the weeks went by, I realised I wasn't the only one who couldn't read or write.

In class we do bits of reading and then we write about what we have read. We work on spelling, some of the words I get right, some of them I don't. My writing has improved so much and my spelling is also so much better. You should have seen the work I did last year. It was terrible. When I started I seemed to be nervous all the time, but now I can see the improvement. I feel better. I still get agitated in class. When my teacher asks me to write something down, I still have this little voice that says, "I wonder if I am doing this right".

But now when a form comes for me at home I can read it by myself. Nobody else has to know my business. I have these little picture books at my place for my grandkids and I read them to them whenever they come over. I go for the Bulldogs in the AFL and now I can read the stories about the Dogs in the paper.

I guess the main reason I am doing all this is so I can get a better understanding and perspective on things. Fifteen months ago I could only read a few words, and that's about it. Now I can read everything I have here in my folder. It makes me feel so good that I have made so much progress.

A Sense of Understanding

Learning has led to huge changes in my life.

I can read things around me. I get a great sense of accomplishment because I can write a quick note telling the teacher that my son is wearing those pants today because the other ones are wet. Once you start to study you understand the word literacy so much more. Sure it means reading and writing, but it also means understanding the world around you.





Megan's Story

I am one of seven kids. I was born in the Lilydale Hospital and I have lived in Warburton my whole life. I loved sport at primary school but as for the learning part, I don't think I took much notice. When I came to things I didn't understand or things that presented a challenge to me, I just misbehaved.



I refused to read in class. I would just walk out. Mum was always at the school, either at the canteen or at the Mother's club, so I would just head off to find her. I would tell her I was sick. Mum would accept that. Mum understood my sister and I had a lot of health issues as kids. Mum also knew I couldn't read properly. She tried to help but I simply couldn't grasp it. In high school nothing really changed. I know when I was asked to read I would get all sweaty and clammy. I would feel the anxiety rise up in me. I would know they were going to pick me and I would head straight for the door.

After school, I worked with my Dad, who was a farmer. I would wrap strawberries. I made good money doing that. I also worked at the local pub and did some professional cleaning as well. But I started to feel annoyed by my level of reading and writing. I knew that I didn't want to be working at the pub or wrapping strawberries, but I felt I had no choice. I had two babies on my own and I was determined to buy myself a house, so I needed money.

As far as my day-to-day needs for literacy, such as spelling or filling out forms, I simply learned to hide it. My Mum used to make lists for me of words or numbers I might need. There were certain numbers like 12 and 11 and 20 that I simply couldn't get my head around. I carried those lists with me everywhere. If I needed extra help I would call Mum. I didn't really think about all the anxiety it was causing me. I just always assumed I was dumb.

But as my children were growing up, I knew that I didn't want them to have a Mum that couldn't read and write. My Mum was really sick at the time, and I think that was what prompted me to take action. I knew she wasn't going to be around all the time. I remember I picked up the local paper and there was information about Morrisons, and the classes they ran. I decided I would give it a go.

On the first day I felt really embarrassed. I couldn't do anything and I had to ask for help. It was like I had this mask on my face. I didn't want to think I was as dumb as I was told I was. So I felt like I had to wear masks all the time and try to be someone else, just as long as it wasn't me.

I was only there at Morrisons for a couple of months when my Mum got really sick. So I had to drop out to look after her. I suffered very badly when she died. I was in this dark hole. On one level my kids still had their Mum. They were clean, they were fed, and they were washed, but I wasn't really there for them. I knew I had to get up and do something. I was sick of that black, black hole. Mum had always wanted me to do my Personal Care Attendant Certificate. I always told her I would do it. So I ended up going back to Morrisons.

I started in the literacy class. We were all of different ages and from different backgrounds. But I understood the teacher and she understood me. She had the tools to help me. The learning felt like it was about me. It was as if she had the particular tools to help Megan but she also had the tools to help all the other people in the class. I felt like I was being

looked after and more importantly I didn't feel stupid. My family really helped too. Dad was always telling me that Mum would be proud of me. He knew that was what she had always wanted me to do.

We worked on literacy and maths and computers. Every time I handed in a little something it was like I was adding another notch to my belt. It told me that, yes I have done that, and I can do this. We had study groups as well. We worked together and we shared. I think relationships are so important to learning.

I spent about twelve months to two years completing my Certificate 1 in General Education for Adults. I remember when I went up to the next level the same anxiety came back. But then I realised that my new teacher was just as good as my previous teacher. I understood that leaving the Level 1 class was a little like cutting an umbilical cord. It meant that it was time for me to let go and move on.

I've now completed five certificates, including the Certificate III in Aged Care (Personal Care Attendant). It's interesting, I remember sitting down with a teacher at the very beginning and talking about my goals. I remember at the time thinking, yeah sure but it may never happen. But it has happened and it has gone really quickly and I'm proud of what I have achieved.

This learning has led to huge changes in my life. I've grown so much. At the moment I have a job with the Shire in home care. Previously, I don't think I really knew who Megan was. Morrisons has helped me find the real Megan. I don't need those masks anymore, all those masks of who people thought I was. I don't wear any of them. What you see is what you get. Now I walk into lots of different situations and I can say, I'm here.

I've developed the confidence to do things. I can read the things around me. For instance, I had never read a menu before. Previously, when I went out to dinner I knew straight away I would just have a

chicken parmigiana. After all, everybody knows most menus have a chicken parmigiana. But now I have choice. I can read the menu and try different things. I get a great sense of accomplishment because I can write a quick note telling the teacher that my son is wearing those pants today because the other ones are wet.

Once you start to study, you understand the word literacy so much more, and you realise you can do it. Sure it means reading and writing but it also means understanding things and understanding the world around you.



