



Steps and Stories

Nine Tasmanians and their journeys
in literacy and numeracy

Compiled and edited by
Terry Whitebeach



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Nine Tasmanians tell their stories

of childhood and school life

and the ways in which their adult lives have been affected by limited literacy and numeracy skills

of their decision to change this situation

and the steps they took to gain or increase their literacy and numeracy skills

of the ways in which they now are creating fuller and more autonomous lives

of those who have helped along the way

and who continue to walk with them on this journey





BERNADETTE

Hi, my name is Bernadette. I grew up with six siblings. I am the youngest. We grew up in East Devonport, Tasmania. We were a very very poor family, even though our father was away from us five days a week because of work. He would bring his pay home and give it to Mum. When Dad left to go back to work Mum would spend the money on herself and not on the house, bills or us kids.

So we were too poor to go to school. Not all of us went to school, only three out of the seven. Mum and Dad ended up separating, because Dad found out Mum was spending the money. Back in those days you had to report your separation to the school. Not long after, Welfare came and took four of us away and put us into homes.

The first home I went to had a cellar. I would be locked in that cellar because I was so slow at school. I was way behind the other children. This was because I had never been to school before. I remember being put in the back of the class where the forgotten children were.

After months of abuse I was taken to another home, out in the country. It was a dairy farm. They were fantastic, kind and very loving. I started another school and yet again I was amongst the forgotten children. This was what it was like throughout my school years. If I put my hand up to ask a question I was told to put my hand down or I was just ignored. So I gave up trying.

After finishing Year Ten with no certificates to show off, I turned to drugs and alcohol. Years passed and I ended up with three children. I had no jobs because of my lack of education. I locked myself in the house with closed curtains and no social life, because of the shame.

As my children started school all seemed to be OK. Then I noticed their grades were lacking. I tried to push them to try harder. That is when my eldest son said to me, “Why should we try? You didn’t. You gave up.” Those words kept playing on my mind. They were true.

I decided to change that, so I went to Centrelink for help. They put me in contact with Mission Australia*. So I went to the interview and was happy to receive the respect and understanding that were shown to me.

During the LLNP course [Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program]* I was so happy, because if I wanted to ask a question they were happy to answer. It was hard at first, but with their patience and my determination we succeeded in achieving my goals. I was awarded certificates for the first time in my life. And my children were there to witness it! That made them study harder and not give up, like I had done when I was at school.

I am grateful to Mission for showing me I am not a forgotten child and that I do have the right to ask questions. Because of them I am doing Community Services Certificate II at TAFE. I am not one hundred percent, but I am in a much happier place. And I have a social life!

*see page 43



BRIAN

It all started when I was in school. My teachers told me I would never amount to anything. I was a bit of a distraction in class due to the teachers not helping me learn to read and do maths and things like that, so I went through life not being able to read and do maths.

I went to three different Primary Schools and I kind of remember that it all started in Primary School. During Social Studies when the teacher did the writing on the board I struggled a bit, reading it. I just couldn't keep up. I couldn't do anything when I was at High School. When I was put in a Special Education School the teachers said I wouldn't amount to much in the future but I did get along with the other students. When they kicked me out of this school and I went back to mainstream High School I had a couple of good teachers who went to the same church as me. I also had a Christian friend who helped me engage, especially during the last year. I finished my schooling there at Pendle Hill High in Sydney.

When I moved to Tasmania from New South Wales I was annoyed that I still could not meet school requirements and I could not grow in my faith and have a better understanding because I could not read my Bible. Plus, I was always getting ripped off by bus drivers and taxi drivers. It was Centrelink who told me about the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program (LLNP) at Mission Australia. So, using every bit of humility I had, I decided to give it a go. It was very confronting in some ways but I had to 'suck it up', especially the community side of it, being in a classroom. When I realised the teachers weren't 'drop kicks' and treated me the same as everyone else, I knew it was the best thing I have ever done. I had expected more of the same from my past experience of education but the staff were very supportive and I built such good friendships in the classroom.

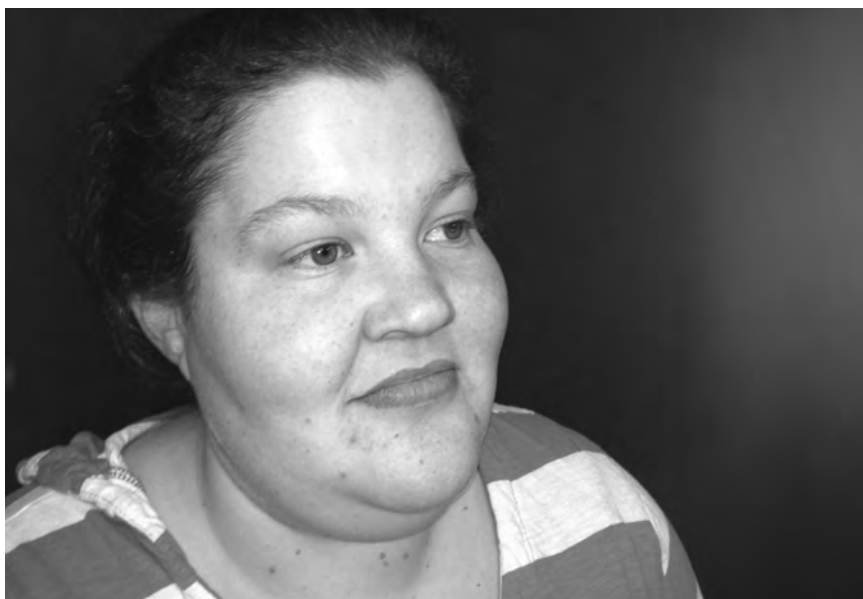
I completed two blocks of LLNP training and then went to work at a rehabilitation centre as an intern and began a Certificate IV in Youth Work. I enjoyed the work but could not complete my certificate because of my literacy problems. I returned to LLNP and completed a full course of training. During that time I was able to start picking up the Bible and reading bits and pieces and I was able to work out my money and stuff. My skills improved and I built good relationships with my teachers. I also did some voluntary work in a Primary School, helping out the children with their work. I applied for jobs in this area and considered doing a Teacher Aide course at the Polytechnic.

I had tried to hide my difficulties with reading, writing and maths at High School and I thought I would get an easy job in the future that didn't need these skills. I was the only one in my family with these problems. Both my brother and sister were A grade students. Reading and writing stopped me from achieving any goals. I wanted to quit heaps of times but my faith kept me going through it all. Early on I didn't really have goals except for getting the 'easy' job but since then I've worked out what I want in life, and my goals have been achieved. I have almost completed my Certificate III in Children's Services at the Polytechnic; I can read my Bible and do maths. I want eventually to do my Diploma in Children's Services, but want to work when I finish my current certificate. At the moment I have some work at a Child

Care Centre but will also need to complete my First Aid certificate, including anaphylaxis and asthma for children.

Time and time again I was told I was nothing and would never be anything. Until I came across the LLN Program. I can't wait to graduate and be qualified to work in an area I am passionate about. I am thankful to the LLNP teachers for not giving up on me and for believing in me and helping me achieve my dream of working with children. Everybody's got to have a dream.





EMMA

Doctors were worried about me even before I was born. I was sick, but no one knew why. Then when I was three years old I got diagnosed with leukaemia, cancer of the blood. I had an operation and eight years of radiation and chemo. I felt sick all the time and lost all my hair. Because of my cancer I missed out on all the basic stuff that kids need to learn. I hardly went to school at all until Grade Five, and by that time my work was crap. I didn't know times tables, take-aways, spelling, how to write a story, or anything.

I went to Bridgewater High in Grade Seven but got kicked out for mucking around, swearing at teachers and walking out, so I went to Cosgrove. Things went okay for a while, but in Grade Nine I got in with the 'popular' group. We always had smokes, drugs and alcohol, and we were always in trouble. I got into a lot of fights. Mostly I was defending myself. If someone called me 'fatty' I'd use my fists. Cosgrove had tutors for reading, and it turned out that lots of kids needed help. They set up a special class and the other kids called us 'retards'. I got in trouble for

bashing them. The class that was supposed to help didn't help one bit.

In the middle of Grade 9 Cosgrove made me leave. I was fighting, smoking choof and drinking alcohol. They said I could come back in Third Term but I didn't bother. I went back in Grade Ten, but only for half-days, and only when I felt like it. I ended up in a Girls' Group. It was okay, but we didn't do much work. I went to Pulse youth group in Glenorchy twice a week. I loved it but we didn't do much work there either. My time at school was over. My mind was going in an opposite direction: down the bad side.

When I was fifteen I got kicked out of Mum's after a big argument about drugs. I went and stayed with family friends, and that's how I met my partner. I fell pregnant soon after we moved out, and two things happened when I turned eighteen: I had my first daughter and Mum took me to the pokies. Gambling was an easy habit to pick up. Pretty soon I fell pregnant again, and again, and by the time I was twenty-two I had four kids. I had no skills, no plans, and no idea that things could ever be different. And, I loved the pokies.

At night my partner looked after the kids and I went out gambling. He knew what I was doing but he couldn't stop me. No one could have stopped me. I got little wins, just enough to keep me going, and I fooled myself that I was in for a big win. I thought I was going to be rich, but I was just talking shit to myself. Gambling was a drug and I was hooked.

I needed money so I used to go 'shopping'. I stole all sorts of stuff and sold it to get cash for the pokies. When I got caught and charged it was a big wake-up call. I was scared I'd end up in gaol and lose my kids. I went to court, but instead of gaol, the Magistrate gave me probation. He gave me a second chance and I decided to make the most of it. I barred myself from the pokies. For the first time ever, I felt confident and strong because I had made a decision and stuck to it.

I told my Probation Officer that I wasn't good with my reading and writing. She really listened to me, and told me about a literacy course I could join. I was ashamed and embarrassed to tell the tutor my story, but he never laughed at me or judged me. I told him that I failed my Learner's on the Service Tas computer so many times I gave up. I thought I'd never drive. I felt stupid and trapped. My tutor helped me

get my Learner's Licence, and now I drive everywhere. I'm not stupid and I'm not trapped anymore!

In lessons we started reading, spelling and maths. Now I read books to my kids at night and they love it. Instead of saying, "Go ask your Dad," I read to them when they're in bed, or they jump in bed with me. I haven't asked them, but I think they're proud of me. I know I'm proud of myself: big time. A couple of years ago I didn't even think about the future. I didn't think of anything. I just went by what was around me, not what was in front of me. I'm different now. I'm changing.

Before I started literacy and drama, I used to hide the fact that I couldn't read and write. I thought people would laugh at me for being dumb. No one laughed at me, and I'm not dumb. I'm getting on better with people now than I ever have before. I've joined my tutor's drama group, '25 Liverpool'. In drama I feel safe and confident. I show my real colours, not my criminal colours. We're all coming from the same place, trying to change our lives.

If I could give a message to someone like me, someone who's ashamed of their reading and writing, I'd say, "Give it a go. Instead of being shy and shut down, open up and try new things. Life doesn't need to be the old way. Life can be anything you want it to be." I won't let myself go back to the old ways. I don't want to live like that anymore. I want to live free: I want to be free to be me.

I opened myself up, and tried new things. Instead of hiding, I came out of myself. Instead of being ashamed, I started changing my life. Now I look in the mirror and I like who I see.



THYLO

*Ten miles down Reedy River
a pool of water lies,
and all the year it mirrors
the changes in the skies.*

Henry Lawson

These words were my favourites from my childhood. I lived on a river. These words spoke to me of the beauty of reading and of the love of poetry that would grow in me. But I remembered them through my ears; I couldn't read them from the paper. Years of reading pleasure were lost to me and I didn't know why. Disjointed and totally frustrated, simple daily things were impossible to accomplish to any satisfaction level.

As a child at school I was laughed at and ridiculed because I couldn't read the words. I knew I was dumb and stupid. The kids and the teachers told me so. My mother sent me to different schools to try to hide the fact that I was no good at English or maths. I tried to hide the fact that I couldn't read words or do maths they gave me. I learned from my father to count on my fingers and use the old convict four parallel strokes crossed to make five to help me do sums. I learned what was read by listening, but the words made no sense on the paper.

The remedial classes that I was put into were with those who were treated as dropkicks and no-hopers, the dregs of the classroom. You almost thought it was done on purpose to make you feel different in every way they could. I escaped into my art. At sport I sat out and made clay sculptures. The other kids didn't understand and weren't kind. That

was where I met the black puppy that would grow to be the black dog that pervaded my adult life and still sends me into times of despair and self-harm.

From my earliest memories I always wanted to be a doctor but this ambition was thwarted once I got to school and was overwhelmed by the feeling that I was stupid and dumb. Once I left school with a Leaving Certificate that I earned from the pots and pans I had cleaned through my school life I thought I would try nursing. Not as good as being a doctor but still dedicated to helping people.

I tried nursing in my hometown where I was given a placement at the main hospital in town. Four months later I was relieved from my duties because I failed my exams. This led to feeling that the only thing I could do was good and honest work but it was not for me; my creative mind was working overtime, and working as a labourer was killing my creative side, which was so depressing.

But, while working as a labourer I made money and with the money I bought an SLR camera and set about photographing everything. This led me to Art School, the place I belonged. At my interview the lecturers were blown away by my artworks. Embraced in a world where I knew I could achieve and was achieving.

Now I was where I wanted to be. I could do things my way. I could associate with other artists and live the life of an artist. It was wonderful as I discovered my capabilities as a creative person. Then I fell in with the “wrong crowd” and my world crumbled away and so did I.

The black dog stalked me. I spent much time in and around hospitals. I had lost my way. Until I met a friend and we set off together as friends down a road that has lasted more than half my life.

It was then in my early forties that my world was upended. I found out that my father and one of my nieces were dyslexic. I am dyslexic, not dumb, not stupid - just dyslexic.

Life has a different meaning.

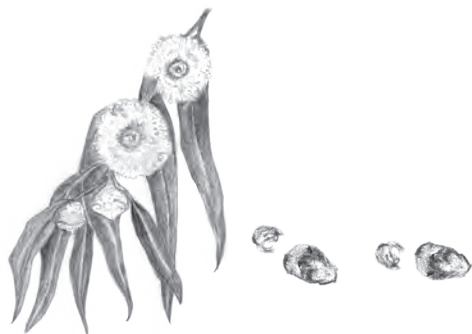
I still have mental health issues. But, the art I create, the pottery and sculpture I make, and the poetry I write, are all creative works. They are not dumb; they are not stupid. I have learned about literacy; it is all about communication in all its forms. I am quite literate in communicating

through art and am developing all my other communication skills and tools.

I have my own web site www.redbubble.com/people/thylacineart where you can view, and buy if you like, my work. This is where my hope is, in the non-confrontational ways of getting my work out there in the public domain without having to personally communicate with many people. My dream is to share my work, which is my life; to be loved and cherished by as many as possible.

What has kept me going all my life is creativity, and the beauty it gives the world.





GILLIAN

I did enjoy my school years. The only thing I didn't like was that if you didn't know much you were put in a low group. In that group you just sat there and did nothing until you were told, "Oh, here's a piece of paper. Take this home and learn it."

I think when you're young you don't sort of worry about it. You don't think you need to know your tables at this stage of your life.

In reading we got to read the *Dick and Jane* books. Everybody got the same book and we had to read out loud to the class. That was all right until you made a mistake and everyone would pick on you. "Oh, you can't do that." "I know it better than you." And you didn't have the teacher saying, "Well, sound it out." You sorta skipped it or kept on going.

I didn't think I had a reading problem until after I left school. Because when I met my husband and when we got married and went to the bank to fill out papers for loans and that, I kept on saying, "Oh, what does this word mean? What's it say?" He'd say, "Don't worry. Don't worry. You don't need to know that." I thought, "Oh, well, fine. He knows better than I do."

Then when it came to separation time and I had to see my lawyer there was a lot of stuff I didn't understand the meaning of and I said,

“Can you put it in simpler terms?”

There was a Reading Writing Hotline ad on TV. I rang up and soon a lady was teaching me. She put me onto another lady who was helping me but then she left and they didn't have anyone else around for more than fifteen years, until Adult Literacy through the library came along.

With maths it was the same situation. If you didn't know much maths, like long division and multiplication and a lot of that, you sat in a different group and had a different teacher to help you. That was all right but there was a lot of stuff that when you were in the lower group you didn't get to learn, like percentages, which I didn't have a clue about. A lot of the stuff they teach now I have no idea about and I couldn't help my own children when they'd come home and say, “How do you do this, Mum?” I'd say, “Well, I don't know because I was never taught it.”

That made me feel a bit down because I couldn't actually help my own children. They'd ask and I couldn't help them. But now I've got a little bit more of a clue of what to do. And I've got two sons now who are good at maths so they help me and help my daughter as well. I'm pleased with that.

I think my brother has difficulties: he sits there and reads to his son, who is one year old now, making the stories up from the pictures. So I'm not the only one. That's what I did! I used to make up stories as I went along until I actually sat down and, basically, with the smaller words I can understand them but you give me a bigger word I couldn't read it and I'm thinking, “Okay, what do I put in here? Oh, I'll change that bit.” I changed it every time I read it. I sort of managed to get myself around things until I had other people who would sit there and read the real words, like when the kids went to Playgroup and stuff like that and they'd hear people reading the story and they'd say, “Oh, but my Mum said this.” And the lady would say, “Your Mum's right too. Every Mum has different ways of telling the stories.”

Homework was a challenge at school. I'd do some but then I'd tell the teacher, “Oh, I didn't have enough time,” or “I couldn't understand what you had to do.” And they never helped you. You either handed it in or you didn't hand it in. And you got graded or you didn't get graded.

It took me a long time to realise I was having trouble but I think it

was when I first had kids. My eldest will be eighteen this year, so that's a bit tragic! And when I was separated from my ex-husband - that was nine and a half years ago - when I had to try and do things myself like filling out paperwork, I'd be thinking, "Oh hell! How do I do this?" And there was no example of how you did it. You just had to sit there and try and work it out. I had my parents to ask but back in their day they didn't learn a lot either, so I had to find someone who knew what I was doing, to help.

I hadn't really had to fill out many forms. When my husband was there he just went, "Oh, just put that bit there and that bit there and that's it." So I didn't actually get to read what I was signing. Since the divorce I haven't really had to do much paperwork either. If I get something, say from Centrelink or somewhere else, I think, "Oh, what does that mean?" and look it up in my dictionary now. And I tell my daughter now if she says, "Oh, what does this mean?" "Get the dictionary! If it's not in there, well I dunno!"

Understanding a computer - that was hard. I wanted to learn more computing to keep up with the kids, of course, and not only that but to get my understanding of what to do or even like when you buy a TV and it says, "Read the manual" - to see how it operates.

I was doing a TAFE course for women and of course we had to use computers. There was an advertisement for a course on the notice board at the Library, for the Adult Literacy program, and I thought, "Do I? Don't I? Will I? Won't I?" And I got the courage after I started an e-Learn course and I thought, "Right! I'm sick of this. I'm going to do it!" And so I did. That's when I went and saw the Co-ordinator. I put my name on the list and just went from there.

I have had trouble with employment because of my difficulties with reading. I couldn't go for a job interview because I didn't know how to fill out a form. I didn't know what to do. I didn't understand when they'd go, "Yayaya!" at you and use big words. "Okaaay," I'd think, "what do you mean?"

This made me depressed. I thought, "Oh, I'm not worth anything. Won't get a job. Won't be able to do this. Won't be able to do that." Sort of dragged me down. Got the blues. "I'll just sit in the corner. No one

wants to know me.” I just thought, “Oh yeah. Worthless. No one wants you because you can’t do anything right. You can’t do a form. You’ve got no education, no skills.” But I’m doing good now!

I think I realised I could do things when I first started doing the TAFE course and then the e-Learn. Then I thought, “I’ll try another course.” I have now done several courses and not quit. I just keep pushing myself, thinking, “I can do it! I’m not going to quit!”

The women’s course built up my confidence. We had to read aloud, learn First Aid, set up an email account, and design a little poster. I found I could do that. I did have a couple of moments there, when you had to read a piece and pick things out and I had no idea what they were on about. I sat there and thought, “Umm!” Then I said, “Excuse me, can you explain please what I have to do?” Once they did, I told myself, “Yeah, that was easy! Keep going!” And I’d never give up. I kept on pushing myself and I thought, “I’m going to get through this course whether I like it or not.” And I’ve got a certificate to prove it. That gave me the confidence to keep going. And once I finished that course I did an e-Learn course. I wouldn’t say I breezed through it but I had a bit more understanding about how to do things. Did that. Got there.

I am supposed to do a Certificate III in I.T. but I haven’t got that far because of other commitments.



CHRISTINE

When I did go to school I loved it. I loved the schoolwork, meeting people and the work experience they put me through. When I was young I went to about ten schools because we moved all the time and often I wasn't allowed to go to school because my parents kept me home to help look after the other kids. When I was about thirteen, school work got hard because I had missed out on so much work, so I mucked around a lot in class and got into lots of trouble. There are nine kids in my family and we all have literacy issues. The biggest issue at school was that I was embarrassed because I couldn't keep up with the work so I would try to hide it. Other kids would bully us with a lot of name calling and fighting. It was very difficult.

I love working and helping people and when I first went out to work I would always try to hide my literacy issues from my bosses. I would have to sneak around and ask other workers for help to get some jobs done. I really wanted to get out and work. My first job was working with older people but my literacy skills stopped me from following through with that work. My father would take my money off me from my work and he would deal with mail and things I couldn't understand because of the literacy. His help wasn't always in my best interests.

Regardless of my literacy issues I managed to bring up three

daughters and one son. I worked hard and I own my own house. I also have five beautiful grandchildren. About six years ago I tried to get help with my literacy by attending TAFE in Launceston. I had talked to a Social Worker at Rocherlea Primary School - that's where my kids went to school - and she helped me to find out about TAFE. I loved going there but my father made it difficult and stopped me from going.

I had been getting help from Baptcare and they told me about Literacy Services in my area, and that I could get a volunteer to help. The hardest thing about getting help was that I was really embarrassed and I believed I was completely illiterate. The first day meeting the coordinator I was shy but I tried to make out that I was good at everything, even though I didn't know the people. I tried to make out I was okay but on the inside I was very nervous. We did some activities to see what my literacy was like and at the end we looked at the work I had done and I felt really good about it all. I wanted the literacy volunteer so that I could read to my grandkids, get my licence and understand my mail.

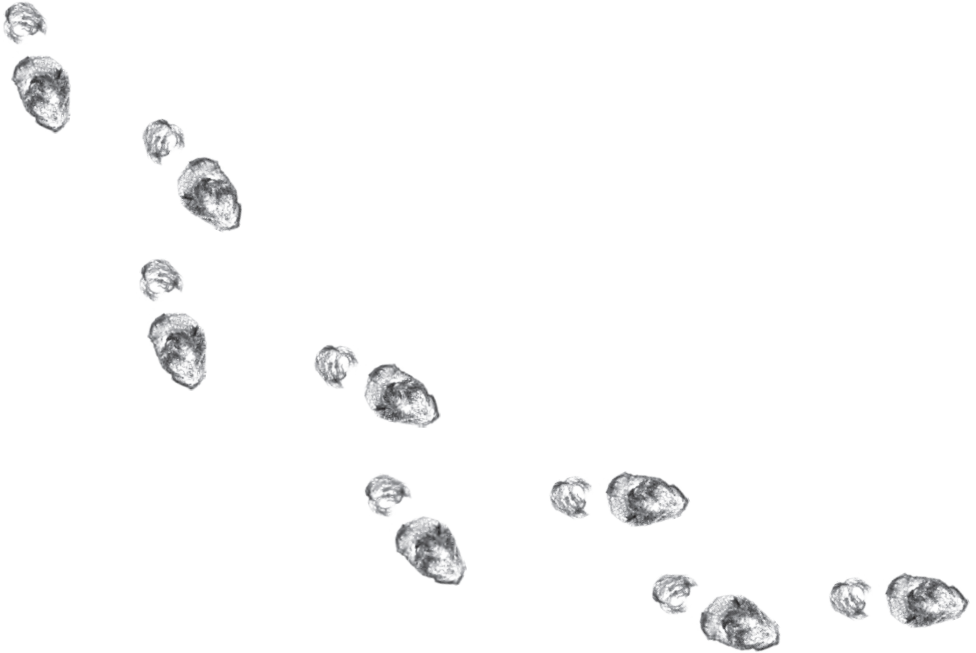
I was matched with a tutor who came to work with me once a week. The first thing she ever taught me was to read a book to my grandkids and that was the happiest day of my life. Now when they come to visit they get a book out and say, "You gonna read a book, Nanny, so we can laugh?" When I first started reading to them I would just read the words but now I put the characters in and make it fun and that's why we laugh and they have so much fun.

Now I am forty-four and have been working with my tutor for just over a year. I've got my Learner's and I have a volunteer from the Council who comes and we go driving. I'm getting practice and I am learning a lot and getting more experience out on the road. One day not too far away I will have my P's. I just want to go back to Grade Eleven and experience more about school. I love learning and I want to get a job helping old people. We did a course called "Ready, Set, Go!" and after hearing the lady from the University speak I realised that one day I could go to Uni if I wanted to and do nursing.

My life is now changing. In the last year and a half I have got married; I know I can get out and meet people and I couldn't before, and I dress a lot better than I used to. I have really become more confident, my self-

esteem is growing and I believe in myself. Just being a woman and not one of Mum and Dad's kids, I am now able to do things for myself. I can understand more of the things that come in the mail. I am becoming independent and stronger.

If I met someone who has literacy issues now, I would tell them, "Don't be afraid to ask for help, because there is help out there and if you get help you can follow through with everything that you need and want through life." I really want to thank my volunteer, Margy, and all of the other volunteers and people who are out there helping.





Photograph by Sacha Sutherland

DAVID

The main reason I went to literacy is because I went to put a notice in the paper for my wife after she passed away and I couldn't do it, because I had to write it out. That's what changed my mind, because I thought I'd better do something about it. I found the number that was advertised on the wireless for adult literacy at the LINC* and rang. I thought I'd never ever have to worry about writing because I was married for twenty-five years and the wife used to do it all - pay the bills and read everything for me and I just used to have to sign them. And I was getting away with it through my work all my life by getting people to do things for me and read things for me. Then my wife got crook and I ended up starting to pay the bills and all that, and my world turned around.

So I thought I'd better do something about it and that's how I started off and as far as I think, I'm doing better. I'm picking up reading more - reading the paper and all that sort of stuff. I sit down and read all the things that are on the wall and things like that, signs on shops. I didn't

think I needed that before. I just got my way through life.

And now I have to have so many licences – tell me about it! I've got my white card licence now, and my dozer licence, my wheel loader licence. I've got them, and I've been to TAFE and got Certificate II for engineering – that's for my welding. I've got my ticket at home. It came a while back. I've got that. She's all right, too. And I finally got my truck licence a couple of weeks ago. I've been driving a fair bit, actually, since I've got it, since I've been working on the farm. Since Gunn's closed in Smithton I've picked up work on a farm. They've got a lot of machinery out there that I use and drive. She's good.

When I was a kid I had a fair few shifts. There was a teacher at Penguin High who used to help me – old Mr McVicker - he was a good teacher. He used to take me when he could and I'd read to him up in the staffroom when he had nothing to do. When he had a spare class he'd come and get me. I got on well with him, old Mac McVicker.

When the original area school burnt down they rebuilt it and it just went to Grade Six. There were two classes in each room. Two teachers, two classes and they didn't worry much. They didn't give you extra help, not back then, they didn't. It was only when I went to high school.

Some of the high school teachers used to reckon I was trouble. They used to put me out into the grounds and I did all the gardens and everything. They put me out there two days a week with the gardener, digging out trees and mowing lawns. I enjoyed it though. I'd sit out there with him and drink coffee and that, and go and get seaweed with him, bark and everything. The old Tas O'Brien, he was the groundsman. I was in Grade Seven there and I left at Easter time in Grade Eight. I said, "I'm going home." So I went and got a job. Must have been only about fourteen. I was going nowhere at school, so I thought I'd get out and get a job. So I did. I got a job and that was it.

I was only using a chainsaw on my first job. Then I left that and mucked about for a couple of years, and then I met my wife. I went to school with her. She went to Penguin High with me. Oh, well, we parted our ways from school and everything, and we met up again and we got together. We had two kids and five grandchildren.

And I used to take my son Brent to Kip McGrath [for tutoring] in

Burnie once a week. He went up there for nearly two years, I reckon. I wanted him to be able to read and write better. He was slow so we took him out of the Smithton Primary and put him in the Stanley Primary where there were only a few kids. That helped him a lot, that did.

And, like I say, I didn't think I'd ever have to read. I had no reason to. My wife did everything. I only had to go to work. I went to work and that was it. I only signed if we bought a new car or there was something to sign like that – like signing the wedding paper! That's all I ever had to do.

And then I lost her. You think your world's over, but it's not. She don't stop. You'd like it to.

This tutoring is going all right, though, I reckon. I'm making progress in reading.

Tutor: *When you first started, you didn't have any books at home.*

And now I brought in one for you to take home to your husband, the other day.

Tutor: *And you are working your way through the colour-coded books.*

Yeah. I've only got a few more of the green ones to go and I'm finished there.

Tutor: *And you're writing stories on what you do.*

Yeah. I wrote another one last night and I've brought it in. I wrote about going to Hobart and the fun we had. Then we go through and check it. I don't mind doing that. And I've got my words in my little dictionary.

Tutor: *There's a big difference from what you could do then to what you can do now.*

Yeah. I didn't even know how to use a mobile phone. Now I can text, but I'd rather ring. And I know how to do everything now - about paying the bills and everything. And I'm good with money. I know when I'm getting ripped off at the shop. They've got to give me the right change back!

I used to enjoy maths at school. They used to put me in there with this computer and I used to do all my maths on that, away from everybody else, because I was too noisy in class. I'd be singing out, so they used to

put me in the room by myself when it was maths time, and I'd still get in trouble. I'd get someone to come in, and the teacher would see them.

If I had to do an essay, I just wouldn't do it. They knew I couldn't read. I went to West Park and didn't do a thing. Too busy going on trips and woodwork and all that sort of stuff, instead of trying to learn basic reading. It was a waste of time having school, I reckon. I didn't learn anything there. They were going to send me out to Burnie High and I said, "No, I'm not going there. I'm going to Penguin High with my mates." I went there for a day, and then I said, "No, I'm not going here," and I went back to West Park and told the headmaster, "No, I'm not going out there." And he said, "Why aren't you out there now?" I said, "I don't like it. I walked back." He said, "Why didn't you catch the bus back?" I said, "I'm not going there." I didn't like it. I wanted to go to Penguin High where the rest of my mates were. So I did.

Dad couldn't read. My brother Geoffrey, he can read, as far as I know. My sister Shirley can, not that good, but she can do it. Sandra can; she's pretty good, and I don't know about Johnny, what he was like. Geoffrey's the youngest – he's the one under me. We moved around a lot – and instead of going home I'd go home to my sister and brother-in-law. Dad died when I was six, so I looked on my brother-in-law as my Dad, and I'd rather go to him. They brought me up more or less. John used to have old cars and he'd muck about with them. Most of my mates used to have old cars in their sheds and they'd go out in the bush with them and bikes and that. We used to go there, up to his shed, and muck about and that.

Tutor: And you still like your shed.

You've got to have your den – your man-cave.



BRONWYN

I had a job for four and a half years and I got a back injury—osteoarthritis in my spine—and I couldn't do the physical work any more. I had to change my job and do something I could do without any physical effort. I actually wanted to become a counsellor. I wanted to go back to school—to the Polytechnic—but I couldn't get into any places to do a course. I enrolled too late so I missed out on that. And I had to move to a different location to go to school and learn and do what I had to do. So I went to Centrelink and talked to them, and they advised me to go to Mission Australia. I already knew I had to gain computer skills. I couldn't do computer and my literacy wasn't very good: I couldn't read very well. And I needed to come to Mission Australia to learn. It was a long time since I'd been to school!

I came to Mission. It wasn't so scary, because I went back to school when I was thirty-six; I went back to school in Georgetown, to do my training to get my Certificate III in Aged Care. That helped me a lot, but I didn't know the computer: I couldn't learn the computer down there

then. So I wasn't really scared because I'd already gone back to school. I knew I could do it, but I was a little bit scared because I didn't know how many people would be in the class; and going back to class again, that was quite an issue for me, because I didn't like school.

I have actually got a learning disability: I am a bit dyslexic. And I wasn't interested in anything back then and I thought I couldn't do anything because I did everything wrong. I couldn't read properly, I couldn't do maths properly and I just thought, "Why am I here? I can't learn anything. I'm wasting their time and my time." I wanted to leave school in Grade Ten, but I didn't. I kept it up and I finished Grade Ten. I thought, "Why am I here? I can't do anything." I thought about going into Childcare but I ended up just getting married and having children of my own. I raised them, and then one day I thought, "No, I want to do something different for myself."

Was your dyslexia diagnosed at school?

No, I was lazy, they said. They weren't very nice to me at all. They did take me out and give me special reading time, one-on-one, but it still didn't help. And I stayed back at school in Grade One. But it didn't help. My brother was the same, with learning. The teachers weren't very nice to me. One of them actually hit me with a ruler and I got hit on the hand a couple of times because I couldn't do the work, and I was just so messy; I kept on rubbing my work out. I couldn't spell and I was making mistakes so I kept on rubbing it out all the time and I got into trouble for that a lot.

It really turned me off. And it took me a long time to go near the place again and that was only because I wanted to learn and do a course, otherwise I wouldn't have gone back there. You should want to go to school. Now they know more about dyslexia and these problems and they can deal with it more than they could back then. Then they just called it lazy. That wasn't right. It hurts your self-esteem. I know I didn't want to go to school and I didn't want to be there. And I didn't have a lot of friends; I was a loner. It's only since High School that I've got more friends.

I was told by other teachers, when I went back and had a talk with them about wanting to go back to school, that these days it's completely

different. You come in on your own hours, you do what you want to do and if you want to go home you can, and you have flexible hours of being there, which is really good. It's different now from what we had. You've got to be interested in what you're doing. So I did Year Eleven, Level III, Aged Care. There were people of all different ages – from eighteen up to fifty - in the course; we all did Aged Care and Disability. I got on well with them all. There were only six or eight of us in the class and it was really really good.

A better learning situation.

It really was. Others helped me as well, because I couldn't do computers: they helped me a bit. I was very slow and I've still got problems with my computer skills, but they really helped me out. They were so good in class. I sorta had friends when I was going to school but they didn't know I had a problem with reading and writing. None of them picked it up.

You must have been very clever about hiding it.

I was. And apparently I have a very good memory. That's what got me through. I remembered things a lot.

Two of my children have been diagnosed with dyslexia. They got tested for it and they both have it – my youngest and my eldest. They got help, which was really good. My son got a job, hands on. The same with me. If anyone tells me what to do, I can go and do it. But if they give me a piece of paper, or say, "Go and read this and then do it," I can't do it. I've got to be shown how to do something. And through talk – they tell me what to do and I'll go and do it. And that's what my son's like: he's got a job and he can do that – a lot of hard work, and simple, but he can do it. No paperwork involved whatsoever. That's why he's got that job; otherwise he wouldn't have a job.

I was bored just being at home. I've always wanted a job. I'd had little jobs, like minding people's children, and a couple of hours at night and a couple of hours during the day, cleaning. And then I thought, "No, that's not good enough. I need a bit more, something different." So I went and did the Aged Care.

At Mission I was in a class with people of all different ages again. I got on really well: I talked to all the young ones and the older ones. I wasn't

nervous at all, except in a group where we had to speak out. I'm a good talker, but not in front of a group. I'm a bit different there!

I still had trouble with the computer. The young ones could do it. I said to them, "I wish I had your skills!" I just could not do it. I've been shown that many times, over and over again. But since coming to Mission Australia I have got the use of the computer. I can do emails now and I can search the Internet. You have to spend time practising. But we were only having a little time on it: really I should have been on the computers all the time, five days a week, then I might have got it right!

I was at Mission Australia for three months. I liked the classroom situation. I could help out if the teacher was busy and they could help me out, too. I could have kept on going with the course but I actually got a job out of it. I was always looking for a job, and next year I was going to go back to school if I had to, but I was always looking for a job as well, in case something came along. And something came along and I'm now doing Disability work. So that's why I stopped the Mission Australia course.

In my workplace we have to use the computer and I might have to come back and do another computer course.

Or you could get a volunteer tutor through the LINC, to work with you.

Disability is different from Aged Care: I do cooking, pick up clients, bring them home and cook their tea, change them and put them in their pyjamas. It's not stressful.

You seem to have good people skills.

That's why I want to become a counsellor, to talk to young and old. I'm a pretty good talker now, but I wasn't. In a group I'm not so good, but one-to-one I am. And I really listen. So I thought, "I'll do counselling. It's not stressful. And I can talk to people – I have that gift." And I'm used to listening to people's troubles.

You must have a big heart.

A lot of people have told me that.

So, it seems that something that was difficult for you – reading and writing - has meant you have developed to a high degree your skills in talking and listening and remembering.

It has. Because I always thought, “Why am I here? I can’t do anything. I’m not here for a reason.” But now I know I am here for a reason – to help people.

In my job in Aged Care and in Disability I was helping people, talking to people – communicating with them. And I love it.

So you have a real sense of purpose?

I have now. I knew ten years ago but before that I didn’t. When I grew up and had my children I wondered, “Why am I here? There’s got to be something better for me. Surely I can do something.” And I did.

I had a sick grandmother, who was ninety-two, and I helped her a lot, and I was helping my mother and that’s what got me into Aged Care. That helped me a lot.

I’m pleased with myself, especially for getting a job. I thought I wouldn’t get a job. I did have a low there for a while. I thought it would take me a while or that I probably wouldn’t be able to get a job. That was a bit daunting, the thought of having to go back to a TAFE or Uni or whatever and thinking about my disability with reading and writing – thinking, “Oh my God, I’m not going to make it. I’m not going to be able to do it.”

Then I came to Mission Australia, and even reading – I wouldn’t even read a book – now, after coming to Mission Australia I go to the library all the time. And I get books out and read the whole book. Before, I’d get a book and read the first two pages and give up. I wouldn’t read a book right through. Now I do. I read all the time. So it really has changed me.

Mission have really helped me out and I’m glad I came to this course. They’re lovely. They treat you as a person. There’s a lot of different people that come to this class and they all treat us all the same.



JULIA

In my job I am cutting fabric, using both inches and yards and centimetres and metres, also doing till work, where I'm needing to be able to count money quickly and accurately. I wasn't good at maths at school. I fell behind and I didn't get the help when I actually needed it. Up to Grade Five was where I kind of struggled, so from Grade Six I was behind and in High School I had a few teachers who didn't really help the people who needed help. I had one of those teachers who just sat there and let us do nothing, so I gave up. I went to class and tried; I was interested but I couldn't do it. A few times people looked at me as if to say, "How come you don't know this?"

My Mum had the same kind of experience as me so she couldn't help me as much as I needed. But I finished Years Eleven and Twelve. Then I got a traineeship. I hadn't worked before. This was my first job. The cash register wasn't too hard but when it came to doing inches that's where I wasn't one hundred percent. My employers weren't happy about this. I could measure, but when customers worked in inches I couldn't really help them because I couldn't calculate it for them.

Tutor: My role is to assist with gaining the skills needed in a workplace. I got a phone call from Julia's supervisor about what Julia needed –

some workplace numeracy training - measuring and calculating cost per metre etc. It was a challenge for me to help Julia work out how to calculate imperial measurements because I had not really worked in inches before. So it was a journey for us both.

They gave me half an hour off, in work time, twice a week. We've cut back to once a week since I've got better at maths. Because the tutor is easy going, it's easier to learn from him than it was at school. He tells me things in a way that I can understand. He's helped me heaps. I can pretty much do everything now that I couldn't do - inside and outside of the workplace. It's just basic general things that I needed to know, but that I didn't know.

There were challenges. When we were doing some tasks together, it took me a while to pick up how to do them. But we just kept working on it and recapping. I kept calm and kept working at it with him and then we just overcame it. It was good.

He tried to make it real. I would bring in bits of fabric and we laid them out on the table and my tutor would ask me to measure them and then we'd get another piece of fabric and he'd ask me to calculate them together – to work it out. And he'd show me different ways on the calculator I could do it.

The tutor would also have this big bag of money and he'd say, "I need this or this much," and I'd have to count it out for him. Then I'd have to count the whole lot and tell him how much was there. Then, in the end we ended up just using paper: I didn't need actual physical money because I'd gotten a lot better.

So now I feel a lot more confident than I used to. Most of the times in the workplace my supervisors don't have time to teach me. They'd try to help me to the best of their ability but they didn't have much time. So working with the tutor has made me feel a lot more confident.

My tutor taught me a way to calculate numbers in my brain so now when people ask me how much something will be I can quickly calculate it. I never used to be able to do that before. I could write it on a piece of paper but I couldn't do it in my head, and now I can. And when I'm giving change, he told me how to count it out to them. So now I feel like I'm going to be able to go to work and not make mistakes. Before, I was

constantly mucking up and that made me feel pretty bad, and frustrated because I couldn't get it. It's frustrating doing the same mistake over and over again.

There was a situation the other day that actually was a positive one: I forgot to give a lady ten cents back. Now I always check the change and make sure it's not going to be out. I went, "No, ten cents," and gave it to her. That was good, that I'd been paying attention.

My traineeship ends soon. I'm not sure whether to stay with the career I'm in now or to expand. Definitely if I did go to another retail store I'd be pretty up to scratch and pretty confident in knowing what to do.





AFTERWORD

The authors of this collection all missed out, for whatever reason, on gaining solid literacy and numeracy skills during their school years. Their stories all speak of the feelings of powerlessness, frustration or lack of self-worth that resulted; of how constrained and limited their choices were in adult life; of how many of them became isolated and despairing, or were forced to rely on others to mediate their worlds for them. It is to address this last point – the inappropriateness of adults’ lives being mediated by other people – and to celebrate the autonomy of the storytellers in this anthology and give their voices the primacy they deserve – that I have chosen to write an afterword, instead of the more conventional foreword, in which the reader is addressed initially by someone who speaks for the contributors, and frames their stories within an ideology, philosophy, or world view. Instead, I have chosen to make my comments after the readers have encountered the stories. It is important that Bernadette, Brian, Emma, Thylo, Gillian, Christine, David, Bronwyn, and Julia speak first, directly to their readers, without

the editor's voice intruding on or framing their narratives.

And these stories speak powerfully of the constricted world into which someone is forced if they do not have the range of literacy and numeracy skills needed to navigate this increasingly complex world of ours. They speak loudly and clearly of the courage it takes to change that situation and will inspire those who have yet to undertake a similar journey, or who are taking the early steps.

Few literate people realise how complex and difficult it is to navigate life in the twenty first century without the literacy skills most people take for granted. At a very young age I realised this. My grandmother could not read or write and once my grandfather was no longer around to deal with the letters and bills and any situation that required reading, writing or mathematical calculations, she became fearful and withdrawn. I remember at age eight or nine going with her on the trolley bus from Lenah Valley to town: she would anxiously tip a jumble of coins into my hands and ask me to work out what we needed to pay our fare. I also noticed that shop assistants were often impatient with her, and that she had a few well-worn routes through Hobart and suburbs, and she never deviated from these.

As an adult, training as a literacy tutor for non-English speakers I got first-hand a taste of the deprivation the lack of literacy skills brings. In an introductory session the teacher handed us two sheets – the first a set of instructions and the second a test. We were given a certain amount of time to complete the test. The catch was that both documents were in a language no one could read. Even though we knew she had done this to make a point, how we all panicked!

Much of my work as a writer, historian and community artist has been to facilitate the telling of the stories of those who often are not heard – people who for a range of reasons have been pushed to the margins. It is my strong belief that we all have a story worth telling, so I was delighted when, partway through the Steps and Stories project, I was invited to collect the stories of those who had agreed to participate, and to compile this anthology. It has been a joy and an inspiration. During the short time I have worked on this project with the organisers, facilitators, clients and tutors I have been astonished to discover yet

again the resilience of people to overcome setbacks, to persevere even when the odds are stacked against them, to dream of a better life and to reach out and grasp the help that is offered, to navigate a way through the setbacks, to set new goals and to rejoice in gains made and more expansive lives created.

It's a shared journey, one in which a cordial and respectful relationship between client and tutor is key to the success of their joint endeavour. To give readers the flavour of this I have deliberately included in the texts of some stories a few comments and questions from tutors. I hope this will demonstrate the mutual cordiality and empowerment of client and tutor. It is my hope, too, that in the future there might be a follow-up project which is focussed not only on the goals and journeys and gains of the clients, but which also documents the experience of being an adult literacy tutor. There is much that could be learned in documenting those vital partnerships. Collaboration, relationship, partnership – all good ways of combating isolation and despair, of remembering that we are all in this bowl of soup together – and of demonstrating that the whole is more than the sum of its parts.

I would like to thank the nine people who told their stories, and the tutors, teachers, facilitators and coordinators who have “walked the walk” with these people. I pay tribute to the enthusiasm, skills and caring of the teachers and tutors, and to the vision of the project team. But most of all I acknowledge with respect the honesty, skill, generosity and valour of the authors of these stories. They have shown themselves to be special people - and powerful storytellers.

Dr Terry Whitebeach

Mission Australia is a not for profit community service organisation that delivers over 550 community, employment and training services from 350 sites throughout metropolitan, rural and regional Australia.

Mission Australia has delivered the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program in Tasmania for over a decade. Teachers work with people to improve their language, literacy and/or numeracy to enable them to participate more effectively in society, training or in the labour market.

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LINC Tasmania is a statewide network giving Tasmanians and visitors to the state, access to library services, research and information, adult literacy support, community learning, online access, and archive and heritage services.

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