

The Struggle I Face With Literacy

By Ray Gentry, YLC Student

My name is Ray. I am 35 years old. I was born in Montreal. As far back as I can remember I have had many problems right from the start with reading and writing. As a kid I spent a lot of time in and out of hospitals because I was a very out of control child. At that time the doctors did not know what was wrong with me. They did many tests on me and said that I had Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), so they put me on a medication called Ritalin. In the 1970's Ritalin was a big thing. Back then a lot of children were taking it so some parents could control their children at home.

As I started my first school year in grade one things did not go too well. I could not understand what the teacher was saying to me. I could hear everything around me but nothing made sense when the teacher would talk. So a lot of times I would just sit there and look into space not knowing what to do with myself. After some time they thought I was playing a game with them, pretending I was dumb so I did not have to do any schoolwork.

I spent a lot of time in the principle's office, and they would call my father at work to come and get me when I had done something really bad like throw a rock through a window and other things. By this time I was seeing special doctors and other experts to find out why I was not learning like other children. They said that my mind was all over the place and that was why I could not remember more than two things at once. So they put me in a special school with other children with the same problems.

As I got older impulsive behaviour became more of a problem for teachers who were trying to help me with my academics. Sometimes other children would make fun of me when I could not spell a word. I would get very upset and start to cry because I felt bad inside all the time. I found it very hard to make friends with the kids at school because I was not cool enough to hang with. Spending a lot of time by myself did not help my social life very much. Because I was the tallest kid on the block some parents thought I was too old for their kids to play with, but I was the same age they were. I started psychological counseling at school to find better ways to improve my education, but things got much worse for me. I started fighting with other kids when they would laugh at me. I would try so hard to learn that I would forget what I had learned before.

I found things to be too hard so I would just quit and walk away, never trying to learn them again. I got a lot of low grades as a kid. My parents were not too happy. They tried very hard to make me understand that I had to do much better. I felt different from other people because I was learning much slower than most or the people around me. Maybe if I had not got into trouble so much as a kid I could have done better in school – you never know. I went to many different schools in Montreal until I found the right one to help me out. This school was for people who had all kinds of different learning handicaps, the Miriam School. In a couple of months my life changed for the better. I made new friends more than ever before. The teachers were a lot more understanding and helped us when we could not do something for ourselves. I went there from 1978 to

1980, and by the end of that time I could pick up a book and read it – not like before when I would run away from books. My education was going much better and my father was happier with me because of it. But the school board closed the place down because there was not enough money to keep it open, and I was shipped off to another school, Iona.

Back at public school they had a special classroom for people like me. There were about 25 people in the class and one teacher. All my problems started up again, like my getting angry over little things like not knowing how to spell easy words or how to solve math problems. Sometimes I could not take it anymore, so I would skip school and run around all day long getting into trouble; and of course when the school called my father he would yell at me of just send me to my room. I started fooling around, acting like the class clown, getting into fights, smoking in the bathroom and not listening to the teacher. This gives you some idea of what I was like in school, and even at home of on the streets. I would act out all the time because nobody could understand what I was going through. I tried so hard all the time to be good but it was easier to get into trouble than to learn something new.

At the age of 17 I was fed up with school so I quit because I thought I would just stay in the same grade for the rest of my life. I went to a car wash and made \$260.00, but at the same time I went back to school part-time for about 2years. Then I got other jobs like cutting grass, and made more money. I was working and doing very well for myself while at the same time putting money in the bank, but that didn't last very long because I partied all the time with my friends.

I was 19 years old and lost my car wash job because I started getting into trouble with the law, doing stupid things trying to make easy money. Because I could not read properly I found myself doing menial jobs and got frustrated. All I wanted was to get rich quick, but that did not work. So I tried some other ways to make money but they never worked out legally. As the years went by I found myself in trouble with the law again and again. I guess I just didn't get it the first time around when the judge told me that I would spend time in jail if I didn't smarten up and fly right.

The years went on and I got older. By age 27 I started to push myself. I wanted to be more productive and get a good job to support myself. I didn't want to rely on social assistance. I got to thinking about how I could get back into studying, so four years ago I found a program to enroll in, the Laubach Literacy program. The ladies of the local Yamaska Literacy Council in the Eastern Townships area where I live volunteer to help people who are in need of special education. I met them through a church group./ The Laubach program has been around for over 70 years and teaches people all over the world how to read. It depends on one-on-one tutoring from trained tutors who sit with me.. They don't assume I have a problem. They listen patiently and go through their material at my own speed. You don't have to rush to do tests, like in normal schools. There is no failure and there are no other students to compete against. I haven't quit yet. I am eager to attend every week.

Reading and writing better has opened up doors and the world for me. I write poems and essays, and I have even attended classes through the Thomas More Institute adult education college, who also visit my local chapel. Now I mostly teach myself with my computer and with books I read on my own, but the Laubach tutors are still an excellent help.. One of my poems was selected Story of the Week and posted on the National Adult Literacy Database Website. I could never have done this without my literacy training. I would never have had the confidence to try and write like that. My poem is called "The pain of not knowing how to read." This is my poem:

Time goes on, and our pain
always stays.
We try to forget
the ones who would play those hurtful games.

The silent tears fall from our eyes...
and the sad thought of memories still seems to blow our minds.
Tender hearts may fall apart as we
pray to God for a fresh start.

We try to hold a brave face as we
walk through life...
as soon as we are alone
time is not on our side.

We know that life is unfair,
but as people we still treat everybody the same
with respect and care.

The time has come and we must say,
we wish their lingering thoughts
would just go away!

It's better to be happy and at peace...
let our hearts and spirits
have the chance to be free.

We must hold on to what is
important to us...
and never let anybody take that
special memory of feeling away:
'cause the meaning has no end!

As time goes on we have ways
of coping with everything,
everything that life throws at us;

but when we have good friends
around us, it makes us feel
much better knowing, that
someone does care and has the willingness
to help us along the way!