

I Loved School

A story by Vicki

I loved school...

I loved putting my uniform on with my black school shoes that I polished the night before, my little school case that I decorated with colourful stickers. I even loved the trip to school, sometimes on the double-decker bus and other times I would run the 5kms to see if I could beat the bus. I loved the taste of the cold milk we would drink out of the little glass bottles. However, the classroom was a big challenge (was then, and continued to be throughout my whole life). I just couldn't understand how the other kids could just *get* it, how letters and numbers all seemed so easy, why their books would look so tidy and neat. I just didn't know why or how I was different. I remember being made an example of and still hear the teacher's words: "See, this is what happens when you don't pay attention." I started to realise when all the other kids teased me about how I couldn't do things and called me 'Dumbie' that there was something wrong with me.

I still loved putting my uniform on and the run to school through the long grass with all the smells that came my way, and the cold milk in the little glass bottles that I would hold in both my hands, BUT, when that bell rang I felt hopelessness. If I could just listen, try harder, sit up straight, try and write on the lines, copy from the board, look at the numbers and letters properly, it would just happen. I would be like the other kids; my work would be the same. I remember thinking that when I got to the primary school it would be better, someone would help me try.

I found a new world in primary school. I remember my 3rd class teacher took us all out of the classroom to the oval, we were put into groups one person from each group was chosen to run to the end of the grass and back. All the boys went first then the girls, there were some boys and girls who couldn't run and some who cried and were told to sit under the tree. I remember hearing "Go" and I ran as fast as I ran to school, I remember visualising about beating the bus. I won. I heard, "Well done, good running". I turned to still see some of the other girls had not even turned back. The group I was in were all excited for I even heard: "WOW you're *fast*". My experiences out of the classroom were the ones I loved the best. I wondered why the kids that sat under the tree were told that it was okay that they didn't run.

As I tagged along through school year after year, after year, it became more and more of a challenge for me and I was always trying to work out ways to try and be like the other kids. I finally made it to high school where things were all about fitting into the

program, their way. However, I found ways to help myself enjoy high school. You see I was good at sport, any sport, so I joined every sporting team they had going. This meant training before school, after school and even during class time. Teams would be picked to represent the school and I always made sure I was in one. I spent all my high school years representing the school and winning the school a very good reputation. I would be up on the stage receiving applause and winning positions in local and state teams. Weekends I would spend hours training to be my best, I was accepted by some of the teachers and the kids would always want me on their team. But it was a very different picture in the classroom.

I still ran to and from school but in the back of my head I wished that I could read, I wished that school was as easy as sport. I remember hitting my head so hard and hoping that that might help me read or even remember things.

My school experience was all about avoidance of situations which humiliated me and made me feel dumb. The ways that I devised to do this ranged from being deliberately naughty so I would be kicked out of the classroom, or using the skills I knew I had to gain acceptance. My teachers took one of three paths: further punishment, cut me some slack because I was good at sport, or to remove me from the classroom so I didn't interrupt.

My school life came to an end when in the early part of January 1979 I was involved in an accident which left me in hospital for about 4 months, followed by about 18 months of rehabilitation. All that time I was isolated from words and letters. I spent time trying to fix my broken body (but really that was what I could do best), happily avoiding school work and its challenges. I was determined to mend but still even then I knew I was avoiding my issues of learning.

I never returned to school. I worked in photography for about 4 years, and then in 1982 I married a Navy man who was often away from home which meant I spent a lot of time on my own. In 1983 I had my first child, then again in '85, '88 and '92 – all healthy and amazing children. One by one I sent them to school.

In 1994, with 4 young children, my husband and I moved to Perth to further his career in the Navy. For me this meant losing my support base and acceptance within a familiar group of people, but in order to support my children in this big upheaval I had to suppress all my own anxieties and fears to make the move a fantastic experience. We arrived in 1994 and in March 1995 I had my 5th child.

I knew how school had been for me, and I didn't want any one of my kids to experience what I had. Support, confidence and a belief that they could achieve whatever they needed to was something I tried to give them all. I knew that all my kids needed was someone to listen to them. They all went through school: three

completed year 12 and one went to uni while the other children showed they were better off learning out of school and went into job training.

Now that my kids had all moved on in their own lives, and things had changed in my own, I found myself needing to head out to work. For me, this was the most frightening thing I had ever done. I started looking in papers for tutoring but none of the ads helped adults. I was looking for some help or something that would lead me to do something more with my own life.

Then the domino effect took place. I was given a brochure on the Read Write Now Program. I knew this was a chance but all the feelings came back, embarrassment of not having the knowledge, the feeling of being ashamed of what I had become was all still real for me. I knew I had to make that phone call. How many times did I pick the phone up? I lost count. I remember the phone rang twice then I hung up, it took days for me to make the phone call. When I made the call my hands were sweating, heart pumping and the words were coming out all wrong. Liz spoke the words: "Hello, how can I help you?" I knew that this was where I was going to get help. We spoke for a while and organised to meet at the local library. The meeting for me was very emotional; we sat and talked through things that I had never felt safe to share with anyone. Liz believed me.

It felt like weeks waiting to hear back, finally the call. My tutor Judy and I made a time and a place to meet. The day came to meet; this was someone I had to trust to help me, to expose all my feelings to. We sat together and discussed how Judy could help me and worked out the best way she could teach me. We worked on maps, recognising sounds and sight words, building sentences, reading a newspaper front to back and discussing it, how to write a story about my trip, keeping a book on new words and their meanings. I often felt this was impossible for me. I had two choices, do what I've done for most of my life or trust that Judy would be there to help me to learn.

So for the next 8 weeks, once a week we met. Together we worked on achieving my goals. At the end of the 8 weeks Judy showed me how much I had achieved. I had accomplished all my goals. I set more, I completed a bronze medal course and passed all the theory, note-taking skills, mapping, my times tables, and reading aloud with confidence and expression. I spent weeks putting together a story based on a trip my family and I had taken and had it put onto the Read Write Now website for the world to see. I explored part time work opportunities and sometimes we talked, just talked about how I was feeling but all the time moving forward and setting more goals.

I managed to get a job cleaning a house. For me this was perfect, however I knew I was still isolated and isolating myself from facing my real challenge – I needed to

make an income to move forward in my life and cleaning one house was not going to pay my bills. The people I cleaned for ran their own business and immediately after I told them about my situation, they offered me a job. The word “Yes” came out of my mouth and I couldn’t believe what I had just done. Straight away I began working out how I was going to hide being dyslexic.

Over the next few days I spent a few hours in the shop to familiarise myself with things. That’s when I felt I couldn’t do this work, they had their own systems in place, I knew this was not going to work, I knew I had no relevant experience at all for this work. I felt it only fair that if they were happy to teach me, I needed to let them know that I was dyslexic. I asked to meet, and funnily enough I wasn’t nervous, more embarrassed. I thought they would tell me that they needed someone with more experience to be in this type of work. When I told them how things are for me and the differences between how I process things and how others process things they looked at me and said: “We can work with that, just let us know what you need and we’ll work around it.” That was not what I was expecting to hear. I had prepared myself for the talk, you know the one: “You’re a nice person, with a nice smile, but we’re looking for someone with...”

I left feeling numb; they were going to give me a shot. I would be exposed to people asking me things I had no idea about. I would be ordering, adding, reading, selling, and answering phones – things that all needed words. I still have my job and two special bosses who always care.

Judy and I still met up every week, we discussed the things at work that were hard for me and set things in place to help me. In the time that Judy has been tutoring me she has helped me move forward and grow. She has hung in there with me on this discovery of words, I will never forget how she helped me and made me feel. I thank you.

Writing this for me was very exhausting and a ride of emotion, but this time I had help, help full of praise, encouragement and understanding.

Tell me and I forget

Teach me and I learn

Involve me and I remember

Vicki (2014)