

Woman heroic while beating illiteracy, cancer

Erin Haluschak
Record Staff

Ellen Szita never thought she would write a book.

Szita's uncertainty was not due to a lack of inspiration or writer's block, rather, for most of her life the 67-year-old Courtenay resident could not read.

The single mother of four who was born and raised in Sussex, England, spent 45 years of her life illiterate, before beginning classes at the Victoria READ Society and eventually transforming herself into an advocate for literacy.

She described her first book *Ellen's Story*, as a testament of her persistent struggle for literacy, the crippling defeat she suffered in her adult life due to the problem, and the ultimate steps she took towards triumph.

Recently, Szita was named one of five *Reader's Digest* Heroes of 2008, a nomination she would have never imagined a handful of years ago.

"Having come this far, I feel my gift to an extent is to help those come out of the closet. It enables me to give back what was given to me," she said.

Szita's struggle with reading began at age 14 when she dropped out of school following an incident with a teacher who threw a brush at her head and called her stupid after she struggled with a math problem. Shortly thereafter, she began working at a factory.

A year later, Szita left home and shared an apartment with a friend who both struggled to find enough money for rent and food. One night, Szita tried to take her own life.

"I walked to the end of a pier ... I had no fear. It was complete numbness," she said.

A police officer stopped Szita and told her words which she never forgot: "tomorrow will be much better."

She emigrated to Canada in 1960, where she continued to keep her secret hidden from her children.

"We start at a very early age to find ways to hide (illiteracy). I didn't have the capabilities of helping my children with homework."

"I felt increasingly alone, like I was dumb and stupid. I felt this way most of

my life. The loneliness was indescribable," she added.

Szita turned to pills and alcohol as a means to escape from escalating depression, and eventually turned to a psychiatrist who diagnosed her as dyslexic and referred her to READ, a non-profit organization that teaches reading, writing and arithmetic.

"I remember walking in and seeing how nice they were. But I was still so angry, and told my psychiatrist, 'I'm doing this for you, not me.' I walked in not believing I could learn at all. It was a golden opportunity because it proved how wrong I was."

Following the program, Szita went straight to Camosun College to earn her Grade 12 equivalency. As she prepared to write her exam, she received a diagnosis from her doctor she had breast cancer.

"I got really mad at the cancer, but it actually got me through it in a funny sort of way. I turned my life around and thought, 'Now you're going to do this to me?'"

She passed her exam and won her battle her cancer.

Following more courses at the college, Szita eventually became a counsellor and an advocate for literacy, sitting on committees and boards across the country.

She continues to speak on behalf of both adults and children who struggle with reading, and said she is astonished at the amount of work given to children in school and the lack of resources available to help those in need.

"We are asking our children to learn three to four times more in school than I did. I find it frightening. How many children are being neglected? If I can find it in my own family, how many others are out there?"

"It's not the teacher's fault, it's the overcrowding in schools. The ones who are having difficulty get overlooked. It's a huge frustration."

Szita is also compiling stories for a second book which will focus on a variety of adult learners who turned their lives around when they returned to school.

"We need the basic foundations taught in schools. It makes so much sense to me."

Ellen's Story is available for purchase for \$20 by e-mailing ellenszita@shaw.ca.

photos@comoxvalleyrecord.com



ELLEN SZITA'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY recalls her story of her 45-year struggle with illiteracy. She was recently featured as a *Reader's Digest* Heroes of 2008 for her advocacy work across the country.

PHOTO BY ERIN HALUSCHAK

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