



Ellen Szita not only learned to read at 45, she's an international advocate for literacy

Education Hero: Ellen Szita

By Sarah Petrescu

We asked you to tell us whom you consider a hero in education, community service, rescue, public life and health. From the nominations received, judges selected a finalist in each category. Here is our Education hero.

After a lifetime of denial, an illiterate, 45-year-old Ellen Szita had endured her first morning of classes at the Victoria READ Society. When she opened her bagged lunch, she discovered a note from her children. Written in language she could decipher with her Grade 6 reading

skills, it read: "To Mom, Hope you do well in school today. We love you." The single mother of four, on welfare and just out of an alcohol treatment centre, promptly burst into tears.

That was 1987. Today Szita, 67, recalls that first day of class as the day she broke the cycle of illiteracy destroying her family—at the time three of her four children were high-school dropouts. It was also the day she set in motion a life passion that has made her a nationally lauded literacy advocate. For Szita not only sought help, she has helped countless others by sharing her story with Canadians, from students and prison inmates to academics and journalists.

Szita grew up in Sussex, England, where the school system slotted students into classes A, B, C and D, based on academic ability. Szita was always in D, "for dunce," she says. A teacher once threw a brush at her head and called her stupid when she couldn't solve a math problem.

Szita left school at 14 and did factory work. Her home life deteriorated as her father fell ill and her needy mother took what wages Szita earned.

At 15, she ran away with a girlfriend. The two lived off Szita's salary—barely enough to cover rent, let alone food. One cold night, the girls set out for Brighton's West Street—notorious for prostitution. But it was so cold, they soon abandoned their corners. When they later realized what they'd almost done, they held each other and wept.

Not long after, Szita tried to take her own life. "I was going to jump off the pier. I took my shoes off, folded my coat and stood up on the wall," she says, welling up. A police officer who had followed her grabbed her arm and took her home. "I'll always remember he said, 'Tomorrow will be much better.'"

Things did look up when she immigrated to Canada in 1960. Soon after, Szita married, then had four beautiful children. Living in Vancouver, neither her husband nor her children suspected she couldn't read.

"The children would ask me to help with homework and I would say, 'That's your teacher's job.' It's so

hard to explain the shame you feel when you're letting your children down."

As the pressures of raising a family increased and her depression deepened, Szita turned to alcohol and sleeping pills as an escape.

When her marriage fell apart in 1979, Szita moved to Victoria with her two girls—the boys stayed with their dad—to find work. She could hardly write a cheque or read street signs or bus schedules. She hid her illiteracy by dressing immaculately; the English accent also helped. But she knew she had to turn her life around when her daughter confronted her after a night of binge drinking.

"She said, 'I can't take this anymore. I have to leave.' It was like a horrible, electric shock," says Szita, who decided to get help. She started seeing a psychiatrist, who diagnosed her as dyslexic and referred her to READ.

After READ, a nonprofit organization that teaches basic academic skills, including reading, writing and arithmetic, Szita went to college, became a health-care worker and counsellor, and wrote an autobiography. She is working on a second book about other adult learners. (She is currently chair of the Learners Advisory Network of the Movement for Canadian Literacy and has served on literacy boards at the community and provincial level.)

CBC legend Peter Gzowski was so compelled by her story, he introduced her to filmmaker Robert Duncan, whose documentary *Ellen's Story* won several awards. Szita herself has won numerous accolades for her activism. In 1994, Governor General Ray Hnatyshyn presented Szita with a Canada Post Flight for Freedom award for literacy.

"She was the first to speak out about the hardships literacy learners face," says Jean Rasmussen, director of Community and Family Development for Literacy BC. "But Ellen went further and became an international advocate for literacy."

"She broke the cycle of illiteracy in our family," says daughter Anna, a health-care worker who returned to school at 25. Three of Szita's grandchildren have graduated from high school and the younger two are still in school.

Over coffee at the Delta Ocean Pointe hotel in Victoria, where she would address a Rotary conference, Szita says of her commitment to the cause, "I'll do this until I die."

Just then, one of the conference attendees approaches Szita and says, "I can't wait to hear you speak."

When he leaves, Szita leans in and whispers, "I don't know what all the fuss is about. I'm just a person who went back to school."