

My Story

Daniel Haines

Hi, my name is Danny Haines and I'm from Edmonton. I've been a student with the Project Adult Literacy Society, more commonly known as PALS for almost four years. Although I have been able to get by on my reading skills, my writing has left a lot to be desired. After meetings with a staff member, I found out just how weak those skills really were.

My reading was at about grade 8, but my spelling was only at a grade 2 or 3 level. How can someone be successful and spend 30 years in the same profession, buy and sell property, make investments, raise a family, volunteer with community organizations and yet not be able to write and not have anyone find out?

Well, here is my story. By the time I was in grade 4 or 5 my brother and I were getting into trouble both in and out of school. We were both expelled and sent to a reform school. Most of the education we got there was learning from other problem children how to get into more trouble. It wasn't long before we were expelled from there and sent to a boys' farm.

Shortly after that we decided to run away from home. Although I do not recommend this for most people, I really believe that decision saved my life. If my brother and I had gone back home, I know it would only have been a matter of time before we were back to our old ways, and either ended up in prison or worse.

Instead, at the age of 15 we ran away to the United States and joined the circus. Yes, we really did join the circus! That's where I spent the next 12 years. It was one of the greatest adventures of my life. I don't know if I can really explain how much that time meant to me. I didn't just grow up—I gained self-confidence. I learned to trust others, get along with and respect the people I worked and lived with. It gave me a foundation to build on, to work hard, and have a real sense of accomplishment for a job well done.

I was good with numbers and learned to read blueprints. As a roustabout, you had to be able put all the equipment together, take it down, maintain it and do any repairs. With the skills I learned from my circus days, I was able to switch to the sign business fairly easily. In those days, people were willing to hire you whether you had a high school diploma or not. You learned by "hands on" experience.

I spent nearly 30 years in the sign business and no one ever knew I could barely write. I would read the paper every day, and watched the news on TV, so that I was always up on current affairs and sports. Everyone just assumed that you had to be able to write and I was not about to tell them any different.

I knew all the tricks to fool everyone. Any time I had to fill out forms for taxes, or time sheets, I would be too busy or forget to do them while I was at work. That way I could take them home and do them. If there was a work order or report I couldn't take home, I usually had cheat sheets or catalogues around so I could look up the words I needed and would always manage to be able to do it when no one was around to see. When the kids needed help with their homework, if it was math I would help out, but if they wanted me to read over a story they had written, I would tell them I had a rough day at

work and to get mom to do it instead.

Over the years I have coached, been the president of sports leagues, been on local and provincial boards and been a Legion member for over 25 years. In all those cases, you never had to take a course or pass a test to be involved. It was usually a time commitment, going to tournaments, working bingos, selling tickets, or organizing an event.

Even as President, I had a secretary to do any paperwork, I just had to sign my name. If there was a social event, I would always be easy to get along with, and let someone else decide where to go or what show to see. If it was a dinner meeting, I would make reservations at peak time, near the back of the restaurant, so I could walk past the people and see what they were eating. I would always find an excuse to order last so I could hear what everyone else had ordered, and then either order the same as someone else, or ask for the special.

As the kids got older and the workplace got more competitive, it got harder and harder to hide. Each time I'd change employers, I would wonder if this time I would be found out. There seemed to be more and more paperwork. Then, a few years ago an injury forced me to make some changes in my life. For years I had struggled with an addiction and I finally realized, if I was to survive I needed to join a recovery program, but to be successful I knew I needed to be able to read better.

That's when I came to PALS. Over the last four years things have really improved. I am much more confident in my reading and although I may not be ready to write a book yet, I can see I am making progress. Four years ago I would never have dreamed of being able to write much more than a sentence and getting up in public to talk about my "weaknesses" would have been unthinkable. I am still using tricks, there is no way I could write this on my own...not yet anyways.

I have two learning devices that I rely on for a project like this. One is my tape recorder and the other is an assistant—usually my wife. Most people can probably prepare a short speech in a few hours, or maybe a day at most. For me to prepare for a speech or a report like this I need a couple of weeks.

First, I like to take a day or two just to think about what I want to say, then I will start to put my ideas on tape. When I think I have enough material, my wife and I will go over the tape, talk about it, and suggest areas that need work. Then we start to put it on paper. She will type it up for me and read it out loud while I read along with her. Once the final changes have been made, she will type up the final version and put it on tape for me. That way I can listen and read along.

I will do this for several days, until I am comfortable enough to read it out loud. Whether it is a report for a board meeting, a speech, or a letter, we go through the same process. This is the first time I have shared this much of my story outside of my close circle.

I would never have been able to do this without the support of a number of people. First, my wife encouraged me to "give PALS a try". Then, after a couple of meetings I was paired up with a tutor. This one-on-one learning is just what I was looking for and I

am still enjoying working with the same tutor.

Then a couple of years ago I got involved with the Steering Committee for the Students for Students Program at PALS. I wanted to do something to give back. Last year I was honored to be elected to the Provincial Literacy Alberta Board as one of the Learner Reps and Literacy Alberta gave me the opportunity to go to Ottawa for Literacy Action Day.

I am Alberta's Learner Rep. to the MCL—the Movement for Canadian Literacy. This summer I was elected to the LAN Leadership Team, which is a part of the MCL Board. Without the support of my family, and the encouragement of the staff and volunteers at PALS I would never have dreamed I could accomplish what I have.

They have made it easier for me to be able to look at myself without being embarrassed anymore and to be able to share a bit of my story because if our messages of needing to improve literacy can reach others and help them to help themselves, then we all become part of the solution.