

Daniel Haines Speaks to the Senate

January 2007

Good morning. Thank you for inviting me here today. I'd like to tell you a little about myself and why adult literacy has become such an important issue to me. My name is Daniel Haines and I'm from Edmonton. I've been a student with the Project Adult Literacy Society, or PALS for almost 4 years. When I started with PALS my reading was at about Grade 7 but my spelling was only at a Grade 2 or 3 level. How can you spend 30 years in the same career, buy a house, raise a family and not be able to write, and not have anyone find out?

Well, here is my story. From the time we were little, my brother and I were always getting into trouble. We were sent to a reform school and then a boys farm. Shortly after that we ran away. Although I don't recommend this for most people, if we had gone back home, I know that sooner or later I would have ended up in prison or worse. Instead, when I was 15, my brother and I ran away to the 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. 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 finished high school or not. I spent nearly 30 years in the sign business and everyone just assumed that I could read and write. I was not going to tell them any different. I knew all the tricks to fool everyone.

If I had to do any paperwork, I would suddenly be too busy. That way I could take it home. If it was something I couldn't take home, I had cheat sheets around so I could look up the words I needed and I would always do it when no one was around. If the kids needed help with their homework, I would say I was tired and to get mom instead. Over the years I have coached, been the president of sports leagues and been on local and provincial boards and no one ever knew.

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 going to survive I needed to join a recovery program, but to be successful I knew I had to read better.

That's when I came to PALS. Back then, I would never get up in public to talk about my "weaknesses". I admit I am still using tricks. There is no way I could write this on my own...not yet anyways. I have 2 learning devices that I rely on, one is my tape recorder and the other is an assistant, usually my wife. Most people can probably write a short speech or report in a few hours, or maybe a day at most. I need at least a week.

First, I like to take some time, just to think about what I want to say. Then I will put my ideas on tape. When I have enough material, my wife and I will start to put it on paper. Once the final changes have been made, she will type it up and record it 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. We go through the same process for a report for a board meeting, a speech, or even a letter.

I would not be where I am today without help. First, my wife talked me into going to PALS and I was paired up with a great tutor. This one-on-one learning is just what I was looking for. Soon I wanted to get more involved, I wanted to do something to give back. I started

by joining one of the student committees at PALS. Then, two years ago I was elected to Literacy Alberta as a Student Director. I am also Albertas' Learner Rep on the national MCL board - the Movement for Canadian Literacy and I have been to Ottawa twice for Literacy Action Day.

I don't know if I can explain how important these organizations are and how much they have helped me. This summer all of the Learner Reps from across Canada were invited to the National Libraries Summit here in Ottawa to be part of their focus groups. This fall I organized a focus group in Edmonton that was part of a national survey on Literacy and Health. Without the MCL and without government funding, I know I would not have had those opportunities.

Since the cuts in funding, Literacy Alberta has laid off several staff members, cut programs and we will probably have to cancel our provincial workshop. The MCL is all but gone, they are down to one staff member... it's pretty hard to organize something like the conference I went to this summer with one person in the office and no money.

Four years ago, I was desperate and needed help. If groups like PALS, Literacy Alberta and the MCL were not there, I'm positive I would not have made it through a recovery program. They literally saved my life. With the support of my family, and the encouragement of the people at PALS I have accomplished more than I ever dreamed was possible. They have made it easier for me to be able to look at myself without being embarrassed and to share my story.

If our messages of improving our own literacy can reach others and help them to help themselves, then we all become a part of the solution. I really do believe that one person can make a difference.