



Another Level of Toughness

Sharene (not her real name) struggled with reading and writing through school, higher education and work. Dyslexia made it even harder for her to cope as an international student and to achieve permanent residency. Finally, she is accessing the help she needs, and tells her story in her own words

I remember when I was in Grade 2 or 3, I remember not knowing alphabet, and not knowing how it sounds. I was living in Thailand. I remember struggling with English especially because it was my second language, but that doesn't mean that I didn't struggle in my own language. The older I got, it was easier for me to pick up my own language because I was speaking the language more often – and it wasn't fully reliant on reading, it was listening.

I really didn't like reading and writing – especially English. Even in my mother language I would change letters around when I was writing – and it would be a totally different meaning. Even when I was doing maths, if it was meant to be '23', I would write '32'.

So up to Grade 9, I had failed my way through. It's from that point that things improved. It was my maths teacher. He realised that I was good at visualising. When it came to geometry I got full marks. I wouldn't be good at anything else except that particular piece of work. I was also good at drawing. Not great, but good. It kind of helped me to get over the frustration, and to realise that I do have a skill that I could work on.

At school I was a loner. Till my teens I really didn't care about my studies, simply because I felt like a failure. And I felt like I wasn't as smart as everyone else. I can't

remember getting any help for reading or study even at school. I was laughed at when I was making mistakes. I felt rejected, and I didn't feel like part of the rest of the class.

I came to a realisation at that time 'if I don't study I wouldn't get anywhere'. So I started working hard. And though it took me time, I took the extra time to read – and I also found this book called *How to Study for Exams*, so in there I found clues. Like listening to the teachers, and realising that whatever the teacher is writing on the board are the most important facts – so those are the ones I should concentrate on. And I learned to summarise things so that I don't need to keep on reading lots and lots. So that I had most of my work in key points and then try to remember the details from key points.

And then I tried to reduce my amount of reading and writing in order to survive. I'm really slow in my reading. And even if I read slowly, I sometimes still won't get some of the words.

I also learned to listen more carefully, and from the listening I learned different words. My vocabulary would be developing, but I wouldn't know how to spell it. So when a person speaks to me they think 'Oh wow, she's amazing', but not really – they don't know what's going on behind the picture. I'm like a sponge when it came

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to listening. And I used to remember all the idioms and whatever I could gather. It would come from my listening.

So I came to Australia when I was 19 and started doing my diploma in information technology (IT), and my flat-mate started noticing me doing really strange things. The way I leave things behind; and I would forget things – and she started questioning me as to what was happening. And then, she saw my hand–eye coordination was not that great either. So she asked ‘Do you struggle in your study work?’ I said, ‘Yes, I’ve always had trouble reading and writing.’ And then I went to the TAFE and asked for help. And they told me that I had to be diagnosed for it. And that’s when I first found out what dyslexia is. I didn’t get help because I was an international student. All I could get was extra time.

It was helpful that IT was more logical and everything is structured, and it was all binary and zeros and ones, and if it’s not ‘this’, it’s ‘that’ – there was no grey. And that helped me do the programming and understand different languages and how they are structured.

When I moved on to the university, it was more work. And when I showed them my diagnosis I was told to go here, there, to get help, but I didn’t get help.

That first year I failed all of my subjects. And I didn’t have any friends either, and I decided to go to a different university, because my friends from TAFE were there. So they had to give me another chance to do university – and it was to do the degree in computer science. At first I struggled and then, again, I didn’t get help. So I did the same things that I did at TAFE, like writing notes from the blackboard. Highlighting was helpful for me. To remember.

So, I came to the end of my university. I did well, the last couple of years. And I was even good enough to get a scholarship – that was more in web designing, so it was more graphical. And eventually I started working with clients in a software company.

I guess another level of toughness came into that because it meant reading lots and lots and lots of paper regarding their software and how it works. And at first I was told that I would be given someone – like a mentor – but that didn’t come about. Because I didn’t tell them about my dyslexia at all. Because before this point I had been shunned – even though I said ‘Hey, this is going on, help me’, it was constantly ‘No no no no no’ and nothing happened. So I was working and I was reading all this work and I found it really hard. And I found it draining. Everyday

I would go home and I don’t feel like doing anything else because I don’t have energy.

At that point I was applying for my permanent residency – and I also had to pass the IELTS exam, an English exam. I was getting good marks for the speech and listening side of things, but writing and reading, always somehow I haven’t done well in that exam. So I did it three or four times, that exam. So that means I didn’t have permanent residency also.

I gave them the diagnosis that was done when I was 21. They said ‘Oh, that’s too old, you need to get one done now’. By this time I was 28. So once again I went to get the assessment done. In the assessment it mentions that I haven’t got my permanent residency and that I am trying with this exam. And when I gave them that piece of paper, my work came back and said ‘Oh, you never told us that you are not a permanent resident’.

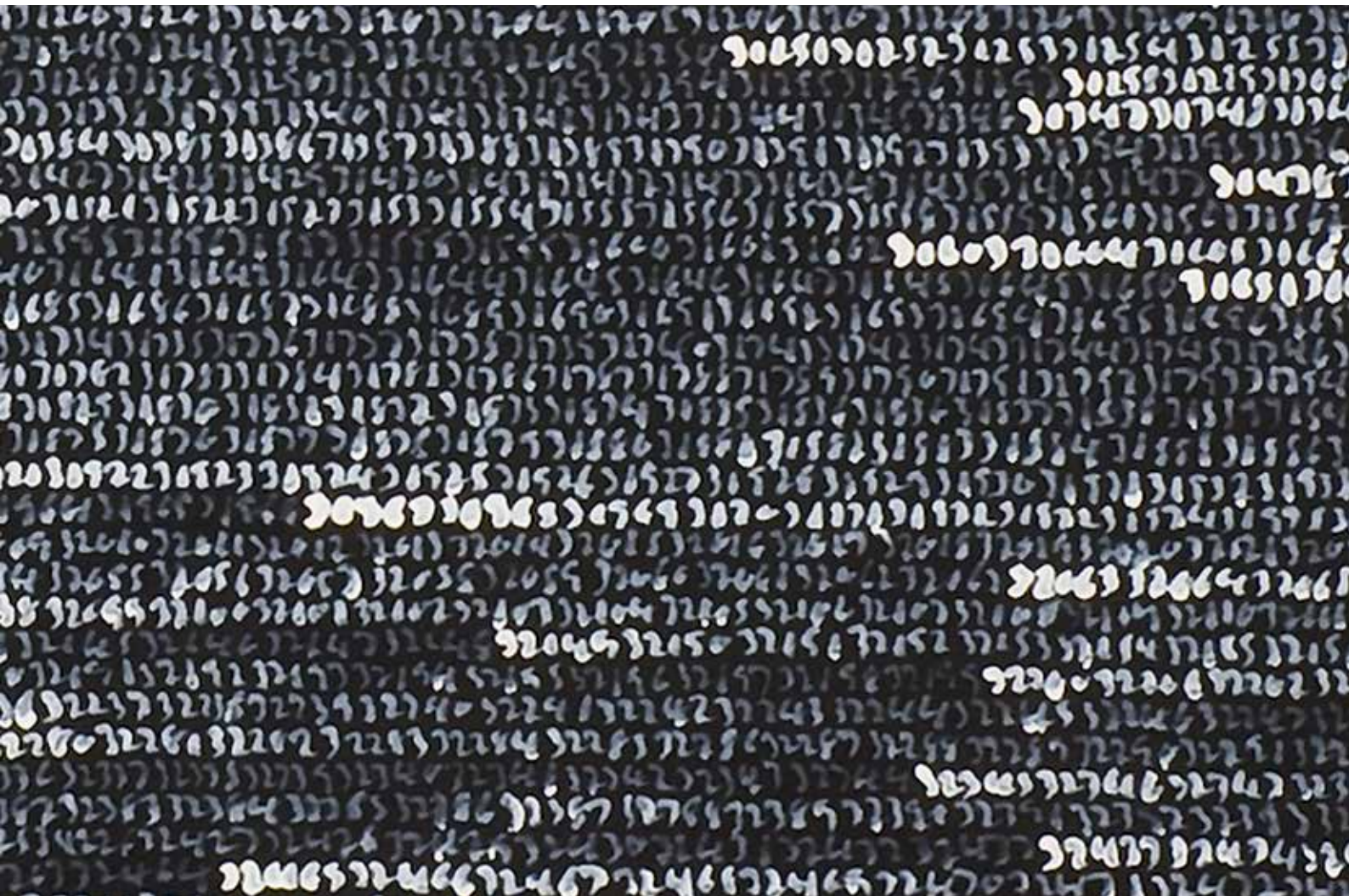
Eventually, I passed that exam. But it was too late. So I had to go back to Thailand and apply for a permanent residency to come back to Australia. That kind of set me back a couple of years.

When I came back two years later, I was a permanent resident. My first thing was to survive and find a job. So I started working in a takeaway shop, then eventually in the aged care industry.

I had the same problem in this industry, struggling to read and write quickly as everyone else. I struggled to quickly read client care plans and realise exactly what was needed. So the way I survived was to get on the phone to the case manager so I would know the background knowledge without having to read all that.

So it did get better, but still I was so tired coming home. The days were a lot of organising. There were more than 1000 clients and every person is different and you need to remember those details when you are handling them, so it was emotionally and physically and mentally draining.

And it was more draining because I was trying to read all these things and write all the details. There were many times that I actually wrote the wrong date. Thank God the carers called me up and said ‘By the way, Sharene, did you mean this?’, and I said ‘Oh yes, I’m so sorry’ and then I was able to fix it. I thought ‘Oh my God, I can’t rely on myself to write the date properly’. Or sometimes I would be writing a different name – because there are surnames that sound the same – and I would get the wrong person. So the amount of times that I had to clarify and confirm was more than a normal person.



This was making me depressed and eventually I just broke down. And I did move away from the coordinating position to part-time administration, but I think I made it worse for myself by going to admin because that meant more reading and writing and making sure everything is in order.

And it just snowballed. And I was never able to get on top of things. And my manager questioned it – Why was I struggling? Was it because I didn't want to be there? It wasn't the case; it was the fact that I was struggling with the disability. And once again I didn't tell them that I had dyslexia. Only after getting sick – a depressive episode. By the time I told them it was too late, and I was struggling with depression and the dyslexia.

I left my job and moved to Hobart to recover. I was able to access a supportive non-government organisation, and from that I was able to access speech pathology help. See, all this time, I wish somebody would have told me – even when I was getting diagnosed I was told that I could get someone to teach me, but I wasn't able to access that. It wasn't clear and I wasn't given good instructions as to how to go about doing it. And also, I had to think about the financial side of things. It's not accessible for all people to get speech pathology easily.

I try not to say a lot because I don't want to sound dumb. And I know I don't say point of views because I don't want to be laughed at. I remember one of my managers telling me that I was shy. And I thought 'No, you don't know me, it's just that I don't want to come out feeling like a stupid person'.

When I was at work, I never felt like I was part of it. I still carry that doing-things-alone personality. It doesn't mean that I'm not good at team-working, it's just me. It's harder for me to connect with people. And I think that's influences from my childhood. ▼

Sharene's story came to *Island* via Rosalie 'Rosie' Martin. Rosie is a speech pathologist at Chatter Matters Tasmania, a charitable organisation building awareness and skill in human communication, language, literacy and positive relatedness.

chattermatters.com.au

Image: *Untitled #4*, Chris Hamnett, 2014, acrylic and oil on canvas, 183cm x 152cm
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