

Ellen Szita overcame illiteracy, depression to write life story

Tale of abuse, courage aims to inspire others

BY KATHERINE DEDYNA
Times Colonist staff

Ellen Szita learned to read at 45 — one of the first people helped by Project Literacy Victoria — and ended up on its board of directors.

She received the Flight for Freedom Award from the Governor General.

She sits on the Canadian Public Health Association expert panel on health and literacy.

She was the title subject of an award-winning documentary by the National Film Board of Canada.

And now she's telling her life story, in her own often wrenching words, with the hope that other desperate people will take heart from what she has overcome.

And there's a lot: abuse, alcoholism, suicide attempts, deep feelings of failure as a mother, depression, multiple murder in the family and breast cancer.

Now, Szita is into joy.

Tanned, with tousled blond hair, the Courtenay resident is younger looking than her 65 years, stylish in white pants and lime shirt.

The self-described "dunce" has self-published a book, *Ellen's Story* (Trafford).

"When they did the documentary on *Ellen's Story*, I had not healed enough to tell all," she explains, sitting on the swing in her daughter's Saanich yard. "And I thought if I'm going to do it, I have to reveal all because it touches many parts of a life that people couldn't even imagine."

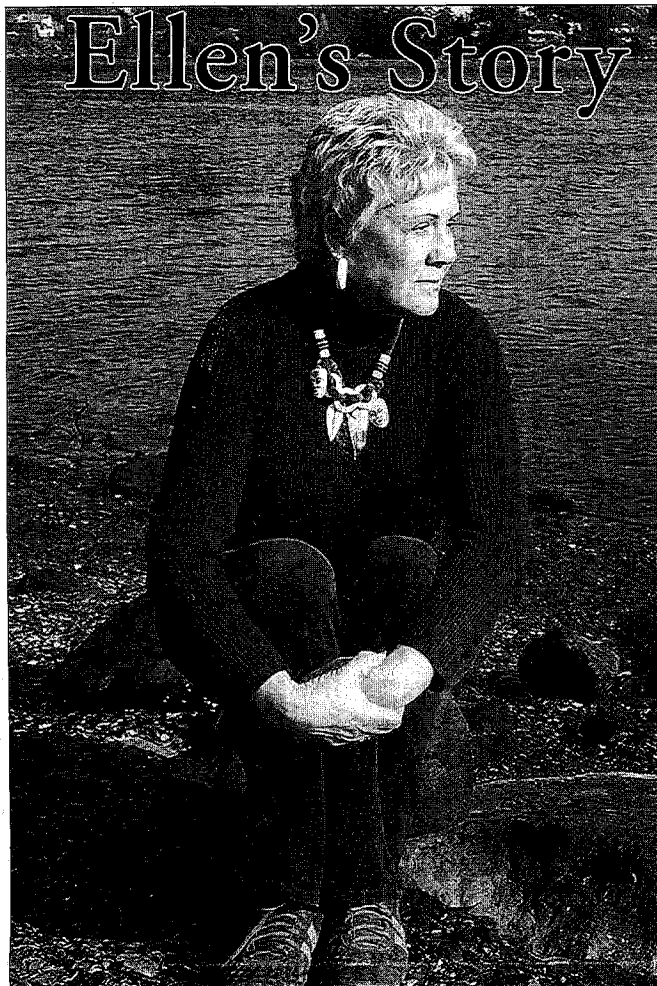
Sociologist Irving Rootman, co-chair of the panel on health literacy for the Canadian Public Health Association, has known Szita over the years but not the full extent of her challenges.

"I'd heard snippets but to actually see it all together in one place, it is overwhelming," he says. "It's a really a powerful book — and very moving and very inspirational."

Szita has spoken of the way anxiety over illiteracy affected her health and that of her family — from alcoholism to perpetual shoulder-hunching to trying to memorize prescriptions she couldn't read.

And she was far from alone. In January, the Canadian Council on Learning reported that 55 per cent of Canadians surveyed had inadequate skills to acquire and evaluate health information, notes Rootman, an adjunct professor of health and human development at UVic.

Ellen's Story is an unflinching recollection of an illiterate life. Growing up in Brighton, England, Szita felt "like a mistake." She was a good little Catholic girl in a large, chaotic family. Sexually



Ellen Szita, who didn't learn to read until she was 45, has written an unflinching recollection of an illiterate life marked by alcoholism and abuse.

assaulted at four, she wet the bed, went hungry and feared a father who used a cane to beat his children when his belt got boring. She suffered from undiagnosed dyslexia, left school at 14 for a denture factory, and was once so cold and hungry she considered prostitution. She also climbed on a seaside ledge and nearly jumped.

Not long before she escaped to Canada at age 18 with her sister, she endured a dreadful scene: "One night Mother started hitting me and put her hands around my throat. Ann had to pull my mother off."

But with her decrepit underwear stowed in her niece's teddy bear, something wonderful happened as they set sail:

"For the first time in my life, all the pain left me and I just laughed and had fun," she writes.

In Canada, Szita married a man with an education and tried desperately to hide her illiteracy. She bore four kids she felt she failed, turned to booze big-time and got divorced. Only after her teenage daughter, having cleaned up Szita's alcoholic vomiting "from one end of the house to the other," threatened to move out did Szita begin her breakthrough.

Six months later, she was in Alcoholics Anonymous, starting a "white-knuckled" relationship with sobriety, and years of therapy that led to self-acceptance, forgiveness of herself and of others.

Her journey into literacy began when

she was encouraged to take reading courses as part of the psychiatric treatment she was receiving. Her first stop was Victoria Read Society, where two teachers assessed the reading, writing and arithmetic of a tiny class. From there, she enrolled in basic adult education classes at Camosun College, and was also tutored by a volunteer from Project Literacy. It took only 18 months to conquer her life-long deficit.

Helen Thomas, Victoria Read Society's co-ordinator for adult programs, can't imagine what it would be like to have such a bleak life without the refuge reading can give.

But keeping illiteracy secret is "very common" in women in their 30, 40s and 50s, she says. Sexual abuse of those with literacy issues is "far too common," says Thomas — perhaps because children with low self-esteem due to illiteracy are more susceptible to 'nice' predators.

The book is courageous and reaches out to affect others, says Thomas. "She wants to have somebody else come along and read this or have it read to them or told to them and make changes in their own lives and in their own attitudes toward themselves."

Sober for 25 years, Szita is past the self-hatred, the years on welfare watching three of her four children leave school by Grade 10.

She has had to fight for one of her grandchildren to get the extra help he needed at Victoria Read Society.

"It should be there in the schools and it's not."

In the technological era, she's more frightened than ever about the toll illiteracy takes. "Even learned people can't keep up with it."

It took her three years just to get everything on paper. Then in 1997, a ghastly tragedy stunned her family. Her niece, Heidi Challand, and her four children were murdered in Black Creek by Challand's axe-wielding fiancé, David Gorton.

She shelved the book for years and took a huge step backward into depression. But she soldiered on, encouraged by her teachers and friends to finish.

Just maybe, someone might relate to what she went through and do something about their issues.

"Especially the suicide. One thing that I don't think is talked about anywhere near enough is that 50 per cent of our teenagers who commit suicide had been previously diagnosed with learning disabilities."

Tears come to her eyes as she tries to talk about it.

"If I can do it at 45, you can do it, and do it for your children," she says.

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