

Transcribe 2011: young writers competition participant wins the special award of the children's hospital at Westmead School-Link initiative...

The Transcultural Mental Health Centre launched its 8th TranSCRIBE Young Writers Competition with its 2011 partners the NSW Centre for the Advancement of Adolescent Health at The Children's Hospital at Westmead, Schizophrenia Fellowship (NSW) and the Black Dog Institute. A biennial event, the competition is open to all young people aged 12 - 24yrs across NSW and focuses on the importance of mental well being for young people within the context of diverse societies. Each competition has a new theme and in 2011 this was *Half Way Home*. The 2011 entries again displayed the remarkable writing talents of the competition entrants and their deep understanding around issues of resilience, mental health and cultural diversity within the Australian context.

Since 1998, TranSCRIBE has attracted more than 2300 young writers from over 300 schools and educational facilities across NSW. This year multiple entries were received from 77 educational facilities across the 3 age categories.

As part of the initiative TMHC publishes the winning stories from each category in the TranSCRIBE Young Writers Competition Booklet. The booklets have widespread appeal and have been used as additional source materials in subjects such as English, PDHPE and society and culture classes in secondary schools and as a resource in therapeutic settings.

The *Half Way Home* winning stories booklet was published and distributed to over 700 schools and educational facilities across the state. The booklet was

launched by The Honourable Kevin Humphries, MP Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Healthy Lifestyles, Minister for Western NSW who also presented the winners with their certificates at an award ceremony at the Sydney Convention and Exhibition Centre on the 10th of November as part of the *Youth Health 2011: It's Totally Important!* Conference. Minister Humphries officially opened up the night's proceedings stating that the competition is of great significance as it challenges young writers to think about the effects of mental health and cultural diversity on families and young people living in Australia.

Additionally, The Children's Hospital at Westmead School-Link Initiative is also proud to present one of the 2011 TranSCRIBE entrants, Vivian Tran, aged fourteen, with a special award for her story entitled 'Sometimes Miracles Work'.

Vivian's entry highlighted the mental health issues of young people with Autism and Intellectual Disability. In recognition of her effort, Vivian will receive a pack from The Children's Hospital at Westmead School-Link Initiative.

The School-Link Initiative has been funded to address the mental health needs of children and adolescents with an intellectual disability. Activities in the Initiative focus on building local partnerships, raising awareness with various stakeholders, increasing education and support to relevant staff and clinicians and supporting the development of mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention for students with an intellectual disability. You can read more about the Initiative at www.schoolink.chw.edu.au or browse resources and publications.

If you would like to obtain a copy of the TranSCRIBE11 booklet *Half Way Home* for your school library, service or organisation visit the TMHC website: www.dhi.gov.au/tmhc. Alternatively for hard copies contact TMHC on 9840 3800 or via email: tmhc@swahs.health.nsw.gov.au. Please note previous competition booklets are also available for download from the TMHC website.

For more information about the 2013 TranSCRIBE Young Writers Competition, please contact; Michele Sapucci on (02) 9840 3909 or Michele.Sapucci@swahs.health.nsw.gov.au.

Halfway Home



Sometimes Miracles Work

By Vivian Tran

At the age of four, I lived in an old blue house next to a park and a semi-busy street. I was the type of child who didn't take naps, or eat food from the preschool. I was the type of kid who got lonely easily. Television, at the time, affected me greatly. I would see pretty houses bigger and cleaner than mine, parents who got along better, and lastly, siblings. What I saw on television, I wanted too. But of all that I had seen on television, I wanted a sister the most.

Both of my parents did not have much time to play with me. I had to wake up at six in the morning to say 'goodbye' to my mother. My father came home hours after my bedtime. I was babysat by my grandma, the one on my mother's side. As nice and as loving as she was, she wasn't a friend. Not a kid who could play with me.

As a child barely past the age of a toddler, I did not know the dynamics of childbirth, or of raising children. Therefore, I had no idea how long it would take for my playmate to grow to an age where she or he could actually play with me. But it didn't matter. Television taught me that babies were cute and likable anyway.

Around mid-year, I was told that soon, I was going to be a big sister. I was happy. I was God-praising happy. The next few months, I would help out a bit. Not causing as much trouble, not seeking as much attention and behaving well enough when

my mother had to go to the hospital.

When she came back, I had a new baby sister. An adorable baby sister. I didn't even mind that she was taking most of the attention. I even helped take care of her, and I got to name her, too. Emily. A pretty name for a pretty girl.

“She told me that my sister was better off than some autistic children, since she had and used her emotions and could learn...”

When she was about one year old, we found it strange that she didn't make a lot of progress in anything. It took her months longer than other babies to crawl, and she hadn't ever uttered a single word.

At the age of three, she was diagnosed with autism. I was told that my sister would be different. She would not interact with other humans normally; she would not talk like we did, and she would not understand like we did. I was about eight at the time, and had no idea a disorder like that existed. Then, a startling revelation found its way to me. She wouldn't be able to play with me. I was very selfish, like most children at that age. It did not occur to me that it would be hard to take care of my sister.

I would soon find out. At first, taking care of my sister was fun. I never had a proper baby doll, so it was new to me. But, all

good things don't last. I would soon tire of it. Repetition made things boring.

Taking care of an autistic child took time. Time my mother didn't have. She had to quit her job, leaving my father once again the main breadwinner.

During year two, I was going to take ballet lessons. Just what every little girl wanted. Just what I wanted. The first lesson was fun, and so was the second. Just before the third lesson, however I fell sick and couldn't go. My mother was too busy with my sister to drive me to the fourth lesson. And that would be the end of the story. The little free time my mother had before was then taken up by my sister. My mother and I tried to convince myself that ballet lessons weren't important. They weren't fulfilling at all. They weren't that fun. But, they were. Even now, I almost wish I didn't stop.

By my year three, we had moved to an old yellow house on a very busy road, which gave me the creeps. The only perk was the swimming pool in the backyard. I liked swimming, but my sister loved it. I was decent, being able to float and do some of the basics. Over two summers, I had gained the ability to swim better than most kids I knew. Over two summers, my sister had gained the ability to walk into the shallow end and to use a floaty. In the end, she received a lot more praise than I did. Being the little brat I was, jealousy was inevitable.

I understood. She needed more love and more attention than I did. She needed to be looked after more closely, and more carefully. Furthermore, I had to help. I understood that it was fair. But it didn't mean I had to like it. Despite that, I always thought my sister was adorable. She would've been prettier if she wasn't autistic. She never let us brush her teeth, despite keeping a collection of toothbrushes numbering over sixty. She had terrible hair, and we had to keep it neatly trimmed since she hated long hair. Her typical outfits consisted of a t-shirt and pants, always refusing to wear skirts and dresses.

My appearance contrasted with hers. My nose was flatter, my skin tanner, my teeth clean, and my hair long. Somehow, I looked ugly. No one point of my appearance made me ugly, but to look at me as a whole, I wasn't pretty. The only 'pretty' thing about me was my eyes, which I shared with my sister.

I thought that I would be compared to my sister in looks, and somehow, academic results too. Despite earning an average B minus in class, I was not happy with my marks. My father wasn't happy with my



marks. But to be completely honest, he didn't really care either. My mother didn't mention much of it in passing, but would often comment on how smart my sister would've been if she wasn't autistic.

Despite probably being a completely innocent, prideful comment, it had an effect on me. It started leading me to thinking- what if my parent's expectations in me were doubled because my sister would not be able to achieve what I could? What if I disappointed them?

With that thought under my belt, I worked harder. And it was *hard*. I didn't get anywhere. That aspect of my school life left me disappointed in myself. To make matters worse, something else had started stirring up. I had once noticed white vans in my sister's school driveway. The curious child I was, I had promptly asked my mother what they were for. She told that they were used to drive some of the children to and from school. That left me a bit confused. If my sister could be driven to school by my mum, how come the other parents couldn't drive their children to school?

Knowing that I was probably thinking about something like that, she started to explain to me that not all parents had enough time to drive their children to school. Some had to work harder to earn enough money to take care of their child, because they might've split from their partners, and might've been taking care of their child themselves.

siblings australia...

I recently received a review copy of a new DVD produced by Siblings Australia. This organisation runs an informative website ranging from info for siblings of children and young people with a disability, to books and other resources. They have also produced a kit to assist with running some activities for siblings groups.

Having viewed the DVD I felt it was a balanced approach – looking at the development of strengths – resilience, empathy, responsibility in siblings, as well as a frank discussion of some of the concerns of these children and young people. The format was one of a combination of talking heads – teenage siblings, parents/caregivers and professionals drawn together by a celebrity narrator. As well as looking at issues for siblings the DVD explores sources of support within the family, outside the family, and professional supports. It provides very useful information about supporting siblings and taking care of carers.

Sometimes, partners would squabble about whose fault it was- whose genetics might've passed the disorder, who might've dropped the kid on its head when it was younger, and so on.

My parents themselves never got on very well in the first place. It was the typical arranged marriage. They would have their wedding, try to get along, squabble and argue some more.

My sister's condition probably made matters worse. By my year five, my parents had officially separated. By grade six, on Valentine's Day, they had divorced. I didn't know whether or not to be happy or sad. I might've been sad because I probably would never have a nice, normal family or happy because my mother was finally free of my father.

With my father failing to meet his child support payments, my mother had to work even harder to support us all. I had to help out to look after my sister. Being a babysitter for her wasn't so bad. I bonded a bit more with her, playing with her and comforting her when she became upset. But it meant I didn't have that much time to do what I wanted to.

Since my mother was always busy, we couldn't spend much time together. But when we did, we talked. She told me curious things. We talked about how lucky my sister was to be a girl, because boys with autism were often worse off than girls and how lucky we were that my mother wasn't

weak-willed, otherwise she might've ended up with depression like many other women with autistic children. She told me that my sister was better off than some autistic children, since she had and used her emotions and could learn.

One day, when she had a day off, I was allowed to go to the movies with my best friend. She was astonished to learn that that time was my first time going to see a movie in a cinema. However, already knowing of my situation, she understood. We went to see *'The miracle worker'*, a movie based on a play based on the life of Helen Keller, who was deaf and blind, and consequently, mute. I watched the fits Helen threw and sympathised with her teacher, Annie Sullivan. I watched as Helen grew in understanding, slowly and winced at her frustration.

Then, at the climax, I watched Helen identify and understand her first word- water. It was like a key to the gate of knowledge. With one word, she changed her whole life. It was a miracle.

I was left breathless after the movie. A glimmer of hope shined in me. If Helen could do it, then my sister had a chance as well. My mother did say she could learn. Maybe, just maybe.

"What happened to Helen, anyway?" I asked my friend. She looked at me, and then answered, "She earned a Bachelor of Arts degree and became an author. Why?" I smiled. "Nothing, don't worry."

My sister had a chance to have a future because sometimes, miracles work. ●

I showed the DVD at a recent parents meeting at a School for Specific Purposes, and it was very well received. I only showed some sections as one challenge of working in our area is the very high number of different languages and cultural backgrounds among our parents – currently some 29 language groups are represented. The DVD is in English, and some speakers are a little difficult to understand even when this is your first language. Nonetheless the discussion generated was excellent and really got people thinking. Some parents of older young people with a disability expressed regret that these issues were not talked about so freely when their other children were younger – so it is clearly a very much needed support.

I would be very interested in collaborating with anyone else who might be interested, to run a pilot sibling support group using the materials from Siblings Australia. I imagine this could pose some logistical

issues – but would like to give it a go. From my experience of running parent support groups at school with Relationships Australia, I feel this to be an appropriate and much needed extension. If anyone else has already used these materials I would love to hear from you!!

Parents were keen to take away a brief handout, and check out the website, and if appropriate encourage siblings to explore it for themselves. Aging Disability and Home Care also have material for siblings on their website. Overall a much needed resource and I would encourage readers to explore the Siblings Australia website for yourself, if you haven't already found it www.siblingsaustralia.org.au.

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