

Everyday Hero Series

# Gary Porter: A Brave Man



by Jo Cryderman





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# **Gary Porter: A Brave Man**

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This is the true story of a man who had to learn to read and write so that he could have a better life. His name is Gary Porter, and he is an everyday hero!

Gary was the middle child of five children. He had a hard time at school and failed grade four. He enjoyed the sports programs but did not enjoy reading and writing. Gary was pushed through the school grades. He went to a technical High School which was a school for people to learn a trade. In the first year there, he was sent to a work place and never went back to school.



When he was sixteen, Gary met and married a girl from the trade school and soon they had a child. They both had few skills to help them as parents and adults. Shopping was a problem as Gary did not know how to sign a cheque. He would copy the name of the store on the cheque before he went in to shop. Whenever Gary had to go through the check-out, he would feel afraid that the cashier would know that he didn't know how to read and write.



Gary worked at many low paying jobs. He made pizza, worked in a bowling alley, and in a factory. When he was eighteen his father hired him to work for him in a business he had just opened. It was a glass and mirror store. When Gary first started working for his father, he could not read a measuring tape, deal with customers, or fill work orders. When a customer came into the store, he would go into the back room to get away.





Because Gary could not read and write or spell at a working level, he felt that he was less than a whole person. His marriage was not happy as he could not be the husband and father that he wanted to be. He could not read his children a bedtime story or help them with their homework.



Gary knew he wanted to better himself. He began to volunteer at a program that helped special needs children learn to enjoy horseback riding. Around that same time a friend of his told him about the literacy program in Barrie. After a long time, Gary got enough courage to walk through the doors and take that first big step to change!

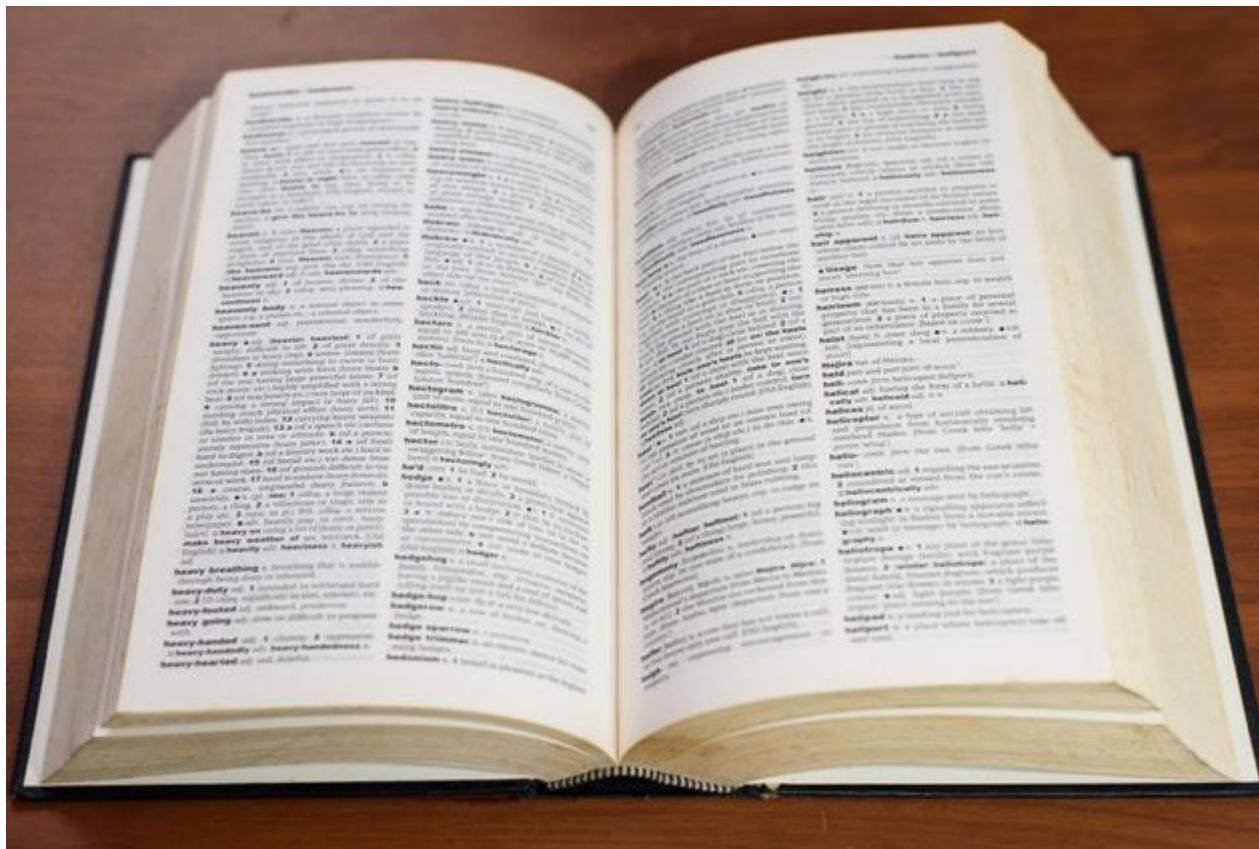


As soon as Gary arrived at the Barrie Literacy Council, the staff made him feel comfortable. The assessor asked him about his life. When he mentioned that he had a stepdaughter in university the assessor said, "Ok, how do you spell university?" Gary looked at her thinking she must be crazy and said, "I can't spell a big word like that!" Right away she said, "Sure you can!" She sounded the word out in parts which Gary learned were "syllables." With the assessor's help he was able to spell the word. He started to believe in himself that he could get better and some of his fear went away!



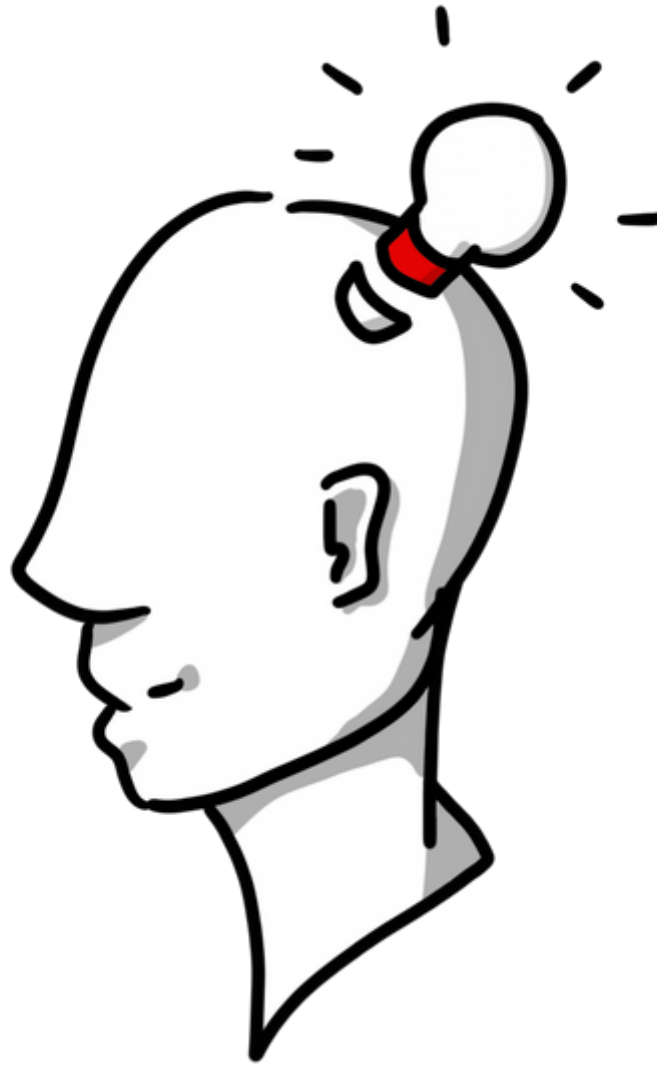
Shortly after that meeting, Gary was matched with a volunteer tutor named Kim. They met once a week on Monday nights. Spelling was the first thing they worked on during each lesson. Every week Gary learned new words. He always kept his dictionary with him. Before these lessons, Gary would try to spell a word by looking at the Yellow Pages in the back of the phone book to see if he could find the right spelling.





At one Monday night lesson Gary felt like a light had gone on in his head when he found out that he could break the words into parts or “syllables” by himself. He could spell all the difficult words he could not spell before, and he knew his hard work during the lessons was helping him!

Gary’s tutor Kim told him to try and read a novel. She said that any book would be okay to read so Gary started to read a Harold Robbins book. He still reads and enjoys books today!



After the first few weeks with his tutor, Gary knew that learning could be fun and he even asked for extra homework. Kim pushed him to succeed. He learned how to spell better and read stories and write sentences. He spent a year and a half with Kim.



Gary found out that he was not the only one with the same problems as himself when he joined a writing group at the literacy council. There would be three to four students working each week in that group. The teacher gave them interesting things to work on and helped them to work together as a group. Some of the group members kept in touch as they supported each other on the road to learning.



At times Gary found it hard to keep up with his schoolwork, his job, and his family. Sometimes there just weren't enough hours in the day! He would get so tired and often got his homework done just before meeting with his tutor. When Gary felt like he was falling behind, he would look to his tutor, spouse, family and others to help him through the rough times.





Gary was ready to write his GED (General Education Development) when his spouse was in a terrible car accident. He found that he had to put his learning on hold. Not only did he have to look after his work, but he had to run his spouse's business as well. He had to order and pick up products, help his staff and look after the banking. What he had learned at the literacy council helped him to get through this difficult time. Gary knew that he was able to do things that he could not have done without his new skills.



With the help of a new tutor, Gary was able to get back to his lessons and work to get his GED certificate! The GED certificate shows that you have high school-level skills without having completed a formal secondary school program. The GED test has five sections which are: Reading, Writing, Social Studies, Science and Mathematics. There is a fee to write the GED. If you are an adult and a resident of Ontario, you can register for the test. Ontario Works clients can get financial help to cover the cost.



From the beginning of his learning journey Gary was amazed at the hard work, time, and dedication of the staff and volunteers who worked with the students. They always treated him with respect and met his needs in every way. They cared about him as a person and helped him to keep going on his journey. They taught him study habits and most of all, treated him as an equal.

Learning to read and write changed Gary's life in so many ways. He can now read to his grandchildren, read a novel, and pronounce words correctly. Also, he is no longer afraid to ask for help if he needs it!



Gary feels better at his business as he can write invoices, order products, deal with customers, problem solve and use a computer day to day. He feels he has gained more respect from his family, and they have given him a voice in the company. He has become an equal partner with his father and brother.





Before Gary started the literacy program his self-confidence and self-esteem were low and he was very shy. He would not speak his mind and would not speak out in public. He now speaks at tutor-training workshops to help the new tutors understand what it feels like to be an adult student. He advises them how to help other adults learning to read and write.



Now Gary speaks in public all the time. One year Gary was the valedictorian at the literacy council's Annual General Meeting and awards dinner. He also thanked the guest speaker and looked after the draw for the door prizes.

At a Road to Reading Festival in Barrie he was one of the students interviewed. He has also been interviewed by CBC Radio. Gary joined other students and literacy workers when they went to Parliament Hill for Literacy Action Day. Gary has also talked on the local Cable TV station about the importance of workplace literacy and spoken about the things that were important to him.



Literacy has been a big part of Gary's life for many years and he sees how important it is to all adult learners. The Barrie Literacy Council has a student group that meets once a month. Students meet to talk about the things that are important to them. As their student representative, Gary takes their ideas and their needs and demands back to the Board of Directors for that council. He is no longer afraid to speak to others who are more educated than he. He is now comfortable speaking to others about literacy challenges.



In past years, Gary traveled to Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island (P.E.I.) twice to meet with students there. He has developed his own workshop called "Return to Learning" which he put on for the students at P.E.I.

In 2001, with the help of literacy staff and one of the students, Gary planned the first regional- only student conference for the students in Simcoe County and Muskoka. About sixty students attended and the conference was successful.





Gary has been the Student Representative for the national organization Laubach Literacy of Canada and for the Provincial organization Laubach Literacy Ontario. As student representative for both organizations he made sure that the interests of adult students were protected. Gary now serves on the Board of Directors of Laubach Literacy of Ontario. He is an important voice for all adult students in Ontario and Canada!



Below are Gary's own words about his journey of learning.

"I had always wondered why my father was so supportive of me at work and throughout my literacy endeavours. He had always allowed me extra time off work to complete my studies when I was under pressure. I was elated when he surprised me by attending my valedictory speech one year ago. It was only recently that I learned that many of his literacy skills were self-taught. And yet he managed to start and successfully run his own business. I think my dad sees a lot of himself in me. I could see how proud he was by the expression on his face."

"Although I am near the completion of my literacy studies, I will continue to learn. The gift of learning has enriched my life beyond what I could have ever imagined. I would like to share this gift that I have received with others, and I am dedicated to helping other students on their journey to learning in any way I possibly can."

(N)EVER (S)TOP  
LEARNING

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