



Dr. Salinee Antarasena was AustCham's 2009 Young Alumni Award winner. Today she shares her struggles and triumphs as she developed a tonal language training program for cochlear implant recipients and devised a system for the blind to develop colours mathematically for documents.

“*Shall We Run a Race?*”

Ever since I was a little girl, the Rabbit and the Turtle tale has always been my favourite, but I've always thought its original version needs something extra.

As a child, I always thought I was the turtle, a land turtle raised up in the rabbits' land. I was always slow to learn and forgetful while all my friends seemed to pick up every lesson faster than me. And though none of my teachers ever feared I would slip behind compared to others in the same class, I always realised I puzzled over small matters – every day. *Where this or that word would come from? How some people could create various means of word formation, the rules, the exceptions? How some people could make incredible sewing patterns, or dancing steps?*

Still, my mother sent me to a good convent school, Mater Dei where I learnt two more languages English and French, and social etiquette. And, I had new questions – every day.

To most people, my first education is a luxury, but to me the school planted the concern for the needy in me. We would have every week of volunteer program, and frequent care home and district school visits. Nuns and teachers would ask us to think what we could do for them by our own, no matter how small it was, and assist us to develop it.

Such concern was also combined with

my early experience observing my father's obsession with his work, the medical voluntary mobile unit, which he actively ran with his own fundraising for Otitis Media preventions and Cholesteatoma surgeries in rural areas, and neighbouring countries.

But as a turtle, I was still slow. I learnt the overwhelming feelings of need outside my house, outside my school and that my extra can

help them, still I could not find things for them I could do.

It was around the age of ten when I started to be a frequent visitor to my father's hospital. My joint pain was first put down to too much swimming, and later Arthritis before I eventually learnt that I had a wolf inside my body. From then the wolf has been my closest friend though living with him has never been easy. He is there every day and never goes away. My study was then made more difficult by brain fog given by the wolf, and I had to invent some techniques to help myself remember things I did not want to forget. Gradually I started realising the difference between me and my friends, my days, shortened – and that perhaps it was me who may need the extra. I began to look at myself as a needy.

I then went to Chulalongkorn University after Grade 11 for my first university degree, where I enjoyed their course immensely. All my puzzles were well presented by the professors, and all clean solved. The wolf, however, was naughty that he allowed me only one full year of study and the rest, in the care of the doctors. Four years later, I graduated from Faculty of Arts with BA (English), without extraordinary





marks, and with strong passion to continue my study, and to write.

In the same year of my graduation, I arrived in Down Under. My father who went to join the Cochlear Implant program at the Australian Bionic Ear & Hearing Research Institute in Melbourne in 1994 found Australia a nice and safe country, where I – even in bad health, could live an independent life.

So, I went to Macquarie University in Sydney, for my MA and Ph.D. both in Creative Writing. To most people, the course should have equipped me with skills necessary for fiction writings. The truth is I engaged in creative writing activities and little by little my supervisors, Prof. John Stephens, and Dr. Marcelle Freiman, encouraged me to play with language. I was still a quiet turtle at that time, and though I started learning English since kindergarten, I was shy to speak and express my thoughts. During the course, the

professors guided me to express myself and my thoughts more accurately and concisely as I wished, through words. Consequently, after a year of study there I won a Thai Government scholarship.

In my later years in Sydney, my health declined but my doctor (Dr. Steve Chadban) and the staffs at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital in Camperdown made my life enjoyable. They always asked what I wanted to do and tried every way to assist my needs. The checkup was never scary and I never felt I was a foreign student in a foreign land. I could continue my study, keep a short walk

around Darling Harbour in front of my house every evening as usual, do some long walks from Central Station to the Quay from time to time, and make some short trips around the country myself.

Living with my wolf was not hard in Australia and day by day I crafted a little work of my own, invented a small way to learn language I love – first a small project to play with languages, to assess different individual perceptions; then I expanded it to give a greater role to individual differences in language development, and word formation.

Back to Thailand, I became a lecturer. I first started observing works with my father's friends, in school and hospital setting. Children with Autism and with hearing loss were my first focus. It was hard actually to understand them as the same lesson seemed to be perceived differently. So, my work focus narrowed down to prelingual deaf children. Dr. Kietiyos Komin and Dr. Maliwan Tammasaeng, both helped me for my first observations.

However, before any work would be completed I had a flare up followed by left sided hemiplegia. My renal doctors (Dr. Nuntaka Chantavanit and Dr. Boontum Jirajan) and my internal medicine doctors (Dr. Yupin Thaipisutikul and Dr.



Somsak Laptikultham) at Rajavithi Hospital spent months to help me recover, and the flare subsided.

I was not fully recovered right away. I had very blurry vision and from time to time, went blind or spot distorted vision. From then I started to depend on my auditory sense and started learning that things around me never sounded like before. Each sound I found in a single day was always a discovery. Without good vision, every sound seemed to be the sound I did not recognise. For months, I experimented combining my ways to code things I did not want to forget with my sound exploration, and the computer use. I then made progress of my research work from that – first I taught the born-blind to be computer-user, and then to detect colors and learn color categorisation from the sounds. That small research work was recognised in an international conference in Salzburg as best paper in the following year.

It was that time that I eventually found what I could do.

And since some sign of stuttering was presented in my early months of recovery and I spent lots of time studying books and research papers dealing with speech and phonetic science, my later work heavily focused on another group, children with hearing loss. This time, teachers at Setsatian School for the Deaf helped me understand how the children



sign language, learn Thai and their third language, English. Dr. Kietiyos Komin, head of ENT department at Rajavithi Hospital helped me understand the cochlear implant technologies and surgeries, what speech and sound would be like through a cochlear implant. Gradually, I spot their difficulties in making language progress as a result of different structures across three languages, and I have brought these children a series of colors specially invented as additional visual cues which prove to succeed in helping them express their phonological awareness and accelerate their development of speech and speech intelligibility.

People often say to me that my work helps the needy. Strangely, I see these children are no different. I myself struggled to find ways to express my thoughts and I spot the same difficulty

in them. Now, I have learnt that if language can be barrier and increase the challenge, then my colour ways familiarize the target language (English) to another, to code it and decode it in ways that any people with good vision or not can easily grasp it.

Now although what I can do becomes much clearer, I'm still the same turtle, puzzling over small matters – every day, and never once asked to be the rabbit. ■

This essay is an account of Dr.Salinee's experiences overcoming great barriers to help those in need. The above article is her original work and has been included in her textbook "Introduction to Creative Writing" second edition. Thanks go to Dr.Salinee for sharing her story with us.

A note from the editors

This essay is an account of Dr. Salinee's experiences overcoming great barriers to help those in need. The above article is her original, unedited work and will feature in the second edition of her textbook 'Introduction to Creative Writing'. Many thanks go to Dr. Salinee for sharing her story with us. If you have an article or story that relates to Thai's living in Australia and would like to submit it to *Advance* magazine, please contact: josh@austchamthailand.com

