

She succeeded in spite of her prenatal exposure to alcohol

This inspiring woman has endured the worst of beginnings including having an alcoholic mother who deserted her family while they were young, a father who abused her, and the probability she has FASD, to achieve success in the academic world.

My name is Megan and I was born in 1953, the third child of a 23-year-old woman. At the time of my birth, my brother was 18 months and my sister had just turned three. My mother did not want me. She had tried twice to abort me, once at seven weeks and again at three months. She was desperate, drinking at home and at the local hotel. She already had two children still in nappies, had no washing machine or refrigerator and no money for herself. I suspect that she may also have been concerned about my parentage.

My father married late (he was 12 years older than my mother), after returning at 25 from the war with war neurosis. By the time I was conceived he had been drinking heavily on a daily basis for approximately eight years.

After I was born my mother continued her daily visits to the hotel and when I was six months old she found she was pregnant with the milkman's child (of all people) and ran away. My father was given custody of the three children by the courts and my grandmother moved in to help care for us.

I remember nothing of the years before I started school so can only relate things I have been told. Apparently I was a placid baby who would lie for hours in the cot, only crying if hungry or wet. My dad recounted how once sitting up, I would sit for up to two hours trying to pick up a spot of sunlight shining through a hole in the wall. When I was four Dad began to take me to work with him and I would play on the building site, with timber and bricks. I did not have any contact with other children my age until I started school. Apparently I had very little receptive language ability and my speech was delayed. This was blamed on my siblings 'speaking for me'.

Starting school was traumatic. I wet my pants on the first day and was so ashamed. I also remember the teacher, a woman who was very kind, made me a bright red bag to hang on my chair (the other children's mothers made theirs) and stayed back with me every afternoon to teach me to speak correctly. I have snapshot memories of staring at her face as she showed me how to make individual sounds. I also remember her exaggerated productions of 'how now brown cow, sitting in the pasture' and 'the rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain'. I remember being mystified by these strange sentences, but practising them ad infinitum in order to please her. I also remember the pleasurable feeling I had when she smiled at me.

I remember only one thing from my second year at school. I was constantly receiving the wet ruler across the back of the legs from Mrs Harvey. Remembering her name still strikes dread in me with the clammy feeling and the light-headedness that comes from the fear. The only incident I can remember that earned this punishment was being caught in the boys' toilet after chasing a boy who ran in there during a game of chasey.

After this my memories are snapshots for the rest of my primary school days. I can remember that the fruiterer's wife gave me a doll – it was my first doll and I took it to school to show it off. While I was showing it around a boy grabbed it and smashed its head on the cement verandah. Mr Hale (my fourth grade teacher) came out and took me inside to calm me. He nursed me on his lap and told me that I would feel better after a while. He also warned me that if I was lucky enough to get another doll I must look after it and not bring it to school.

I had no friends and was teased constantly because I came to school with no shoes on and holes in my clothes. I used to take my shoes off and hide them on the way to school as they hurt. The children used to call me 'ching chong chinaman' and 'mongol' and were often telling me that I looked funny.

Mr Butler, the principal, started to notice that I had a gift with language even though I had been late to develop these skills. He called me to his office to tell me that a story I had written was very good. I remember the story as he read some of it back to me. After he had finished reading he asked me if I would like to go in a story competition. I was in grade five at the time and the story was called 'If I Were a Horse'.

But that first contact with Mr Butler initiated more regular and less pleasant dealings with him. He regularly asked my fifth and sixth grade teachers if I could be excused for book cupboard duty. He closed his office door and sat me on his lap and played with my vagina. He would also put my hand down his huge trousers and under his huge tummy until I had hold of his penis. I was quite used to this as my father, my uncle, my father's best friend and a young man down the street all used to do the same thing. I can still often smell Mr Butler, when I think of him.

During my primary school years, my grandmother stayed with us off and on depending on her health. The three of us were often left with no carer after school when Dad was at work or drinking in his office.

My behaviour became worse as I got older. I ran away from home on a number of occasions and was frequently physically violent toward my brother and sister. Conversely, I was happiest when reading. I devoured books and harassed the local librarian to get more books for me. My favourites were adventure stories; the *Famous Five* series, the *Secret Seven* series, *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer*, *Hill's End* and others from the same genre. I had a little friend, a boy with learning difficulties with whom I went on adventures, when I was at my auntie's house. I had saved him from Mr Butler's cane on countless occasions by threatening to 'tell someone' about his (Mr Butler's) behaviour with me. My little friend would readily follow my lead and we felt we were the only two children left in a world suddenly made devoid of adults. Many of the fantasies we played out were versions of the exhilarating accounts of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn.

I had also become fascinated by words. I started to read the dictionary and could more easily remember the word than its meaning. I learned many words that I pronounced incorrectly as I would sound them out phonetically. My favourite at one time was 'rendezvous' which I pronounced exactly as written. I had many a rendezvous with my learning-disabled friend and my many cousins. Our school holidays were spent at a variety of uncles' homes all of which were on the river. They were wonderful settings for my adventures and my male cousins were faithful followers.

My academic ability continued to increase, until by my final year of primary school, I was third in the class. My successes, however, were related to my verbal abilities. I struggled with schoolwork that involved numeracy skills or problem-solving.

My behaviour in these final years of primary school has been described by family, friends and professionals as erratic, impulsive and at odds with my obvious intelligence. I was described as 'in your face', no social skills, bubbly, highly excitable, irresistible and cuddly.

Author's Note: This story was to be the first in a series following Megan's journey from childhood to present. However, even after many requests from me and assurances from Megan that she would complete her story for this book, for a long time I did not receive the remainder of the story. I understand how difficult completing the first part in this series must have been for Megan and completely understand why I had not received subsequent chapters. But just before the manuscript was due to go to the publishers Megan contacted me again to say she had been ill and would like to continue with the chapter. The next paragraph she wrote in an email to me with the next instalment of her story.

Tears stream down my face but I feel compelled to continue. For your sake Elizabeth (knowing your own circumstances) I must impress on you that I lay no blame for my circumstances. We were all victims in a sense; even the adults that sexually abused me.

I was very fortunate when I started high school to have a friend. Unfortunately, her parents decided to move to New Zealand so I found myself in a strange and frightening environment with no friends.

I fell in love immediately with a Dutch boy in my year, and this affection has continued on both sides to this day. However, he could not openly associate with me as he was in the 'in' crowd and I was on the 'outer' (1965). Later in high school he became more self-confident and sat with me at lunchtimes and we critiqued each other's poetry.

I had some very close relationships with older boys between the ages of 12 to 15 years as I had a 'knowingness' about me that attracted them. Fortunately, all of them recognised me as a 'decent' girl and despite me throwing myself at their mercy did not have intimate relations with me. In those days boys grew up under the threat of death if they 'interfered' with a girl who was underage.

My high school years would have been disastrous if not for an amazing woman who was the deputy headmistress. She seemed to intuitively have a sense of my situation and provided invaluable social and emotional support. Other teachers played a very important role. I am well aware though that if I had not shown such academic promise they would not have invested the extra time and energy that was so important to me.

I graduated with very good marks, scoring in the top 1% of students in South Australia for English and doing very well in all other subjects (thanks to the time put in after school by a number of teachers).

In 1970 I enrolled in Adelaide University to do an Arts degree and a teaching diploma with the aim of being a high school English and History teacher. In my heart I knew that I could not do this and had such low self-esteem that I was confused as to how I had ended up at university. This attitude rubbed off onto my university attendance and achievement.

Socially, for the first time I found that people liked me. They were not judging me because I lived in a shack or because I had no mother and my father was an alcoholic. They were aware that I had a personality and a character and I had opinions that were engaging. I became drunk on the acceptance. Young adults from very wealthy families respected me and valued my company, parents would ask for a return visit if a boy took me home to dinner. I focused on developing these relationships and ignored my study responsibilities. I became obsessed with social acceptance and at the same time (with all the fetters of my childhood being released) went wild seeking risky activities and exploring an exploding sexuality.

I was untrustworthy. I sought sexual excitement no matter what the effect on others. I drank heavily to quell my conscience because I knew what was right and what was wrong (after all, I had attended Sunday school from two years of age, and taught Sunday School from the age of 13 years). I had virtually two personalities, the one I used with people where I said the right things and acted as they would expect a girl from a good background to behave, while at the same time engaging in high risk behaviours involving alcohol and sex that was outside the norm.

At the end of my first year at university I failed, and I accompanied a friend on a working holiday to the outback. I still lived in a fantasy land of books and movies and I fell in love with a modern 'Roy Rogers', a young man much older than me who had grown up on cattle stations, riding horses and playing the guitar and singing country and western songs. We planned to be married but once he found out about my past (I felt compelled to be honest with him) he told me that I had misled him and he could never associate with a girl of my low character.

This rejection heralded an as yet unprecedented period of promiscuous behaviour, which continued until and even after I became engaged to the man who was to become my husband and father of my children. I felt I had no

control over my behaviour. I was living in the sandhills of northern South Australia and I felt as out of control as a prickly bush being driven in all directions by the dry wind. My risky behaviours resulted in two abortions, which still cause me emotional agony to this day. One was during my engagement and I manipulated my husband-to-be to agree to an abortion because I knew the baby belonged to an Aboriginal station hand.

Once I was married I settled happily into the strict structure of the isolated lifestyle offered by an outback sheep station. My husband soon became frustrated with my lack of support and started to openly criticise me because I argued against him on political, philosophical and social issues in mixed company. I did not understand what behaviours were required from a wife and any criticism struck at the core of my fragile sense of self. Before I even began a family I was feeling like a huge failure without understanding what I had done wrong.

Once I became a mother I was fiercely maternal without having the emotional or psychological maturity to parent appropriately. I wanted my children to have all of the things I'd missed out on and I wanted to protect them from harm. This desire was so strong that I would not leave them with anybody male, even their own father.

When my youngest was four years old, only seven years into my marriage I was in deep depression. I felt that my husband didn't love me, that my in-laws hated me and that there was no resolution to my miserable circumstance. I sought comfort with an old friend (one of the men I had an affair with before getting married) and this continued off and on for three years. I felt that the only time I could be myself yet still be accepted was with this person, who appeared to recognise my gifts and my generous spirit.