

# friday

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### 'I beat my stammer after 50 years'

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Unable to utter a word or even say her own name because of her stammer, UK-based Lynne Read stopped talking - until a chance meeting with a woman who had beaten her stutter unlocked her silent world

As told to Karen Pasquali Jones, Editor, Friday magazine  
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Image Credit: Supplied picture

Lynn helps new recruits to The Starfish Project, who need phone support controlling their speech.

Watching Colin Firth as King George VI tripping and stumbling over every word in *The King's Speech*, I bit my lip. His portrayal in the blockbuster film was so

realistic, he'd won an Oscar for Best Actor.

But while he could walk away from the role and the monarch's crippling speech impediment, my entire life had - until a few years ago - been ruled by mine.

My mum said I stammered over my very first word. She realised I had a problem at 18 months and by the age of three, my tongue tangled over every syllable.

I must have realised I was different because I stopped talking. Inside I was bubbly and inquisitive but my mouth let me down. I avoided conversations and let friends answer for me.

My stutter was so bad I couldn't even say my own name. When I was seven, Mum sent me next door to get change for a £1 note for my dinner money. I crept up to the front door and knocked so quietly I knew they'd never hear. I was terrified our neighbours would answer and I'd be forced to try and talk.

I didn't know why I stammered. In my head, my voice was loud and clear. But when I opened my mouth, every word became stuck on the tip of my tongue, unable to escape. I was always happy but my lack of speech shattered my confidence. I just thought, why bother trying?

At school, I came top of my class in maths and English but I couldn't answer when the register was called or ask a question. Luckily, I wasn't bullied and had a few close friends who spoke for me. But I hated the way everyone assumed I was stupid because of my stammer. I joined the Girl Guides and got every badge just to prove I was good at something.

Yet I saw strangers rolling their eyes when my mouth contorted, trying to spit out even the simplest of words. And when a National Health Services (NHS) speech

therapist declared there was nothing she could do after a year, I thought I'd have to hide behind silence forever.

Then mum asked me to get her half a dozen ripe bananas. I got panicky waiting in the queue in the greengrocer's and lost my temper when he handed me a bag of rotten fruit.

"How dare you?" I raged, then froze. My fury had meant I didn't stammer. I liked getting angry after that because it was the only time I could talk. But I was quite placid really and soon grew tired of people talking down to me, treating me as simple or ignoring me.

I left school and after 27 interviews got work in a factory. My job was packing plastic around record player boxes. I was terrible at it and the supervisor Malcolm, who was 21, had to keep helping me. He flirted and I laughed at all his jokes, too scared to speak.

It meant I was the perfect girlfriend and 18 months later we married. I was shaking as I walked down the aisle and the minister had to say my vows with me, drowning out my terrified, stuttering whisper.

A year later, our daughter Nicola was born, who became my voice by the time she was three. I had two more girls Lisa and Vicky but after 13 years Malcolm and I drifted apart.

## **Giving up**

I was a single mum and needed a job. But no one wanted to hire me. Some bosses even said I was unemployable because of my stammer. I wanted to fix it, but speech therapy didn't work, and I couldn't afford any specialist treatment. "I'll never be able to speak without a stammer," I told myself and gave up.

I finally found work in a restaurant and the customers thought I was stand-offish because I didn't chat as I

served them.

Weyland Read was different. He didn't stop talking and we became very good friends. He accepted my stammer, and was patient as I struggled to speak. Four years later when Weyland asked me to marry him, I agreed - as long as we could have a silent wedding.

We flew to Chonburi, in Thailand, for a Buddhist ceremony and married without exchanging a word in a tiny shrine in the middle of a lake.

Afterwards, I landed a new job at an accountant's office. Even then I was called Helen for three months because they'd misheard me at the start and I couldn't say my name was Lynne. Years passed and my 50th birthday was looming. I saw there was a British Stammerer's Association lunch and booked to go. At least I'd be among people who wouldn't mind my stutter. So I plucked up the courage to go. Over lunch, I watched, in awe, as a woman who'd beaten her stutter, gave a speech.

She'd been just like me, and now she spoke beautifully. I found out she'd been on a course at The Starfish Project near Eastbourne, East Sussex and I booked to go. I'd been boxed in by my stammer long enough but I didn't know if the course would make a difference.

### **My word!**

Within an hour I'd said my name for the first time in 50 years and was crying, I was so excited. All I'd had to do was learn how to take a costal breath - breathe in from my diaphragm, like an opera singer, instead of my tummy - and speak on that. It was the same technique King George VI had used and it worked. My words flowed out, but I just kept saying two over and over: Lynne Read.

My name sounded so lovely after so long.

There was no holding me back after that. I finally had my voice and it meant I could answer the phone, order a take-away or what I wanted from a restaurant menu.

I sobbed, relieved, when I bought a train ticket and could say the destination I wanted to go instead of writing it down.

Overnight I went from being quiet and avoiding speaking to becoming a chatter box.

Weyland and I decided to open a Bed and Breakfast and I volunteered to read newspapers onto tapes for the visually impaired. I also help new recruits to The Starfish Project, who need phone support controlling their speech.

I still have to work hard to breathe correctly but people find it hard to believe I ever had a stammer. I'm proof that you should never give up trying - I was bullied into silence by my stutter for 50 years, but I've beaten it and I plan on never shutting up again!