**Natalie**

I would like to welcome our first speaker today Dr. Cay Holbrook, whose talk is called creating empowerment through a joy of reading and writing. In addition to being a lifelong member of Braille Literacy Canada, Cay currently is a professor at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, British Columbia, where she has lived since 1998. She began working as a teacher of students with visual impairments. She completed her PhD in 1986 and has held faculty positions at John Hopkins University and at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. Cay’s research and scholarship has focused on literacy in all forms for individuals with visual impairments. She has published several textbooks, several on the topic of braille and/or literacy. She continues to conduct research in the area of braille and literacy, and currently is involved with colleagues at Rice University in a large research project designed to explore the way that braille is taught and used by school aged children. Thank you, Kay, for being with us today. And I will turn the floor over to you.

**Cay Holbrook**

Thank you so much, Natalie, I can't tell you how excited I am to be here. I think this is a wonderful event and I appreciate being included. I am going to start with something that's not very joyful. My presentation was originally going to just be all about the joy of reading. But something happened last week that highlighted literacy for me and in not a very joyful way. And that was learning of the horrible, horrible tragedy that happened at the Kamloops Indian School residential school, where there was a mass grave that was found with the bodies have to at least 215 children who had been at that school. I originally heard about this situation on TV. And I it struck me that I immediately turned off the TV and went to try and read information about this. It was so important. It was so tragic. It was so horrible that what I really wanted to do was absorb the information in a way that allowed me to reflect as I was reading, I needed to have control over my gathering of information control that comes from reading information myself, I didn't need any analysis of what to use, I knew instinctively and through years of experience, what I needed, and how to satisfy that need. I also trusted myself to check on the legitimacy of the information through multiple sources. Subsequently, I have continued to use my literacy skills to be as informed as possible and have been involved in many conversations one at my dentist's office when my mouth was completely open and my dentist was talking about this situation.

To be involved and to gather information from other people. My knowledge gathered through my literacy skills has empowered me to be involved, to be compassionate, and to try to be a part of the solution to this horrible problem. I started out with that and I'm really happy I didn't cry because it was such an emotional situation for me and I immediately went to this presentation, the idea of this presentation and how powerful it was that I had so many options for gathering information.

But since I started with a story about gathering information in a difficult situation, I want to give a little bit of time to another literacy story that I know is providing joy to readers and writers and that is a company that provides a such an opportunity for mostly families. It's called Storyworth you may have heard of it before, but I got a subscription to Storyworth from my nephew and my niece. Every week a new question comes to me about my past. What do you remember about sports when you were in high school? Do you have a favorite stuffed animal when you were a child? How did you decide on what profession you wanted to go into? Those kinds of questions. It was, it's mostly a gift, mostly from the younger generation to an older generation. And after a year, the company publishes a book with all of your answers. And then you can give it back to the people who have given you that gift. It's joy all around. It's joyful to write the stories. And it's joyful for the generation below to read the stories. In fact, my nephew and his wife gave that this subscription to me and also to my sister. And I know that when my sister's book was published, they read it to her grandchildren, who just were fascinated by it. This was a way that readers and writers and involve their life, in literacy and, and empowerment.

So, I want to talk just a few minutes about things that literacy gives you and how it empowers you. We've already excuse me, we've already talked about empowerment through knowledge, you know, the saying that knowledge is power. But there are other ways that literacy helps people become empowered. It can be seen as the great equalizer, but only if everybody has access to reading and writing. And that demands attention. Reading and writing helps you understand yourself. There's a quote, I have a colleague who says deep down, I'm really shallow. And I know that this is a quote from a popular movie, You've Got Mail, but I love this quote. The quote is, “when you read a book, as a child, it becomes part of your identity in a way that no other reading in your whole life does”.

And I think that's true. We, we create our identity through the experiences that we have had, but also through our reaction to the things that we read. It provides us with vicarious adventures, things that we never would have opportunities to experience, or possibly the bravery to experience. Literacy allows us to go into fantasies, to learn from the perspective of other people, and to help us understand the past and how our place in history fits into the world as we have it now.

When I was a teacher of students with visual impairments in Rock Hill, South Carolina, I had a student in kindergarten, who just was very stuck in egocentric thinking and so I used stories to help her look outside of herself to how other people would be feeling. She loved the stories and it was a powerful way to get her to put herself in someone else's shoes. Literacy gives us a deeper understanding of our rights and responsibilities. And part because we can examine the wholeness of a story, what happens at the beginning in the middle and the results of what is happening instead of our little slice of time that we're living right now.

So in order to make this happen in order, I think we're all committed to making sure that braille is a part of the lives of individuals who are blind or visually impaired. But in order to make this happen, we have to pay attention. Our efforts are only as good as the execution of our efforts. So I have a few suggestions. These are just suggestions for making sure that we're paying attention in a way that leads to literacy and the first one is to start early and to have a sense of urgency. I recently, many years ago, we collectively as a profession decided to avoid the use of pre braille. Because pre-braille somehow indicates that there's a time before you would provide braille to a to a child. And we don't actually fundamentally believe that we believe that children should be provided access to braille from a very, very young age at the very, very beginning of, of their exploration of reading and writing. And so we decided to try and avoid that and replace it with something like early literacy experiences or foundational skills or things like that. But recently, I've heard more and more people use the word pre- braille. And so I guess I want to revisit that a little bit and, and remind ourselves of why we had avoided that term in the first place. So no pre-braille. Braille is braille, whether you're providing it to an infant in their environment and we don't withhold braille the early experiences of a child.

The next thing that I want to mention is how critical it is to involve families, and communities all along the way. Every time someone else in a child's environment, have access to an understanding of braille, that's a plus for our students. I think that we, especially because braille is not used by everyone, we have a sense of its isolation and a child's life. And what we should be about whether we are braille readers, or teachers or members of the community who care about the situation, what we need to be about is expanding the number of people who are involved in, in braille and understanding braille. I have a student right now, who was talking about her community and how important it was that people understood and how many times she was realizing that people did not understand braille or the importance of braille. And so she's decided to do a class a community class on braille. And I think that's a fantastic idea. And I'm proud of her for thinking about this as she is a pre-service teacher.

The next thing that I want to mention, this is a little bit of a, I don't know, I want to say, caution. What I really want to say is, I don't want to fuss at you about this but I think that sometimes we tend to become keepers of braille. And what we really need to do is to provide opportunity for students to own braille themselves. When I said that it's important to start early and have a sense of urgency. This relates to that sense of urgency. We don't want to be the people who dole out braille a little tiny bit at a time. I recently heard someone say about a child, this was an older child, who was learning braille, as a supplement to print reading and writing. And this person said, we're going to introduce braille gradually. And I said, “why are you introducing it gradually?” And they said, “Well, we don't want to overwhelm the child. Well, we think it's, it's going to be difficult.” And that's the message that's given that message that's given when you go out gradually. And here you can have this piece of braille, but the rest of it's too complicated. It's you get the sense that it's difficult or complicated, and I'd like to use words like logical and elegant, because that is also true. So reframing the way that we talk about braille, especially if there are some issues that we need to address in relation to how a person is embracing braille from the beginning. I also find it fun to ask people. And I'd love to do this right now, if we were in a big room, I would just tell you just to call it out. But I love to ask people what their favorite contraction is. And children that I asked that, too, are often really surprised by the question, they usually have an answer. But they haven't ever been asked before, what's your favorite contraction, by the way, my favorite contraction is ‘AR’. And when I tell children that, they, they love it, because you only have favorite things, of the things that you care about, and the things that you love. And so having a sense of, yes, you're going to learn the entirety of this and you're going to learn it efficiently, we're not going to overwhelm you, but you are going to learn it efficiently. And we want you to use it as quickly as possible. I know that Francis Mary is on the call, and she is someone who holds the banner of meaning high and waves that enthusiastically we need to provide opportunities for students to read meaningfully, to have meaning in the stories that they read to have meaning even in the earliest parts of introducing braille. So meaning meaning, meaning - really important.

Another thing that's important that our students often don't get is practice. You know, children who are beginning to learn to read and write in print, have unbelievable amount of practice. And in doing this, but often, the students who are learning beginning to learn to read and write in braille, are limited and their number of opportunities to practice reading and writing in braille. When I was a teacher of students with visual impairments, I had a situation that has stuck with me all these years and I tell it to you, because it could be happening today. I came into the classroom, and the student came to the table where I was going to be working with him. And the classroom teacher said, “Oh, let me get the Braillewriter for you”. And it was up on a high shelf. And so she got it down from every from the high shelf, and she brought it to the table. And then as I was leaving, I noticed that she took the Braillewriter and put it back on the high shelf. So we had a long conversation about wait a minute, wait a minute, why, why are you keeping it there?. But that's what the child had been told is your time on braille is with Miss Holbrook when she comes in. And that when I say that's what he'd been told, that's either explicit or implicit telling of that. You don't get to practice. Use enthusiasm and excitement. Tell your students about all kinds of cool braille things. Yesterday, I was observing a student who is just beginning to learn about braille, and there was a discussion about Louis Braille. And so I'm a horrible University observer, ‘cause I've just can't not say something. And so I kind of interrupted and I said,” Can I ask you a question?” Yes you can ask me a question. And I said, “Who do you think in this room has been to Louis Braille’s house?” And so this way, that it wasn't you was it you and I, we had a lovely discussion about how exciting it was to be at Louis Braille’s house. That makes things real to the student and it was exciting and she smiled and I smiled and our voices went to an exciting level and that's important. That level of enthusiasm. You want to check your own attitudes at and make sure that what you're saying to someone is actually what you want to portray in terms of your enthusiasm about braille, and this goes along with that Alan Koenig, professor at Texas Tech a long time ago used to use the phrase “blame the child syndrome” to describe the situation where an adult doesn't matter who could be a grandparent, it could be a school administrator, it could be a teacher unfortunately I hope that doesn't happen very often. But will determine that the challenges that a child is having relate to something about the child. He's resistant. He's not motivated. She's difficult. She doesn't care. The parents are grieving. All kinds of reasons that don't have to do with the responsibility that we have to make sure that a child is motivated that a child is experiencing success in learning braille.

And the last thing I just want to mention, and then we'll have some time for question and answer is how important it is to talk about the future. Children do need to know why they're learning this. Children who are learning to reprint see multiple opportunities for using print in daily lives and adults around them all the time. But children who are reading braille need that same realization, I like to talk to children about the Braille Challenge. And by the way, Canada is sending four students, this time to the Braille Challenge finals. And that is, I think, that probably matches our high first for finalists in the Braille Challenge, which is very exciting. And so talking with them about opportunities that they will have in the future, because they are braille readers.

And last, but absolutely not least, is making sure that children have opportunities to get to know people who are older than they are, whether that is an older student, or a teenager, which is always exciting. or children, who have now graduated and gone to college, or even adults and grandparents are braille readers. How do you use braille in your profession, and sometimes that happens pretty naturally through community events, but sometimes that does not happen naturally. And that's something we need to organize and arrange. So those are my thoughts about empowerment and joy and use of braille to make sure that we are we're good giving students opportunities not just to learn the skills of braille, which is a different kind of a presentation, but also important, but, but in addition to that, to learn the things that surround braille that make real meaningful in someone's life. So I look forward to some question and answer.

I think we've had Thank you, Cay, for that wonderful presentation. I think, Natalie, are you coming in?

**Natalie**

There we go. Thank you so much, Kay, as always for a wonderful presentation. I know that I could ask many many questions, but I'm sure there are others here as well. Who will have things to say.