

INVISIBLE BONDAGE

A Story of One Woman's Struggle with Illiteracy

by Jody Karr

Twenty-three years ago when she lost custody of her two children, Toni Cordell wanted to die. Unknowingly, she signed away the custody of her son and daughter because she could not read the legal papers.

"The attorney asked me to sign the divorce decree. I did what he told me to do. I didn't realize I was signing away the custody of my children," Toni recalls.

Toni regained legal custody of her children two years later, remarried and had a third child, but she continued to hide her illiteracy. A life-long struggle with feelings of inferiority and shame caused her to keep her secret, not only from friends and co-workers, but from her husband and children, as well.

In 1990, at the age of 48, Toni revealed her secret in a very big way. She roller skated across the United States on a literacy awareness campaign that she devised after learning how to read, and talked to communities along the way about illiteracy.

"I wanted to make a large-scale contribution to literacy at the grassroots level," she said. "I struggled for years with my problem and had no idea help was available, and I asked myself how many others need help and have no idea that it is available."

Authorities estimate that 27 million adults in America are functionally illiterate. Toni's commitment and enthusiasm for literacy has motivated individuals, interest groups, and organizations from various levels of society nationwide to step forward to become part of the fight to end illiteracy. Her message, "I did it; you can do it too," has inspired many non-readers to find the courage, as she did, to ask for help.

Toni spent the majority of her life as a low-level reader. She could read individual words, but could not comprehend sentences. Childhood illnesses and frequent moves interfered with school attendance and prevented her from acquiring basic reading skills.

"I always had a book in my hand," Toni said. "Although it was a struggle, I always wanted to read because I wanted the knowledge the books would give me. It would take me three months to read a very simple book."

Toni's feelings of inadequacy began early in life.

"I was told at a very young age that I was stupid. I grew up believing I was stupid, that I was unacceptable, and that it did not matter what I did – I would never be acceptable. It's a crippling thing to do to anybody. I could have learned if somebody had encouraged me or if somebody had sat down and helped me."

By the time she was a teenager, Toni's shame, frustration, and low self-esteem were hidden behind a mask of defiance and rebellion.

\ "I was so mad that I decided I'd rather be *mean* than stupid because mean was my choice; *stupid* I didn't know how to change.

Toni describes her life before literacy as "a struggle to hold on to everyday life." She had trouble coping with the tension that surrounded her turbulent home environment and struggled with her lifelong fear: *How long before people find out?*

"I didn't see myself as a valuable person at all. I felt like an alien, not just in this nation, but an alien on this planet. Non-readers are virtually held in bondage, an invisible bondage. There is no dignity. You don't feel good about yourself. You have no hope of ever getting the kind of job you would like because you know you lack the education for it. You take whatever job comes along. Reading frees readers. In order to vote, I no longer need to get the newspaper and a sample ballot to ask my husband to explain the propositions to me."

Although she managed to "slip through high school with enough passing grades to get through," Toni felt she could never acquire any type of job except a low-level one. Job hunting was a major ordeal. Not only did she have to struggle to read the road signs while driving to a potential place of employment, she had to struggle with a job application also. She devised a way to avoid having to fill out an application in front of a secretary or receptionist.

Toni recalled, "What I would do is take a job application home, fill out the answers on a blank piece of paper until I determined they were right, and then write it all properly on the application. I knew that if I filled out an application in front of a secretary or receptionist, she would write on my application that it took me two hours, and I would never get considered for the job."

Toni's second husband, Carl, assisted her when she needed help, but never realized the extent of her problem even though he received long-distance phone calls when away on business from Toni about spelling because she couldn't read the dictionary.

Despite her handicap, Toni has worked as a receptionist and a sales representative. In addition, her strong mechanical skills got her a job as a camerawoman.

She traveled to India, Honduras, and Africa to film documentaries. Toni kept her secret from co-workers by asking numerous questions in order to cover up her inability to read instructions.

Toni's low-level reading skills caused her problems in numerous areas, but the most painful area was parenting. Her feelings of worthlessness were reinforced because she was unable to help her children when they were young. Toni's children didn't realize their mother had a problem when she didn't help them with homework.

"We always thought she just wasn't a tolerant person. Because she always walked around with a book, everyone assumed she could read," daughter Amarie said.

"I was not a pleasant nor nurturing parent," Toni tearfully confessed. "I was angry at life most of the time and frequently took that out on my children. Children need to be told how important and valuable they are. When my children were little, I didn't do that – which is regrettable. Since then, I do that."

In 1987, Toni made a phone call that changed her life. The catalyst was a television movie called **Bluffing It** about an illiterate adult, a man whose feelings mirrored her own.

"In the movie, I saw the character's level of frustration, anger, and rage and I realized I still had a lot of that kind of anger, frustration, and rage in me. Maybe the rage was gone, but I still had an awful lot of anger. And it would erupt out of proportion to the circumstance. I had treated my children that way all of my life when they would violate one of my rules. I would always overreact and go into a rage. I think that's what triggered my willingness to see myself in that character," she said.

At the conclusion of the movie, trembling, Toni dialed the 800 number on the screen and asked for help. The operator gave her the number of a local literacy council in Oklahoma where she lives. Toni called to make an appointment for an evaluation.

"I went to my evaluation trembling with fear. I perspired profusely because I was so afraid they were going to prove I was stupid."

Toni was able to identify words during her evaluation, but had little comprehension of what she read.

"They told me 'we have the perfect tutor for you. We're going to teach you to read.' I didn't believe them because I didn't think anybody could. But I went through with it anyway. I am grateful because it worked for me," Toni said.

Toni spent a year learning how to read from Marjorie Strider, a trained, volunteer tutor, who had a problem of her own. She was slowly losing her eyesight because of a degenerative eye disease. Marjorie taught Toni how to read letter-by-letter (phonetically) through the Laubach Literacy Method. She went beyond standard teaching methods to assign homework for Toni, including elementary crossword puzzles and assignments to study the **Reader's Digest Word Power** section. After mastering reading (She now reads at the 2nd-year college level.), Toni went on to tutor two students.

But tutoring wasn't enough. Toni wanted to make a large-scale contribution. She searched for a novel way to draw attention to the problem of illiteracy so others like her could receive help.

She used new-found reading skills to consult the **Guinness Book of World Records** to discover what type of cross-country journeys had been recorded. The routine sight of a young girl roller skating by Toni's home sparked an idea. Toni checked the **Records** and found that no woman had roller skated across the country. Rollin' for Readin', a non-profit organization and tour to promote literacy, was born.

Toni informed her husband of her plan and was surprised at his reaction.

"When I told Carl that I was going to skate across the United States for literacy, he said 'Okay,' just like I was going down to the store to go shopping. But then he asked me to think about it for at least two weeks and asked me 'Can you pay the price?' He wasn't talking about money. He was talking about strapping those skates on day-after-day and all of the other things that would be involved. It was excellent advice because it forced me to think about what was really involved."

Toni received full support from her family. She drew on her husband's expertise in media relations and her daughter, Amarie's, managerial skills to make the cross-country skate a success. As a team, they launched a nationwide literacy tour of skating and public speaking engagements. Both Toni and Amarie quit their jobs to devote themselves full-time to the cause. Meanwhile, Carl, who is in his sixties, worked feverishly (in a town 100 miles away from his family) to keep project and family afloat, often working 70 hours a week. They solicited corporate support from various companies. Marriott Hotels, Shaklee Corporation, and Hind's Performance Sportswear donated goods or services. IBM donated funds. Despite some individuals and corporate assistance, the family incurred tremendous personal debts for the project, debts that they won't be clear of for years to come.

While Amarie coordinated most of the business details of the project, Toni trained Olympic-style for eighteen months before embarking on her cross-country journey. She underwent various physical tests and slowly built up her stamina and strength for the tour. The Advisory Board for Rollin' for Readin' included community leaders, doctors, politicians, attorneys, and a well-known athlete, Billie Jean King.

Toni's 2300-mile skating tour began in San Gabriel, California on January 2, 1990 and ended five months later, on May 28, in Jacksonville, Florida. Amarie, age 26, followed her rolling-skating mother across the nation in a brightly-colored van, painted by a group of artists (literacy advocates) who call themselves Cartoonists Across America. The van, which carried food, clothing, equipment, and other essentials for the venture, was decorated with cartoons and Toni's slogan: "Read. Exercise Your Mind."

Toni roller skated 3 hours a day on her tour, averaging 30 miles daily, except for Sunday when she rested. After skating, she spent the remainder of each day, dressed in her skating attire, speaking to various groups at schools, civic organizations, conferences, and libraries. She spoke to a myriad of radio, TV, and newspaper people as well.

"I had my skates on an average of 12-14 hours a day," she said. "Each day was extremely full."

Toni's trans-continental journey across deserts, cities, and mountain passes was not without incident. She battled strong winds and encountered dogs who viewed her as a giant milk-bone treat. Luckily, she suffered only minor injuries: swollen ankles and a bruised wrist. The mother-daughter team had one harrowing experience where they narrowly escaped getting hit by a reckless driver.

Amarie recalls, "Flashers were going on the van and there was a bright-yellow banner with red letters that said: CAUTION! COAST-TO-COAST ATHLETE AHEAD. There were also bike flags two to three feet on top of the van, but the driver disregarded my brake lights and all other warnings."

The driver tried to pass the van on the right shoulder of a four-lane highway even though no other vehicles were around. Toni was skating in front of the van and did not hear Amarie honk the horn in warning. She didn't realize what was happening. Amarie cut in front of the driver to keep him from running into her mother which caused the man to apply his brakes.

Toni says most of her on-the-road encounters were positive and some were funny or heart-warming.

"I had a guy on a motorcycle pull up next to me and pace himself with me and want to chat! Well, he's on a motorcycle and it's easy for him, but my lungs are busy, quite frankly! Occasionally, people would hang outside a car window and give me the 'thumbs-up' sign or 'other' signs," Toni said, laughing.

In some towns, the skater was greeted by honking horns, and crowds of cheering students, teachers, community people, and local media people. Some supporters cheered, "Go Toni!"

Toni recalls two of her most heart-warming, on-the-road experiences.

"In Los Angeles, a little Hispanic man who had heard about me on television came running up to the van while I skated and threw seven dollars in the window, shouting to Amarie, 'I want to buy her lunch.' I was touched deeply."

A second encounter occurred in the desert of California. An aged sun-baked woman stood waiting by her dilapidated pickup truck which she had parked in the dirt on the side of the road. She clutched two crumbled five-dollar bills in her hand.

"When I saw you on TV, I went home and borrowed ten dollars to give you," the old woman said.

Toni recalls, "I wanted to tell the woman you can't do that. If you had to borrow the money, it's too much to do. Sometimes the tour was a project of the people because occasionally people would come up like the woman in the desert to offer a few dollars. On the road, we did not ask for funds because you never really know who you are asking and what situation they're in. I wouldn't want somebody to give out of an emotional need when they might have to go without to do that."

Toni has had heart-wrenching experiences off the road, as well, during her journey.

After speaking to a five-state gathering of educators in Biloxi, Mississippi, Toni asked the audience if they had any questions. A man named Jim in a pin-striped suit stood up and asked 'Where do go from here?'

"I thought he meant Jacksonville, Florida where I was going next," Toni said. "And he said, 'No, where do **I** go from here?'"

Jim pointed to the table of educators in front of him from a college and said, 'These people gave me a degree, and I'm like you. I need help.' The people in the room gasped a resounding 'uuuhhhh' and the man tearfully told the stunned audience, 'I've got no place to go but up.'

Toni recalls another brave non-reader who stepped forward in front of his peers, this time a young boy in the midst of his classmates.

"You know, I'm like you," James admitted. "I can't read very well and kids make fun of me."

Toni recalls her struggle to keep her composure and to keep back her tears.

"I'm supposed to hold it together, hold my composure in front of adults and children. Listening to him, my heart got ripped out," she whispered.

Toni has spoken to over 100,000 people about illiteracy. Her efforts and commitment has affected many lives. Although not compensated for her work, Toni has received a priceless reward in helping others.

"The best thing about the tour was seeing adults get to the point where they could say that they needed help, and then they got that help," she said.

Although her skate across America is over, Toni continues to speak on behalf of literacy. On December 3, she was featured at the United Nations during a conference focusing on how illiterate people can learn to read. She hopes to speak (wearing roller skates) to communities in every state over the next two years to persuade each community to conquer the problem on a local level and to dispel the myths that surround illiteracy.