

Newcastle East Public School 1966-1972

Reece Chambers

I was three years old, third child in a family of four siblings, when I was diagnosed with bilateral severe/profound hearing loss. I was fitted with my first hearing aid when I was four years of age. The hearing device resembled a small metallic transistor with a long cord with an ear mould on the end. My hearing aid was positioned in a pouch attached to a bra-like harness worn underneath my clothing. My family relocated from Woy Woy on the central coast to Newcastle to support me with a specialised deaf education at Newcastle East Public school. I went to Newcastle East Public School on the corner of Bolton and Church street from 1966 to 1972. I attended the opportunity deaf (OD) composite classes before going main stream in sixth grade in preparation for high school.

My infant years were full of wonderful and magical memories. Mrs Gee (nee Miss Bros) was my kindergarten and infant teacher for the first few years. She had the warm and loving presence of a mother. She was beautiful. I had eased into my first year of school as a happy child. My earliest memory of my infant classroom was of marching up steep stairs to the front entry of the school where my classroom was the first door on the left. The windows overlooked Bolton Street. There was a cloak room located at the back of the classroom where school bags and belongings were kept. Today I can still remember the excitement and joy I experienced in relation to that particular cloak room. It was kindergarten and the last week of school prior to the Christmas holidays. My small class went to gather our belongings from the cloak room to find a Christmas present waiting on the top of our school bags for each one of us! I was the first to enter the room. I could not contain my excitement. I proclaimed I'd seen Santa Claus and his sleigh of reindeers fly out of the window and down Bolton Street! For days I remember teachers beaming with delight and asking me about the Christmas present I received!

As the OD classes were small composite classes, there were only two other students my age. Vicky, Karen and I became close knit buddies known as the 'musketees' and were friends until we went our separate ways at high school. We were always seen together in the playground rehearsing role plays, playing netball or squabbling over our differences! I particularly enjoyed the social and sporting events during my primary school years. The school held sports carnivals once a year at an oval in Watts street. The three sport houses Bradman, Landy and Rose (I cannot remember if there was a fourth house) would march diligently in time behind the house banners to Watt Street with the hope of being judged the best marching house and thereby win points. Swimming carnivals were held at Newcastle Beach Bathes during summer. I loved and lived for sport days. I represented NEPS and competed against other primary schools in netball and softball. I felt like a star player one year when I was chosen to be the softball pitcher!

Newcastle East Public School held some memorable social events for me. Once a year a family fancy dress parade was held on a Saturday afternoon at the little sandstone hall on the top of the hill in Church Street, opposite the Christchurch Cathedral. I was fortunate to have a mother who was incredibly creative and imaginative. She could create costumes from all types of craft materials. One year my sister went dressed as a Bushells' box of tea leaves! It became known that 'the Bretag Family' always went home with prizes. Also held in this quaint little hall was the school's yearly concerts and speech days (presentation days).

When I was around 11 years old the Australian Commonwealth hearing centre provided me with two 'behind the ear' hearing aids. It came as a relief, particularly for my parents who were very glad to finally see me wearing new hearing aids in the home. I had disliked wearing my first hearing aid because it made me feel restricted and uncomfortable, especially while playing sport. Due to the expansion of OD students enrolling at NEPS around 1970, the school installed a demountable building which had two classrooms, into a corner of the concreted upper playground. Mr Hall was the school principal for the duration of my time at NEPS, until I transitioned into mainstream sixth class where Mr Mackenzie became the school principal and my class teacher. My education began to enter a significant phase of uncertainty as I was introduced to a different educational curriculum and a bigger classroom. There were mixed feelings as I adapted into the 'hearing' world of a mainstream classroom in preparation for secondary school at Cook's Hill Girls High School where I completed third form. I completed the rest of my schooling at North Rockhampton High School in 1976.

In 1978 I returned to Newcastle and completed a pre-apprenticeship course in painting and signwriting at Tiger's Hill Technical College, before relocating to Sydney in 1979 to take up an offer with Telecom's apprenticeship program as the first female painter and decorator. I married in 1984 and relocated to Darwin to share my life with my husband, Chris, who was in the defence force. Two children followed and soon my family moved to Sydney which has been home ever since.

During 2002 I completed a Diploma in Youth Work before pursuing a degree in Community Welfare at the University of Western Sydney. Now in my ninth year, I work for the Benevolent Society, Australia's oldest non-government charitable organisation, where I am passionate about assisting clients and their care needs by providing referrals to appropriate services.

Last year I had surgery for a cochlear implant for my left ear which could hear only 4% with the assistance of a hearing aid. At 54 years of age I am truly grateful to be able to experience fuller hearing with the cochlear implant, thanks to advanced hearing device technology and research. The fascinating and noisy world I am experiencing now would have been inconceivable to that small girl about to start OD classes at Newcastle East Public School.