

“I Decided Then and There to Become a Speech Therapist ...”

A BIRTHDAY CARD ON THE DOOR OF MY CLUTTERED OFFICE QUOTES a member of the National Stuttering Project who says, “When people ask me if I have stuttered all my life, I always tell them, ‘Not yet.’”

I grew up on a cattle and sheep ranch in the Rocky Mountains of northwestern Colorado about fifty miles north of Steamboat Springs with my parents, brother, and sister. Looking back, my family, relatives, and neighbors valued hard work, directness, honesty, and a sense of humor. And my mother, especially, placed a high premium on getting a good education. We were isolated: Our closest neighbors were a half-mile away. It was a 20-mile drive to a one-room store and 70 miles or nearly two hours to a town of 1500 with “real” stores. I was the only one in my grade, and for most of the five years, all of the other four to seven students were first cousins, and my Aunt Grace was the teacher.

I have stuttered ever since I can remember. My mother said that my brother, who is fifteen months older than I, “stuttered,” and I imitated everything he said and did. He quit, and I didn’t. Years later as a client during high school, I did ask my parents if there were any other relatives who stuttered, and was told there was no one else. No one, that is, until 1988 when I was talking with my Dad a few years before his death. He remarked, “Oh, I used to stutter.”



Ken on a dog-sledding trip near Fairbanks, Alaska, in 1990.

“Cowboy” Ken, on the right, holds hands with brother, David, in 1948.



Incredulously, I asked, “Why didn’t you ever mention that before?” “You never asked,” was his answer. Dad was a rancher; he was always wonderfully supportive of everything I tried to do but never completely understood the nuances of my speech pathology career.

There were no speech therapy services in northwestern Colorado in the late ‘40s and early ‘50s. That was true through the ‘60s as well. I do remember vaguely being taken to Denver as a young child and talking to a lady. This was my mother’s attempt to find out at the speech therapy department at the University of Denver what might be done about my stuttering. My parents were told, “Ignore

it, and it will go away.” They did; it didn’t. I stuttered all the way through elementary school and during junior high and high school in Steamboat Springs. And, in retrospect, I’d rate my severity level as moderate. I didn’t let it hold me back academically, but I have the common painful memories of stuttering (severely in *my* mind) trying to get a date, doing oral reports, and trying to tell jokes. But I could sing fluently, and, following in my grandpa and Dad’s footsteps, I often entertained people with cowboy songs.

Except for a strange two-month interlude, no one ever mentioned speech therapy to me during these years. That interlude was when I was in the sixth grade. My dad used to guide deer hunters from California, and one of the hunters was president of the school board in the little desert town of Maricopa, California. He invited me to

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come live with his family for a year and to see a speech therapist in their school. I went there in early October and stayed for about two months. Then, just before Christmas, I rode the train all the way back to Rawlins, Wyoming. I guess I got homesick after I got home, and, so, unfortunately, I did not return. The interesting thing about this period is that I saw the speech therapist only once, and I was completely fluent during the entire stay with my new family and my first experience in a “big” school. My stuttering returned during the 100-mile car trip from Rawlins to our ranch in Colorado.

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That led to my first therapy, an 8-week summer program in Laramie at the University of Wyoming Speech Clinic. I had lots of individual and group therapy experiences. But what I remember is that a therapist taught me some techniques called cancellation and pull-out, and for the first time, I felt like I had some control. I had something to do when I felt paralyzed by the stuttering. By the end of the program, I was completely fluent in all situations. I decided then and there to become a speech therapist and to solve the problem of stuttering. That was just before my senior year of high school.

I gradually relapsed, but I was undaunted about my career decision. I entered the speech pathology program at Colorado State University as a student and also began receiving individual therapy in the speech clinic there. I had a new graduate student clinician every quarter and attended a once-a-week stuttering group therapy session run by Bill Leith. Everybody used an approach developed by the late Charles Van Riper, no doubt the world’s leading authority on stuttering. There was lots of emphasis on developing a “thicker skin” or desensitization. Towards that end, once I was taken by my female student clinician and her assistant into a woman’s shop, and told to ask the clerk, “Does a woman wear the same size padded bra as regular bra?” while voluntarily faking my most severe stuttering. The clerk promptly called the police thinking that I was trying to distract her while the women shoplifted.

I also had lots of outside practice using the voluntary control techniques of cancellations and pull-outs. Overall, I did very well but just could not seem to maintain my gains with any solid

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consistency outside the therapy situation. In retrospect, I was, in some ways, the perfect client for students, because I always showed up and tried hard. At the same time, I probably enjoyed the attention of my attractive female student clinicians too much and, perhaps for that reason, was not particularly motivated to get finished.

All that changed about the first of April of my sophomore year. Bill Leith, who was chair of the department, called me in with my new graduate clinician (a quiet, no-nonsense kind of person). He instructed her as follows, “Every time Ken reverts to his real stuttering, just grab his arm and jerk him out of the situation.” Moreover, he not-too-subtly indicated to me that if I did not get control of my stuttering in the ensuing quarter, I might find myself out of the program.

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This hit me like a thunderbolt, but I didn’t know why at the time. Almost overnight, I felt under control almost all the time, and, in fact, often felt like I had no stuttering at all. But the interesting thing is that whenever I faked my old stuttering or just thought about being a stutterer, I would instantaneously go back to the old feeling and occurrence of stuttering. I discovered that I could play either role—the fluent speaker or the stutterer—whenever I wanted. More important to me at the time was the incredible amount of free-floating anxiety I was experiencing. I literally felt like I could jump out of my skin. It was two weeks—a period that seemed like two months—before I could get an appointment to talk with Bill. Funny. I don’t remember what was said when I finally did talk to him, but something settled in my mind and emotions. That was my major therapeutic turning point.

I always had a strong desire to experience another culture. And, being an idealist in those days, after my bachelor’s degree, I joined the Peace Corps and began training to go to Turkey. We studied Turkish 6 to 8 hours a day, and I was fluent (that is, with little or no stuttering) during the first several weeks. Then, as I became more skilled (or more “fluent” from a language-learning perspective), stuttering began to plague me again. This continued for the next two years. I was pretty good at foreign language learning, especially the sounds of the language, and became quite

proficient in Turkish. But I stuttered nearly all the time. The better I got, the more I wanted to speak as a native, and the more likely I was to stutter. But, like my early years, I never let it hold me back; I went ahead with conversations, and occasionally, was quite fluent. In the rare instance that my listener didn't notice that I didn't look much like a Turk, I could sometimes even pass for a native speaker. When I returned to the US and stopped speaking Turkish, I returned to my relatively fluent English-speaking self and have remained so for thirty years.

Stuttering is not even among my top ten problems now. For the most part, I don't stutter very much or at least very significantly. Often, I have absolutely no difficulty. And, unlike most of the other stutterers I have known, I generally don't have to concentrate on my speech at all. But, I still don't like making telephone calls, especially to people who may not be interested in talking to me. Occasionally, I get caught in a "doozie" of a stutter (for me) in such situations. And I did relapse to some extent a few years ago, due in part to the stress of standing in front of a camera while teaching a course on satellite and in part to dealing with my mother's debilitating emphysema and death. Another situation that generally evokes obvious stuttering—and almost always to my surprise—is when I talk to my siblings or cousins. Generally, when I find myself stuttering more than usual, I do some voluntary stuttering (Yes—stuttering on purpose!) on some words or in some situations that I would just as soon not say or enter. That seems to reduce the tendency to avoid or struggle and get me back on track.

A big part of my story as a stutterer is that I want to help others who stutter. I have discovered that one of the ways I can be



Ken St. Louis poses with equipment on a mobile research van in 1968.

Ken and Princess at home in West Virginia.



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most helpful is through my research activities. Unfortunately, however, there is very little money available for research in the area of stuttering, although public education, clinical treatment, and self-help advocacy seem to do well. Nevertheless, my dream is to create and contribute my time and talent to an international stuttering research institute that will address problems in stuttering which can only be answered by collaborative, international research. I now know that I won't solve the problem of stuttering, but for my remaining productive years, I would like to leave an active research institute as my legacy.

Author: Kenneth O. St. Louis.

Ken is the editor and major contributor to this book. He holds advanced degrees in speech-language pathology and has devoted his professional life to learning and sharing as much as he can about the problem of stuttering. Though they often seem remote to his daily work routine as a university professor, clinical supervisor, and researcher, he has never lost his love and respect for the outdoors, rural living, and the wonders of nature.

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