

## OUR SPEAKER:

# Willemien du Toit

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I was born into a highly successful family, as a severely dyslexic person with all sorts of learning disabilities as a result of complications at birth.

With the love and support of my family, I managed to complete my school education, but my dream was to become a lawyer. As you can imagine, I was constantly told by almost everyone: "You can NOT"

"Can NOT" was NEVER an option to me because every time I heard the words "you can-not", I would repeat 10 times in my mind "YES I CAN!".

Being a lawyer has always been my ultimate dream and at 36 years old it seemed too late to even try. My husband encouraged me to find a university that would be willing to accommodate me.

After a long struggle to get an interview with universities, I finally got an interview with the University of Buckingham (UK). I was unable to present the university with school records. (WHY?) My South African matric exam results were so low that I was too embarrassed to present them to anyone – in fact, I think I went as far as to destroy my results. Also, I did not have UK school records due to the fact that I attended school in South Africa. I was required to write an entry exam. The test revealed that I am severely dyslexic and was placed in the 2nd percentile of the UK population. My professor said to me: "You are one very disabled lady, go home and look after your child, you will never make it through school, let alone law school".

What made them accept you so that you could study law?

When I told my husband, Johann what the profession told me, he said: "if you believe what this professor is telling you, you are not the woman I thought you are. Go back to the University and ask them to at least give you a chance." I then went back to the university and asked them for a chance. They agreed to give me one term on the basis that if I fail (which they believed will happen) I am out and if I pass I can continue.



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Through sheer determination, I managed to complete my LLB Hons degree in law in only 2 years from the University of Buckingham, and a post-graduate diploma at Oxford University in the UK. I would transform "boring" reading material into exciting, colourful pictures. I studied law by creating images of cases and statutes. It was then that I realised I had a gift.

I would listen to my lectures, recorded them, and re-listen to everything. I would then convert everything I heard into stories and pictures and placed them in a rational format to make it easy to learn. Colour and the correct application of colour was vital to my learning process. What people do not realise is that a child/person with learning difficulties finds it exceptionally hard to read black on white – I changed the background of my papers to anything but white, and I wrote in different colours. If colour is applied or used incorrectly it has no effect whatsoever.

How did you manage to get through exams? The university allowed gave me a computer to type my exams. The computer picked up on word and sentence formation, spelling, and grammar which enabled me to "correct". If I had to write my exams instead of typing them, no one would have had a clue what I wrote because it would have looked like a scrabble. When I studied for my exams and course work, I listened to my recording or the lectures, re-typed it in colour, and created structured mind maps with pictures and bullet point stories. These pictures and mind maps became very popular amongst all my fellow students who bought the mind maps from me because it was "easy" to study with. It made the complex and heavy workload easy to understand and study from.

Now, after having two sons of my own go through school, and seeing what they had to learn, and the manner in which the material was taught, I was inspired to put my talent to good use. By connecting pictures with words and numbers and adding colour and an element of fun, I've endeavored to inject life into "boring" reading material in such a way that supplements the current school curriculum. Most importantly, it will also change the lives of those children like me who suffer from learning disabilities.

This is the very core of "YES I CAN!"

