



Stutterers speak up for top movie

SARAH MALIK

After going to see *The King's Speech*, Wendy Randall says she can relate to the monarch's speech impediment as she too suffers from stuttering.

Randall, president of NSW Speak Easy stuttering support group, has struggled with the speech impediment since she was a child.

Hollywood's drama depicting the inspirational true story of a stuttering King George VI who overcomes his handicap to address a nation in World War II has garnered wide interest, and not just for the acting.

The King's Speech, which follows the relationship between the King (Colin Firth) and his Australian speech therapist Lionel Logue (Geoffrey Rush) as they work to overcome his disability, has been lauded by those suffering from the impediment.

"[I remember] going to the shops to buy things for my mum when I was about 14 years old and being in tears the whole way there because I knew I would struggle when I got there to say what I wanted to say," Randall said.

"Going to the neighbour next door to ask for a lend of some butter – it took me so long to say and I was just mortified."

Randall said she understood the bullying the King went

through.

"People with stuttering still face a lot of misunderstanding in the public," she said.

"Mostly kids who would imitate how I was trying to speak – even into adulthood there are some adults that will still do that sort of thing."

Randall says it is really the anticipation of stuttering that was crushing for sufferers.

"It's that anticipation – what's going to happen and how embarrassed you're going to feel and how difficult it's going to be," she said.

Randall said completing a smooth speech course as well as joining the speak easy support group in 1996 has helped her deal with her stuttering.

"Being able to have the support of other people who really understand what it's like ... I found it really helpful – it's taken away the feeling of shame that you have around stuttering."

"You feel, 'I'm stupid, everyone else can talk why can't I?' [but] being with other adults who are lawyers and doctors that stutter you think, 'I'm not stupid'."

Dr Bernice Mathisen, a senior lecturer in speech pathology at the University of Newcastle says the movie accurately depicted the

struggle of stammerers. "People with stuttering still face a lot of misunderstanding in the public," she said. "Mostly kids who would imitate how I was trying to speak – even into adulthood there are some adults that will still do that sort of thing." Randall says it is really the anticipation of stuttering that was crushing for sufferers. "It's that anticipation – what's going to happen and how embarrassed you're going to feel and how difficult it's going to be," she said. Randall said completing a smooth speech course as well as joining the speak easy support group in 1996 has helped her deal with her stuttering. "Being able to have the support of other people who really understand what it's like ... I found it really helpful – it's taken away the feeling of shame that you have around stuttering." "You feel, 'I'm stupid, everyone else can talk why can't I?' [but] being with other adults who are lawyers and doctors that stutter you think, 'I'm not stupid'."

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"*The King's Speech* is a brilliant movie – it's really well acted and it does show the real impact for that man's life and not only his life but his wife and the ability to do his job," she said.

"Most people think those with fluency problems may have an intellectual impairment or maybe a psychiatric disorder."

Mathisen said the film raised awareness of the social impact of stuttering as sufferers avoided situations and words which posed problems.

"You see the bullying that his brother gave him all through his life and the way that his father looked down on him because he couldn't speak."

"There's lots of things about that movie that are quite true and the anxiety is quite crippling for that individual,

You feel, 'I'm



for a lot of people as they get older it gets worse because it impacts on their employment opportunities.”

There are different theories on what causes stuttering, with factors such as genetics, anxiety and also brain structure all coming into play.

“There are still lots of theories, but it seems that there is a difference in a stutterer’s brain,” Mathisen said.

But with treatment stuttering is completely manageable.

“In Australia the Stuttering research centre has done a lot of work... they’ve shown children can recover quite well; the significant component is the parent getting very much involved in the monitoring

and treatment of it.”

One treatment known as the Lidcombe program involves intervention as early as preschool for behaviour modification.

“It’s very much based on behaviour modification. A lot of it is to do with speech restructuring – you actually give them ways to control or manage it,” Mathisen said.

“Obviously you want to get people as early as possible; you don’t want them to go through life like the King did – untreated.”

Randall said that, unlike King George VI who struggled to speak in public, it was the private conversations that were often the most difficult.

“Unlike King George – a lot of people find giving a speech is the easiest thing to do as you can learn it by heart,” she said.

“You’ve got the audience in your hand, you don’t have to fight for what you want to say; that can be a lot easier than being at a party or something like that.”

Mathisen said that other techniques, such as smooth speech therapy which involved slowing down speech to improve fluency, could also be used.

“You can’t cure stuttering but you can manage it and make it have as minimal effect as you can.”



OVERCOMING CHALLENGES: Helena Bonham Carter, Colin Firth and Geoffrey Rush star in the Golden Globe-winning *The King’s Speech*.