

Profile Mary-Ruth Mendel

A conversation over lunch with a colleague inspired a passion to help others.

By Lucinda Schmidt

If Mary-Ruth Mendel had been more passionate about making money and less passionate about helping disadvantaged children to read, it's fair to say she could have made a very comfortable living as a speech pathologist in Sydney's eastern suburbs.

Instead, she has worked two jobs over the past 15 years to establish the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation (alnf.org).

"It's a passion I have," says Mendel, 53. "Without reading, children don't have a chance of connecting with their other talents – I'm a bit driven by that."

Just how driven is evidenced by the long hours, which she won't initially discuss. "I don't want to say the hours, you'll think I'm a fruitcake," she laughs.

But she adds that setting up the foundation has been "a mountain of work". Later, she calls back to clarify exactly how she has managed to work 7am until 11pm most days, plus weekends, as well as raising her twin sons and co-parenting another three children from her second marriage.

She divides her day into units of time to spend on various work tasks, although that plan is flexible. "I know it sounds weird but it's the key to doing it. You always have a sense at the end of the day of what has been achieved."

The foundation had its genesis 15 years ago, when Mendel was chatting at a lunch to another mum, Kim Kelly, about children's literacy. Mendel had been working as a speech pathologist since 1980, specialising in helping children with reading problems.

"Speech pathology is not just about talking," she explains. "We're speech and language pathologists – oral and written."

In 1994, Mendel created an extension to her private practice, The Sydney Literacy Centre, and television coverage of its success led to an avalanche of

phone calls – more than 3000 in one week – from worried parents and teachers wanting to help children who were struggling to read.

"I was so inspired by their passion and determination for their kids to have this key to learning called reading," says Mendel who, with Kelly, decided to establish a charitable foundation.

"We deliberately chose not to do it as a commercial operation," Mendel says. "We decided this was our way of supporting the community. We have very clear criteria of the foundation's

work – for those who are struggling the most and receiving the least."

It took five years for the foundation to receive tax-deductible status – the first literacy organisation to do so, according to Mendel. Another six years were spent writing courses to teach parents and teachers games and activities that underpin literacy. And all the while Mendel kept up her "day job" as a speech pathologist.

Now, she says, her foundation is in phase two, when it rolls out the programs focusing mainly on



indigenous and refugee children. A recent pilot program at three preschools in Kempsey, on NSW's mid north coast, has shown good results, and 300 high school students from refugee backgrounds have been mentored by university teaching students in Sydney.

"I get a great deal of pride when young people who have been feeling grumpy and disconnected and ashamed start to have a sense of moving forward and stepping up to create their own futures," Mendel says.

THE BIG QUESTIONS

Biggest break Meeting Kim [Kelly, co-founder of the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation]. We've put our noses to the grindstone and created something that now has a life all of its own.

Biggest achievement I was a finalist in the Australia Day local hero awards [for NSW in 2008]. I remember thinking "that's just the bee's knees".

Biggest regret Not being able to communicate earlier to more people the genuine need for [literacy] support. With support, a lot of young people do learn to read, they're not hopeless cases.

Best investment The people I love and those I work with. It's my personal investment in those people, it's all about people.

Worst investment People whom I misjudged; they weren't looking forward where we were going. From time to time there are sidetracks.

Attitude to money It's essential and it needs to be used wisely. It has become increasingly important to me as I've needed my money for other people's needs.

Personal philosophy By giving, you receive in handfuls back. But you need to be able to give practical skills to allow people to stand on their own two feet.