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**T**he recent news of a visually challenged girl from Chennai clearing the prestigious Civil Service examination, securing the 343rd rank in the final list of UPSC and topping the list of 30 disabled aspirants, inspires awe not only in commoners but also among fellow aspirants, many of whom find it difficult to clear the examination having all the resources in hand.

Beno Zephine is the superwoman who achieved the rare feat. Beno speaks to *edex* about her childhood, her college education, the challenges faced by her during these years and particularly during the preparation for the UPSC exams, and her ambition once she becomes an IAS officer.

Born into a middle-class family, Beno did her entire schooling at Little Flower School for the Blind and Deaf in Chennai. She has been a bright student since her school days, and was known among her teachers for her incredible capacity to observe things faster and more accurately than her classmates.

It was during her school days that Beno acquired the interest to serve society, the reason she decided to take a shot at the Indian Administrative Service. Beno says it was during her higher secondary days that she set her aim on becoming an IAS officer, and started to move towards the target.

Though she could not recollect any single event that served as her inspiration, Beno says her social awareness was the kindling that ignited the thought. She has always had a sense of indignation about people wasting resources and has sought to create awareness within her peer group. She remembers chiding her friends and relatives for using both water and tissue paper for their ablutions. Whereas in Western countries, people use tissue paper instead of water, in India people wash their hands with water and then use tissue paper to wipe it dry, using double the amount of resources, she points out. "Because I condemn such practices, my friends gave me the nickname 'Nattamai' (a local leader who issues diktats and verdicts based on popular appeal)," says Beno.

Beno, who completed her graduation in English Literature from Stella Maris College and then went on to do her post-graduation in the same subject from Loyola College, both in Chennai, says she has never felt impeded by her disability, as she has been blind since birth. Instead, she took it up as a challenge and decided to achieve something that would

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— Beno Zephine

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## CHALLENGED BY LIFE, VICTORIOUS BY GRIT

Socially aware Beno Zephine shines with the 343rd rank in UPSC's final list, exhorts the disabled to aim high and overcome hurdles



Beno's mother Mary Padmaja reads to her

be useful to society. She began preparing for the civil services from the final year of her under-graduation, and approached it more intensively from the first year of her postgraduation. She says her friends helped her a great deal during the entire course of her preparation, right from her college days till the day before the final results of the UPSC were announced.

She ascribes a huge part of her achievement to her parents, who encouraged her and helped her pursue her ambition.

She says her father, NL Charles, a government employee, used to take her to coaching centres and wait until the classes ended to take her back home. "He has been a real inspiration," says a proud Beno.

Her mother, GA Mary Padmaja, too played a significant part in her preparation for civil services. She used to read all the newspapers and study materials for her, says Beno, who was good at grasping the information quickly. Beno is also grateful to her mentors at various

coaching centres, especially for taking special classes for her and clearing her doubts to help her achieve her goal.

Beno, who began learning to use Braille right from LKG, says she prepared notes for Indian Polity using Braille, as it requires personal shortcuts to remember facts. If she is selected for IAS, which is likely considering her high rank, Beno is determined to work for the welfare of the poor and marginalised sections of society.

Speaking about conquering disability, Beno has some wise words that apply to everyone: "Disability lies not in physical attributes but only in thoughts; people with physical disability should overcome hurdles with mental toughness and achieve their goal."

Quoting Helen Keller: "I cannot do everything but I can do something, and because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do something that I can do", she parts saying people should discard disability from their minds.

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