

# The **NEWS** Minute

June 16, 2015

**Why Beno Zephine, first 100% visually challenged IFS officer is an inspiration**



You may not have heard of her, but 25 year-old NL Beno Zephine is a rockstar in her own right.

She made history last week as India's first fully visually impaired person to be working in the Indian Foreign Services.

**Her visual impairment has not come in the way of her education.**

Born and brought up in Chennai, Beno attended the well-known Little Flower Convent Higher Secondary school for the blind. In college, she went on to major in English, obtaining her degree from Stella Maris college and her post-graduation from Loyola college.

She's now doing her PhD in English from Bharathiyar University.

## **Was it easy cracking the Civil Services exam?**

Cracking the civil services exam is hard, but not impossible.

“It has to be tough. But it’s not an exam that can’t be cracked. With the right methodology and right kind of approach it is possible,” she tells The News Minute.

She lost out in her first attempt, but she didn't give up. The second time that she tried in 2013-14 she got through. “The first time, I studied really hard. The second time was easier,” she says.

## **A wall of support in the form of her family and friends**

“My father got me all the books. My mother used to read out to me,” she says, adding that her family has been everything to her. Her father Luke Anthony Charles, who worked in the railways and mother Mary Padmaja, a home maker, ensured that she got what she needed. She has a brother who lives with his wife in Canada.

She fondly recalls her school teachers too, as one of the factors that enabled her current achievement. “The whole dynamics worked in such a way that everyone believed in me. There was a positive force that drove me to succeed,” she says.

## **The necessity for more material to help the visually challenged**

“We don’t have many books that are accessible in audio or braille.”

Although literature as a whole is more easily available for visually-challenged people, books for civil service aspirants are hardly sufficient, she says.

She uses a special software that allows her to read from the screen. During preparation her mother would read out to her and she also prepared by scanning the required papers on to her computer, but it's hardly enough considering the huge amount of material that civil service aspirants read through, she says.

## **She's inspiring others to achieve their dream too**

Despite having cleared the Civil Services exam last year, it has taken a while for the summons to come from the External Ministry. Till then, Beno working in the State Bank of India made sure her experience and confidence benefitted others aspiring for a similar dream. She has been inspiring others through motivational speeches given in IAS academies.

"You have to understand yourself" and identify your potential, she says in one such similar speech.

## **Procedural changes have been made to include her into the system**

Though there have been many partially-blind candidates who have joined the civil services, Beno is the first completely visually challenged person to get through. "I was told that I was eligible for the IFS. But since this has not been given to 100 percent blind persons so far, they had to make some procedural changes," she says.

All set to leave for training, she hopes to get a chance to meet Tamil Nadu Chief Minister J Jayalithaa and PM Narendra Modi to express her gratitude in helping her out.