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TIMES CITY | EYE-OPENER

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GIRL WHO SAW TOMORROW

Last Week, TOI's Chennai Office Had An Interesting Visitor—**N.L. Beno Zephine**, Who Made Headlines When She Became The First 100% Visually Impaired Person To Enter Indian Foreign Service. During A Lively Interaction With Reporters, She Spoke About **Issues That Concern People With Disabilities**. This Special Page Is An Outcome Of The Discussion, And Seeks To Create Awareness Among Public

'I am blessed to be 100% visually impaired by birth'

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When N.L. Beno Zephine walks into a room, there is suddenly a spurt of energy. The first 100% visually impaired person to gain entry into the 68-year-old Indian Foreign Service, Beno neither dwells on her disability nor shies away from referring to it.

"I am blessed to be 100% visually impaired by birth," said the 35-year-old in an interaction with TOI. "If you have any vision, then you are worried about it deteriorating."

For Beno, her parents—Lalith Anthony Charles, a railway employee, and mother Mary Padmaja—have been her pillars of support. "My mother is an IPS maker apart from being a homemaker. My parents always treated me on a par with others, giving me a lot of confidence," she said. "My father takes me wherever I want to go. The moment I completed writing civil services, he told me to study something else. My mother reads to me for hours."

Working as a probationary officer with SBI was not without its challenges, but the work atmosphere was friendly and she was treated as an equal, she said. "At 4pm every day we used to plan where to go out and eat," said Beno, who feels visually impaired people shouldn't always expect sympathy from society.

For Beno, has not let her disability affect her joie de vivre. "There is a general assumption that visually impaired people are rude. For instance, in a bus, some demand for seats. I don't mind standing. For while I can't see, I don't have a problem with my leg," she said.

THE SELF-CONFESSED FOODIE, WHO STUDIES AT THE LAST MINUTE AND IS A LAST BENCHER, HAS STRONG VIEWS ON RESERVATION FOR THE DISABLED, WORLD AFFAIRS, DATING & MARRIAGE

"There needs to be understanding."

However, she does have dreams of a more accessible Chennai. "It is easy to move around in Chennai; in Delhi, it is easier. When we plan for roads, we can make them barrier-free, and buildings can be more accessible," said Beno.

The self-confessed foodie, who studies at the last minute and is a last bencher, has strong views on virtually everything from reservation for the disabled, world affairs, dating, and marriage. "Being visually impaired is not a problem. If you see good, you will be dated," she said with a smile.

On a more serious note, she added, "I'm not fascinated about people getting married and not thinking of their career. Both should co-exist."

Growing up, Beno never felt insecure as the exchanged notes and shared about boys with her friends. "Peer pressure to date is slowly increasing in Chennai, but it can mount only when people give in to it. After Stella Maris, I want to Loyola where I did my MA and civil services together. When others went to the movies, I sat and studied. It doesn't mean that I did not want to go. I just wanted to study," said Beno, who loves movies and can be spotted hanging out with friends at Amge Skywalk on weekends.

Beno is looking forward to her training and making an impact. For her time in Delhi, her parents have come up with a way to help her choose her clothes. "I have no idea of colour so my parents have named my clothes with labels in Braille," said Beno.

She hopes that success stories of visually impaired people are widely covered by the media. "A disabled person is expected to need to get recognised."

(With inputs from Dipan Chandra Babu)



IDE DE VIVRE: For Beno Zephine, her disability is not a hindrance to living her life to the fullest.

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TECH TO AID

From apps to smart canes, researchers across the world have come up with devices and applications to help the visually impaired. Here are a few

MINIGUIDE | An ultrasonic handheld device weighing about 50g, it detects obstacles. The aid vibrates to indicate the distance to objects—the faster the vibration rate, the nearer the object. It uses ultrasonic echo-location to detect objects up to 6m away.

HANDLING MONEY | Bill (Talking Barikote Identifier): Identifies currency in circulation. Once the currency is inserted into the device that can be carried in a pocket, a voice announces the denomination. It also indicates torn or defaced currencies. If one requires privacy, an earphone comes with it.

WAY FINDER ACCESS | With this mobile phone-based GPS navigation system, users can explore unfamiliar areas, identify and select locations using pre-recorded prompts and a screen reader. It allows people to save favourite destinations and select pedestrian routes. It also has a "Where am I?" feature if a person is lost. It provides information such as street crossings, favourite places within a vicinity, as well as speed, altitude and coordinates.

JAWS | (Web Access with Speech): A Windows supported screen reading programme. Globally, this is one of the most widely used software that reads out the text and displays from a computer screen. The speed of reading can be controlled according to the user's comfort and understanding. It is also being used in mobile phones now.

ID MATE QUEST | A talking bar code scanner that identifies an item or a product at a store. Using text-to-speech and digital voice recording technologies, it can also identify currency. Jointly developed by the Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi and Phoenix Medical Systems, Chennai. The device is fitted with a regular cane and sends out waves as the user walks and alerts the user if there is an obstacle. It costs only ₹3,000.



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