



“YES WE
TOO CAN”

MADHAVI LATHA



‘My advice to other disabled people would be, concentrate on things your disability doesn’t prevent you doing well, and don’t regret the things it interferes with. Don’t be disabled in spirit, as well as physically’. These were the words of the famous physicist Stephen Hawking who was a paraplegic. Finding what the disabled can do well and what gives them joy may take a while but when they do they have this need to bring this change in the lives of others like them. It’s like they want to bring them hope and draw them out to light from

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a possibly bleak existence for they know what that can be like.

The light and the wide smile on Madhavi’s face are the first things that touch you. The next thing is her feisty, steely determination, a spirit that swims faster and flies above her wheelchair bound frame. A former national paralympic swimming champion, working as an associate vice-president in an MNC bank, Founder General Secretary of Paralympic Swimming Association of Tamilnadu, Founder President of Wheelchair Basketball Federation of India, the brain behind the movement – ‘Yes We Too Can’ championing the cause of sports for the disabled, inclusivity and wheelchair basketball, a fledgling author - Madhavi Latha is much much more than what one sees.

The immeasurable sense of peace that we feel around water and a chance to escape the hyper-connected, over-stimulated state of modern day life in favor of its calming and restorative benefits are perhaps why Madhavi loves water. But being afflicted by polio at an early age and therefore being restricted to a wheelchair her family did not want to allow her anywhere near water. She laughs as she points out that her spinal cord is in the shape of the letter ‘S’. With such a scoliotic spine it was just a matter of time before it started to impinge on her lungs making it difficult for her to take in enough oxygen, resulting in muscle weakness. The doctors insisted on a life-threatening surgery. It was at this critical moment that a physiotherapist suggested Hydrotherapy; specific movements to be done while in water to exercise her muscles. Madhavi decided to follow this advice, which she now reckons was the turning-point of her life.

Much to her joy, she realised that the buoyancy of water made her feel weightless and enabled her to use the weak muscles of her legs underwater. It was a euphoric moment for her. The newfound freedom at the age of 37 opened up

possibilities for her. She taught herself all the styles of swimming as the regular coaches were challenged when it came to her. There were no prescribed methodologies or guidance on how to teach someone like her. It was at this time that the bank that she was working for conducted a corporate Olympiad where she was the only disabled person to participate in a swimming competition. She completed 100m freestyle, even as the organizers worried for her safety and much to the astonishment of the onlookers. This spurred her to train her eyes on a more level playing field. She got in touch with the Paralympic Swimming Federation of India from where a coach came to meet her. The awakened spirit in her set its sights really high. Para National Swimming Championships followed in which she went on to win 3 gold medals.

Madhavi could have sat back, satisfied, resting on the laurels of winning the Nationals after crossing the age of 30, but the grit and the spirit that one can only be defined as those of a true champion wouldn't let her. The exhilaration she felt at overcoming the odds and of managing what is perceived as impossible needed to be felt by others like her. She believed that this was one way to help the differently-abled to fit in, along with being rehabilitative. It could be the beginning of inclusivity that many only speak of, enabling them to come out of their shells. Their self-esteem would be boosted and they would start believing that they too are a valuable part of the society.

With the objective of wanting to open the world of others disabled like her she started a movement called 'Yes We Too Can' to bolster the benefits of sports for the disabled. She took it upon herself to visit schools and government agencies, armed with her medical records as proof, to give talks and convey the message that if she could find the benefits and the joy, others too could, especially if they started earlier. It was very important for her that she help dispel the fear and the ignorance about

the disabled and swimming and propagate the reality that it is life-changing for them.

Not everybody was forthcoming as they still had reservations about allowing a disabled into a pool. Nobody wanted the risk of the possible dangerous consequences. Her persistence paid off for her unrelenting efforts led to the formation of the Paralympic Swimming Association of Tamilnadu. Coaches Sensitization Seminars were conducted with help from Orthopedics, and physiotherapists to enhance abilities to coach. What started with just 4 paralympic swimmers now boasts of 300 members. She realised the change in mindset needs to come at a national level for which people had to see for themselves. With the help of many like the SDAT Aquatics Complex, the IIT, Madras and her bank colleagues, the 12th Para National Swimming Competition was organised in which 500 participants with disabilities ranging from blindness to amputees participated. This event opened the eyes and mind of many, and paved way to build of confidence that yes, swimming is not just therapeutic but healing too.

UK-based NGO Choice International,

seeing her efforts, wanted to partner with her to promote wheelchair basketball in India and thereby was born the Wheelchair Basketball Federation of India (WBFI) in 2014. Madhavi is the founder President of WBFI which aims to put a team from India at the global arena of the Wheelchair Basketball Championships.

Madhavi speaks and advocates inclusivity. Including people with disabilities in everyday activities and encouraging them to have roles similar to their peers who do not have disability is what inclusivity is about. The prerequisite for achieving inclusion is the involvement of inputs from people with disabilities along with disability-focused and independent organisations and government agencies in the programme or structural design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.

Madhavi believes that inclusivity and changes are coming but not at the holistic pace that a developing nation like ours should be having. The attitude of the society is much more handicapping than the physical limitations that flow from the actual impairment. People sympathise and rush to help but she hopes they can instead create

a world for them where they can be independent without having to face the embarrassment of constantly asking for help. Many places still think building a ramp, that too a steep impractical one would do. Not a lot of thought goes into it. The public restrooms are so small that a wheelchair cannot hope to enter. The society's inability to create a conducive environment where the disabled are not made aware of their condition each and every moment is more crippling. Madhavi recalls an event where she was to go on to stage but the announcer announced that 'since she is unable to come up on to the stage, we will go down and do the needful', when it should have been 'since the stage is not wheelchair-friendly we will go down and do the needful.' The shift has to come in the minds and the thought processes of people she says.

Nothing has ever stopped her. She is independent; used to ride a two-wheeler, now a four-wheeler. She takes it upon herself to go everywhere to create awareness. She attends debates, conducts workshops to inspire more people to accept their disability and use sports as a medium to find their joy. An inclusive education is at the basis of an inclusive society. To make India better and positive for the largest minority, i.e. for millions of persons with disabilities, we ought to encourage mediation, dialogues and action about measures required to boost equal opportunities. Her efforts are ongoing in the form of writing to the Sports Ministry, Education Ministry and Sports Universities to include sports for the disabled in the curriculum so that inclusivity may come naturally at a later stage. All her time is spent on trying to bring a change, make a difference, and create opportunities for the betterment of the lives of the differently-abled. Madhavi is in the process of publishing her autobiography so that it may inspire others like her to believe and hope that a better tomorrow awaits them. One can only look at her life and wonder what excuse does an abled-person has to not set goals and find ways to achieve them.

