

FAITH IN THE TIME OF FAILURE

Challenges & unfavourable circumstances did not stop Deepa Aathreya, founder and CEO of School of Success, from changing children's lives



Children at a recent event conducted by School of Success • Debadatta Mallick

A diversities have always plagued my life. When I was young, I was fat-shamed — my friends named me 'baby elephant', while at home, my brothers called me 'chimpanzee'. I don't remember a time when someone called me by my original name. All the shaming and my introverted nature only made my situation worse. But thanks to my class 8 teacher Pramila Louis, things started to look up. One day, she announced my name and asked me to read aloud a chapter, in front of the whole class. I was excited and gave it my best shot. I vividly recall her comment: "Deepa you'll be a great orator someday...you are extremely talented and your English diction is amazing." That was the first compliment I ever received. In many ways, that incident paved way for me to fight and stand up for myself.

Soon after, I was nominated as a candidate in my school's student election. Despite my inhibitions, I went from class-to-class and campaigned. I was one among the students who were labelled 'average'. That was my campaign's focus — to stand up for people like me, who were underrepresented and to make the school a better place. I won, came out of my shell and realised my potential.

I have a degree in BA Economics. While pursuing MBA, I met my husband, Arvind. But getting married to him came with a set of challenges. There were differences between our families. On the last day of college, an autorickshaw hit me. I was unconscious for a few days and when I woke up, the first name I uttered was Arvind's.

After the incident, my family agreed to the marriage.

In 2001, when I gave birth to my first child, I quit my job. My husband was the only breadwinner. Serendipitously, I received a call from my former manager. "You are good with children. Why don't you plan a party for my baby?" she asked. I agreed. I planned a 'go-green' themed party and it was a huge success. I began receiving requests to plan more parties and there was no looking back.

I opened a summer campum-after-school facility for children where we taught documentary and short-filmmaking, communication skills, and groomed children to fight their inhibitions. My husband joined my venture too. However, we got into the wrong partnership and

were cheated. The venture crumbled and we were bankrupt.

Around this time, I was expecting my second child. We moved to Bengaluru, hoping for better prospects. My husband was on a frantic job hunt. There were times we went to bed on an empty stomach. We had just ₹300 rupees in our account. Amid this, I had to get a caesarean delivery. But miraculously, we were able to arrange the money and I gave birth to a beautiful baby girl.

We moved to Chennai, Arvind got another job. But our ordeals never seemed to end. I needed money to take care of my children. Money was still an issue. So I decided

to sell balloons. I had ₹120, I bought a packet of 80 balloons for ₹100, sold each for ₹10 and earned ₹800. I was elated. I bought dal, milk and diapers.

This allowed me to make money. I used to go to the beach every day and sell balloons. I shared my story with regular customers. I also started hosting English story-telling sessions by the beach, outside the

Odyssey store and Sangeetha hotel in Adyar. The number of people who bought balloons increased. When people ask me how my marriage survived despite these challenges, I tell them:

"You can't blame your husband during the tough times and take credit during the good times. Every couple should be able to solve problems together."

Life took a turn when Dr Premalatha, the correspondent of Mahatma School Madurai, got in touch with me and said that she wanted to meet me. She had heard my story. She travelled to Chennai and asked me to conduct a story-telling session for her school's children. Then, I launched a leadership and teacher training programme. By 2011, we were

debt-free. But tragedy struck us again. When we were heading back to Chennai from Bengaluru, a truck rammed into our car. I was stuck inside, diesel was spurting out of the car, my husband was crying for help in the middle of nowhere. I said two prayers.

One, to take me back home for one last time to say goodbye to my children and the second, to let me live. "God if you keep me alive, I'll transform a million lives" I prayed. I gave my everything to stay conscious and alive. We were rescued. My left hand's nerves were damaged and the doctors told me that I couldn't use it anymore. But I defied it, I got better. The accident also affected my memory. Now I am fine.

I have worked with more than three lakh students from over 2,500 schools. Now I see things in a positive light. The world is full of beautiful people, I operate with that faith. Every failure is an opportunity to grow. Children are my lifeline now. One of our programmes, 'Be the Change' is a movement run by children, for children. They take up different social causes and work on projects, once every month. I believe that we have to look for goodness in every child. Let the child be and they will bloom. Take one step at a time, because each day is a blessing.

(As told to Rinreichui Kashung)

“Values and life lessons cannot be taught to children in a classroom, they will learn only when they come in contact with real-life scenarios

—Deepa Aathreya



Photo: R Satish Babu