

Beno Zephine, Under Secretary, Ministry of External Affairs
Yashasvini Rajeshwar, Deputy Editor, Success & ABILITY

YR

Good afternoon and thank you so much for joining us here today. We have with us Beno Zephine, an Indian diplomat who has been serving as an IFS officer since 2014. She is the first 100% visually challenged officer in the IFS. She was born and brought up in Chennai and has degrees from both Stella Maris College as well as Loyola College, and we are very, very glad to be speaking to her about her journey thus far. Thank you so much for joining us.

BZ:

Thank you, Yashasvini, again. It is very nice to see you. My association with the Ability Foundation dates back to I think 2008 when I first approached the Foundation for a conference that I was invited to go so after that we have been in constant touch and I think a couple of times I have met the members of Ability Foundation in my school Little Flower Convent also right from Jayshree Ma'am, it's like a family for me so I'm very happy to be a part of this session today.

YR

Thank you so much. We're so glad to hear it. It's so lovely having you back with Success & ABILITY. We have a few questions for you and I'll get started right away.

As the first blind IFS officer, why did you choose diplomacy? Who were your role models? Or were you just forging ahead to defy stereotypes?

BZ:

Actually, when I cleared the civil services, I got into the IFS and it was a great opportunity for me. When I got allotted the IFS, I was just aware of the fact that I am privileged to be the country's first 100% visually challenged woman IFS Officer. I was also aware of my responsibilities and duties. And I know that there are both challenges and opportunities which lie ahead in front of me. But I think, you know, I feel that the opportunity comes and you have to take it up. So it's something that I'm liking every day and increasingly I have developed a passion towards this. So I'm very happy to be a part of the Indian Foreign Service.

YR:

Fantastic. Now we'll backtrack a little bit to your years as a student. I know that visually impaired students traditionally have been asked to study the Arts; did you study the arts or the sciences? What were the kind of stumbling blocks that you overcame during your education?

BZ:

Actually, I graduated from Stella Maris College with the Bachelor of Arts degree in English Literature. I post graduated from Loyola in 2013 with again a Masters degree in English Literature. Right from my schooling, as far as my education is concerned, my teachers were very supportive and used to encourage me. My principals at the school used to always encourage me and whatever competitions one could come across were referred to. I used to take part in those competitions, especially those related to oration so after that, during my

college both at Stella Maris and Loyola, I got similar opportunities to represent my college in various competitions as well as to participate in the intra-college events as well. It sort of gave me confidence, apart from the regular classes that I took in both the colleges, so I'm extremely thankful to my school and my colleges at this moment.

But you know, the stumbling blocks as you mentioned, - I'm a person who doesn't look at anything as a challenge. For me, there were not many books in braille. So I had to take my mother's help to read the books for me or I have my JAWS software to read. So, apart from that, I think I had a very friendly atmosphere in both my educational institutions, in terms of my college as well as at my school. That way I was very comfortable and the stumbling blocks as such [were] the lack of materials in Braille. I could remember that to have been the biggest block, but nevertheless having the I could get over it. I took the help of my mother and I took the help of the software to read further. That way, I think my educational life has been so great with both the help of my parents and the support of the technical aids as well as because of the huge support and guidance extended both by my school and my colleges.

YR:

Right. And what you're saying is so important, that you know, teachers and the educational environment play such a large part in how one experiences their time [in educational institutions] but you also spoke about the books, which leads me to my next question. What are your ideas, thoughts and suggestions to create a more accessible world, however specific or general those suggestions might be?

BZ:

So I'm sure the government is doing a lot in this space. And there are so many NGOs also involved in this task and I know that many books are required for the preparation of civil services. They're also getting shaped in terms of [being published in] Braille, etc.

So I think one can recognise the books that are required for say Civil Services Preparation or either for banking or for any other professional aspect... You know, books that would be required to study for civil services, CBSE, NCERT books as well as these books required to complete your college studies successfully... Visually challenged students may opt for English Literature; many opt for history, law, such books...

Common books can be translated or can be converted into accessible formats and kept in libraries so that everybody gets access to the same. I think in terms of digital literacy, that is very important. That needs to be done with immediate attention to the same.

YR

My last question is about leadership lessons that you keep going back to from whichever point in your life.[Is there] something that teachers have said or something that you learnt during your time at the service?

BZ:

As far as I'm concerned, I'm a person who believes that it's good to learn certain good qualities, certain efficient aspects that you can learn from others whomsoever [they may be]; not just from leaders but from everybody that you come across in your day-to-day life.

But I'm someone who believes that your own creativity and originality is something that could define you in your life. I think a blend of your own creativity, your own self, and the ability to combine whatever you learn from others would make for good leadership quality, now and forever.

YR

Fantastic. Thank you so much for your time with us this afternoon, Beno. I know you've been having a fair few busy weeks, but we really appreciate it. It's been a pleasure speaking with you.

BZ:

Thank you so much for this opportunity. It was great talking to you and thank you so much for having decided to connect with me. Thank you.

YR

Thank you and have a great evening.