

## Endless potentials

To look at Aishwarya's story as a story about overcoming disability would be the equivalent of saying the Taj Mahal was a white building. Would that be true? Of course. Would that be the entire truth? Nowhere near it.

Before her 15<sup>th</sup> birthday, Aishwarya had witnessed both her parents suffer from and succumb to cancer. With her stepmother's support, she finished high school and decided to pursue mass communications. The dream was to become a documentary filmmaker.

The story would not be that simple.

In 2008, in her third year of college, Aishwarya started experiencing terrible headaches and nausea. A few months later, she was diagnosed with a brain tumour and soon, lost all her senses and memory. She was heading for paralysis. Doctors gave her three months to live. "If I am only going to live for three months, I will do my best," she decided.

Six months after her diagnosis, Aishwarya had recovered all her senses but one. She was now completely blind. But as Aishwarya saw it, she was *only* blind. She discovered screen readers and realised she could still access computers. She began exploring content freelancing and started applying for jobs. "Back then, no one wanted to employ a blind girl," she recalls. When she went to LV Prasad Eye Institute for rehabilitation, the team saw the fire burning in her belly and invited Aishwarya to work with the helpline for persons with visual impairment in 2013. Soon, she wanted to do more and began making audio movies. Bolstered by the confidence from the audio movies, Aishwarya began making awareness videos and other communication material, and rekindled her passion for art. Today she has a growing portfolio of tactile art. Yet, creating this portfolio brought to light another challenge. "How do I know what grey to use for the monsoon sky and what to use for an elephant?" She may have lost her sight but that was no reason to compromise on her art. The question, combined with her dictum of being the solution, led to the next turn in her road.

Aishwarya and an acquaintance from LV Prasad developed Spacefelt, an application that allows people with visual impairment to label anything to their requirements. Working with the firm full time now, Aishwarya is excited by the possibilities of assistive tech. Never one to stick to one tune, she wants to host talk shows that raise awareness and advocate for the use of alternate text on digital platforms. She wants to grow Hyderabad Baingans, a community she launched in December 2022 to nurture social spaces for people with vision impairment.

Aishwarya's story could very easily have been one of loss – a child who lost both her parents, her eyesight, and many of her dreams. Instead, she rewrote her script, and today, her story is one of potential. The horizons seem endless for this young leader.