

Famous Visually Impaired People

Caroline Casey

Caroline Casey is a visually impaired lady who rode across India on an elephant. She found out she was blind when she was 17.

Caroline was born almost blind with a rare hereditary condition; she couldn't see anything more than two - three feet away. Glasses didn't make a lot of difference. Caroline says, "it's like wearing glasses with vaseline smeared on".

In 1996\97 she completed a Masters in Business in Organisational Human Performance and Design for which she got first class honours and an award by the Irish Management Institute. Then she got a job with Accenture Management Consultants.

Caroline had read a book called "Travels on my Elephant" by Mark Shand - which is about a journey across north-east India on an elephant. When she was feeling sad about working long hours and her eye-sight getting worse she decided that she should do something positive with her life. Over the next ten months she set-up a charity and organised her own elephant journey.

In June 2000 Caroline set up the Aisling charity (Aisling means 'dream' in Irish) which fundraises for the National Council for the Blind, Sight Savers International and Protection for Asian Elephant. Caroline wanted to open people's minds by doing the Indian Challenge. Her wish for this was to "create an adventure and inspire people into thinking of disability in a positive way."

The journey was 1,000 km long across southern India. When she got to India and had met Bhadra - her elephant, she went to do some training with an Indian mahout (elephant handler) called Jayan. She only had three months to train even though it would normally take up to eighteen months to train properly. The other mahout Vikram did not know why Caroline wanted to learn about living and working with elephants. Caroline had to prove to them that she wanted to learn their skills. She had to wear bandages on her feet to stop her from getting rope burn.

Her elephant's name was Bhadra. She travelled 8 hours a day. Nothing would stop her. The safest place to sleep was the top of a battered transit van.

Meals consisted of rice, dhal(split seeds), chapattis(bread) and lots of vegetables, watermelon, mangoes and bananas.

There was always the danger of male elephants mating with Bhadra. Fortunately whenever a herd of wild elephants were near Bhadra would lift her trunk, sniff the air and make a rumbling sound in her belly. Then everybody would run and get pots and pans and make noise to frighten the elephants away and if that did not work then they would set off an elephant bomb, which was like a small loud firework that startles elephants. Surprisingly, Bhadra would barely move when the bomb went off. It was as if she knew

that Caroline was trying to protect her. Sometimes she would pass a herd of wild elephants or through villages of screaming children armed with bananas!

At the end of March after two months on the road, Caroline spent three days at the Shankara Eye Hospital, which serves 14.5 million people. Fifteen surgeons work there for Sight Savers International and carry out hundreds of cataract operations every day. A fifteen-minute operation can restore sight to a blind person.

Caroline raised £250,000 for the Aisling Project by doing her trip through India. She said that she hopes her trip proves to everyone, both blind and able-bodied, that anything is possible if you really want it enough.

Caroline plans in the future to:

- 1: Set up "For Tara"- an organisation.
- 2: To participate in " Eighty ways around the world" in 2003.
- 3: She is writing a book about her Indian experience.
- 4: To continue with the work of the Aisling Project.
- 5: She plans to visit schools in the autumn
- 6: Give a talk at an employment conference

In recognition of her achievements she has been named one of the RADAR (Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation) UK's People of the year 2001.

Caroline is visually impaired to the degree that she is registered legally blind and is campaigning to promote disability in a positive way. Drawing on the experiences of her Indian Challenge, Caroline will introduce school students to the concept that if someone believes in something enough, they can do it.

The core message will be to think about disability positively, to embrace all around us with a disability and to know that we all can reach our fullest potential and fulfil our personal dreams, no matter what they are.

"I'm making a point publicly. People need to judge people, their ability to undertake a role, not to judge their disability and to know the real difference that someone with a disability can make in society and in the workforce. Understanding this begins at a young age" It's important to be open to diversity and differences and to not judge a book by its cover. Someone with a disability can do the same job as us, they just might do it in a different way. Take responsibility for your own life, get out there and make a difference. Life isn't always easy and sometimes if you fail, you have to get up and try again. "I'm determined to share with Ireland the real difference that people with a disability can make in society and in the workforce. I'm not unique. There are hundreds of people with a disability who have so much to offer." Caroline Comments

Helen Keller

Helen Keller was born in Tuscumbia, Alabama 27th June 1880. When she was two years old Helen became very ill. The illness left Helen blind and deaf.

As Helen grew older she learned how to see with her hands by feeling the object she was holding. To listen to people talk she put her fingers up to their lips and felt their lips move and their throats vibrate. Then she tried to copy the movements of their lips. When nobody could understand her she kicked, hit screamed and had a temper tantrum.

As Helen grew older her father wanted someone to teach Helen how to read, write and talk. He asked his friend Dr Alexander Graham Bell for some advice. Dr Bell told him to get in touch with Michael Anagnos. Michael found someone to teach Helen. Her name was Annie Sullivan

Annie Sullivan

When Annie arrived at the Kellers house she realised her first job was to tame Helen, who was more like a wild animal than a little girl. Annie took Helen to live with her in a house at the bottom of the Kellers garden. Helen and Annie became great friends.

Unlike Helen Annie did not grow up with her parents. They had fled from Ireland during the great famine. When Annie was five she began to suffer from an eye disease, trachoma, which gradually made her eyesight worse.

When Annie was eight her mother died and after living with relatives she was sent to live in the poor house with 900 other people. When she heard about Perkins Institution for the blind she wanted to go there more than anything in the world. In 1880 at the age of 14, she got her chance to go to Perkins Institution for the blind. The other girls laughed at her because they thought she was poor, ignorant and ill-mannered, but she showed that she had a mind of her own. She surprised the other girls by arguing with the teachers and the school's director Mr Anagnos. She had two operations to help her sight which helped her to read. Annie left school when she was twenty.

After school Helen went to Radcliffe College and she graduated in 1904. Helen began writing about blindness for magazines and soon people were writing to her for information about the blind and their needs. She gave lectures and soon she was giving lectures all over the USA with Annie. In 1921, the American Foundation for the Blind was set up and Helen gave lectures to raise money for it. In 1932 she lectured all over Europe.

Polly

On one of her trips she met Polly who helped Annie and Helen with their lectures and became a good friend. In 1936 Annie died, Helen thought her heart would break but she carried on working. Then a year later Helen and Polly went on their greatest trip to

Japan and helped to change people minds about disabilities. During the Second World War she gave hope to soldiers that were blinded.

Helen's Last Gift

In 1957 Helen and Polly were too old to go travelling anymore so Helen wrote a book about Annie, titled "Teacher". Polly died in 1960 and Helen too became very weak and died in 1968, just before her eighty-eighth birthday. Her life gave hope and courage to disabled people everywhere.