

The Girl Who Just Won't Give Up

Aisha Chaudhary, 18, has not let a respiratory disorder stop her from becoming all that she can be

By SHILPA KAPPUR VASUDEVAN

Aisha has motivated people with her talks at events in companies such as McKinsey and BoehringerIngelheim

Like most 18-year-olds, Aisha Chaudhary loves to watch TV, listen to Bollywood songs, draw, paint, swim, play with her dogs Kobe and Rolo. But unlike all teens, every breath for Aisha is a struggle and every infection carries the possibility of being fatal. Despite this, she has been giving inspirational talks at various platforms since she was 15.

A student at Delhi's American School, Aisha suffers from pulmonary fibrosis, a respiratory disease that leads to scarring of the lungs, thereby making breathing difficult. She was diagnosed with the ailment when she was less than six months old. Her lung capacity being only just under 20 per cent, Aisha then underwent a bone marrow transplant. The doctors had told her parents that the baby would not live for over a year. But Aisha proved them wrong.

As a child it was difficult for Aisha to cope with the condition as "I was really short, couldn't run as much as I had wanted to. I used to leave school early and feel isolated at times. I kept myself busy with my family and used to spend a lot of time with my brother Ishaan." As precautions, she has to use oxygen_masks and wheelchairs most of the time. But that hasn't stopped her from living. A fighter since birth, Aisha, who is voluntarily taking one more year at high school, also learns make-up via Skype at the Fat Mu Academy School in Mumbai.

Aisha remembers some of the difficult moments she had and how she found happiness in those tough times. "Once I had to undergo several medical tests when a sleep study was done on me. A lot of wires were strapped to my body and face. I refused to let the illness bother me and whiled away time observing the physician who was in charge of monitoring me. His snoring left me sleepless and the results were bad," she says.

Another time, when she was in Maldives, she decided to go snorkeling, which is difficult to do for someone with a condition like hers. "Though I dipped my head in the water for just a second, the view of beautiful array of fish was literally breathtaking," she laughs at her own pun.

The gritty teenager believes that it is important to create happy memories to wipe out the sad ones. "Death is the ultimate truth, but I want to be happy and I choose to have a happy pulmonary fibrosis," she says. Aisha has also been sharing her positivity through talks to help others to find strength within.

Her first speech was at an INK event held in Chennai in 2011. She spoke at another INK conference in Kochi last October and at Ted X-Pune. She has also spoken at events in companies such as McKinsey, BoehringerIngelheim and the Shift Conference.

The budding motivational speaker is quick to share how she prepares her speeches. "To start out with, I would just make pages and pages of notes with any ideas that pop into my head about what I want to say. For example, the theme of INK Conference2013 was 'All that Matters'. So I wrote down anything that came to mind when I asked myself the question, "At the end of the day, what matters to me most in life?" To get more ideas, I asked my friends the same question. Next I went quote hunting on the Internet. I always do this to get inspired. If short, simple quotes are included in my presentation, I find that people are able to connect better. I find lots of pictures to help tell my story. Then go back to my notes and start to tighten it up into a proper speech," she says. "I often go to my dad for a bit of help and advice, as he gives and writes a lot of public speeches. "Aisha's father Niren Chaudhary is the president, South Asia operations, of YUM brand, while her mother Aditi is a mental healthcare worker.

Aisha loves spending time with her dogs—a Labrador and a pug. "Though humans and animals exhibit similar qualities, there are a lot of things that we humans fail to enjoy that our best friends (dogs) do like a little walk, a small treat, etc." she says. Besides her dogs it's her love for life that keeps her going, "Little things make me happy like meeting someone I hadn't seen in a long time or spending time with my mother," she beams. Her art work can be viewed at aishasart.weebly.com.



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