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PLUCKY



COURAGEOUS Kajal Dhawan, this year's recipient of the 15th NCPEDP-Shell Helen Keller Awards.

A journey of true grit and quiet determination

My mother spent hours making me sit in front of the mirror, learn lip-reading and producing sounds. All my family members learned sign language to guide me and help in my studies and this was the biggest help for me," recalls Kajal Dhawan, executive officer at International Division, Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), as she goes down memory lane with a sense of pride. Elated with the news of being honoured with the 15th National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People (NCPEDP)-Shell Helen Keller Awards this year, Kajal's happiness is contagious.

"Initially, my being hearing impaired came as a big shock to my family, but they resolved to treat me as a normal child. I was put in a school for deaf for the first one year but later my parents decided to put me in regular schools," recounts Kajal who later graduated from Jesus and Mary College.

Regaling *Metrolife* with stories from her school days, Kajal says, "Since my parents put me in regular schools, I had to

struggle a lot to cope up with the school and homework. Some children used to make fun of me, but slowly they became sensitive to my problem and helped me in taking notes."

Given her army background, the 35-years-old Kajal spent the better part of her life travelling around the country, changing schools and making friends wherever she went. "I could pass all my courses with a distinction because my parents used to first study all the subjects and prepare notes for me to understand and remember them."

A keen sports enthusiast, she says that as sports secretary of Delhi Foundation of Deaf Women (DFDW), she organises activities for the physically challenged and motivates her colleagues at work to take up some sport and play regularly. And it is a measure of her passion for sports that she is the only woman member of CII cricket and football teams.

Anxious about the concerns wracking people with disabilities in the national capital,

Kajal feels that while Delhi does have in place some basic infrastructure and amenities for the physically challenged but a lot more needs to be done, and expeditiously.

Though Government policies are good but their proper implementation is sorely inadequate and feeble, lending credence to the impression that it is mere lip service. Recounting her experience, Kajal says, "All too often Government offices and indeed many able-bodied people tend to look down upon the physically challenged. We are all born equal then why this discrimination? Our Constitution grants us equal rights but some people do not let us get our rightful place in society. We have to fight for our rights, be it for getting seat reservations or jobs earmarked for the handicapped etc."

But not one to quit in her fight for the rights of the differently abled, she signs off with an Abraham Lincoln quote: "The best way to predict future is to create it." And Kajal is determined to do that! **Isha Arora**