

Beyond the ordinary

Three women who dared to challenge their circumstances and create extraordinary lives for themselves... Read their inspiring stories By Roma Sur

Good things often come in small packages...

Ashwini Doshi is a charming 27-year-old who works for consultancy firm Deloitte and Touche in bustling New York City. She lives by herself in a Manhattan apartment and drives her own car. Nothing unusual about that, until you find out that Ashwini Doshi stands only three-and-a-half feet tall!

Ashwini was born normal, but when she was a year old, it became apparent that her growth was stunted. She was soon diagnosed with a medical condition known as achondroplasia, which, in layman's terms is "short-statured". She was the sole member of her family with this rare condition. After exploring several treatment options in India, her parents, then in Mumbai, sent X-rays of her skeletal frame to specialists in the US: They felt that the only med-

ical solution was to put bone extensions in all her extremities. This would entail extensive surgery, and leave her bedridden for long periods of time. Even after that, there would have been no guarantee: Her growth would have been nominal, at best. Ashwini's parents decided against the surgery.

Ashwini was raised in an "extraordinarily normal" environment – in a middle-class household of 19 members. Never once was she made aware of her physical difference with her siblings. If anything, she felt empowered by her condition. 'I did everything everyone did, only in a different way,' says Ashwini. She attended the finest schools and colleges in Mumbai, where her teachers and professors were supportive and protective of her. In her biology and chemistry lab classes, Ash-

wini would do the same practical experiments that the others did, but standing on step stools! Moreover, Ashwini excelled at everything she tried. She was, quite simply, a sharp mind inside a little body.

Cast in her "special" mould, Ashwini remained dissatisfied with her achievements. She may have been small-statured, but her dreams loomed larger than life. She applied to six top-notch universities in the US and was accepted by almost all of them. She ended up choosing Stanford University's Management Science and Engineering programme. In 2004, she picked up bag and baggage and left behind her the cushioned environment of her home to relocate to the US. She was the first member of her family to move overseas.

Ashwini had no friends or family in California when she arrived. From the cultural dissimilarities she met with, to her own physical difference and the challenges of acclimatising to a new environment – she had to figure everything out on her own, approaching each experience – from finding an apartment, to arranging transportation, and even grocery shopping – with a childlike excitement. Her only "help" was a step-stool at her Stanford, Palo Alto apartment that enabled her to reach up to the stove. Was she ever scared? 'Not really. It was a little overwhelming at times, but I truly believe that if you are motivated to do something, you'll figure out a way to do it.'

To Ashwini, these were just small day-to-day matters that she had fun solving creatively. So she grabbed children's trolleys at grocery stores to do her shopping, used a rod in her apartment to reach switches that lay at a normal height, and mastered the art of lip-reading at social gatherings (since she only reached up to the knees of most people). 'Ashwini still thinks of herself as a normal person living an extraordinary life... Out of necessity, she figures out ingenious solutions to all the physical obstacles that face her every single day,' writes Professor Tina Seelig, executive director, Stanford Technology Ventures Program, in her book *What I Wish I Knew When I was 20*. Like many

others, she did not hire Ashwini the first time she had applied to her as a graduate student for a research assistant's position. This is a common refrain in Ashwini's life: People are often skeptical when she walks into the interview room. But when she starts speaking, people are won over with her mature ideas. 'Her voice is that of a little girl but her ideas are that of a mature adult,' says Professor Seelig who eventually hired her and describes her work as "exemplary".

In 2006, Ashwini graduated from Stanford University and moved to the Big Apple with a job offer at Deloitte & Touche. Today, she's a senior consultant with the Enterprise Risk Services



ASHWINI DOSHI
From New York, USA
The "little girl" who dreamt big... The short-statured Mumbai woman broke out of her familiar, comfortable world to plunge headlong into the competitive arena of the Big Apple

Ashwini's zest for life is unmatched... Here she dons her parachute with the help of her instructor, before sky-diving!

Photographs courtesy: Ashwini Doshi.

division at the same company. Last October she learnt how to drive. After using public transportation for years and hitching rides from friends, she decided it was time she drove her own car. She made innumerable calls and finally found a driving school in New York that accepted her. She now snakes her way like an expert through the New York traffic in her car, equipped with special pedal extenders.

Ashwini truly believes that she can make a difference in the lives of people who are less fortunate. She is a co-founding board member and director of operations at TeachAIDS, a non-profit organization that promotes AIDS/HIV awareness all over the world using research-based, rich-media applications. Says executive director and founder of TeachAIDS, Piya Sorcar, who's also a close friend: 'Ashwini is one of the most intelligent and talented women I know. Her dedication and passion towards improving social welfare is truly inspirational.' Says Ashwini, 'It's a small step towards the larger dream of social impact that I would like to create.' She's also taught kindergarten-level children in New York



Top: Ashwini receives her Masters in Science from one of the world's best universities, Stanford. Left: With her proud parents at her convocation. Ashwini is the first member of her family to go abroad for higher studies.

bursting with energy and a love for life! She enjoys dancing at parties: She loves performing and choreographing Bollywood-style numbers, and hip-hop. The next "to-do item" on her list is to start her own company. After all this, she still wishes she'd taken more risks in life. That's Ashwini Doshi for you – small in height, but tall in achievements!

City about the importance of saving money and hard work, with the Junior Achievement programme. Ashwini is a delight to speak with,

Riding life's roller-coaster, and coming out tops!

Uma's life was simple, but she was content. The eldest of five siblings, she lived in the small town of Naihati, West Bengal. From an early age, Uma learned to deal with hardships. Her father had a simple job in the Inoculation Department of the municipality, and drew a modest income. But Uma had a sharp intellect and a strong spirit. To support her family, she began taking tuitions. At the time, the Indo-Bangladesh turmoil loomed large in people's lives. Uma says: "There was a time when there was no milk at home. I bought a goat for Rs 65 and gave the children kheer made from its milk!"

In 1971, Uma's father was diagnosed with a peptic ulcer. Because of a lack of proper treatment, he passed away in February 1972. Uma was left with her widowed mother, three sisters and a little brother, who was only five at the time. They didn't have any assets to fall back upon. Though she was a brilliant student, Uma had to give up her education and became the bread-winner of her seven-member family. She got a job with the Calcutta Metropolitan Inoculation Organisation, after which she'd take a bus all the way across town to teach children. That same year, her house suffered massive damage due to

floods. But Uma could see nothing beyond her goal of raising her siblings. 'I just knew I had to do it because I didn't want my mother to step out of the house to work.' Uma managed to continue the education of her siblings through those tough times, never pausing to think about herself.

In 1976, Uma met Baidyanath Bhattacharyya, soon to become her soulmate. He supported her need to educate herself and acknowledged her responsibilities of raising her siblings.

Bhattacharyya was a sanitary inspector at the Municipality when the couple got married. In a household



UMA BHATTACHARYYA
From Naihati, West Bengal
Life is a roller-coaster ride.
There seems to be no end
to the loops and surprise
twists at every corner.
Yet Uma Bhattacharyya
continues to smile
and work through
it all

of 22 members, Uma's tiny 8-by-9 foot room became her oasis. She started attending classes in the evenings. She was all set to appear for her Master's final exam, when her mother fell seriously ill. Once again, Uma could not complete her degree. But she secured a job at the primary-school level and bounced back. But fate had other challenges in store.

In the winter of 1985, Uma got an emergency call from home. She reached home to find her husband collapsed on his right side, with a cerebral thrombosis attack (a blood clot in the brain). 'I had faith that nothing would happen to him,' says Uma. She rushed him to a nearby hospital, but all the doctors were away on vacation. Bhattacharyya went into coma and suffered two further attacks while he was still in the hospital. He survived, but barely. Uma was in the middle of her B.Ed. and her sister's wedding was around the corner. 'My brain just froze, but there was no stepping

away,' she says. She checked her savings and went ahead with the wedding arrangements, while continuing her B.Ed. from the hospital.

Bhattacharyya was discharged within a few days, but he was paralysed on his right side! He'd lost his ability to speak and walk. Uma ensured he got neurological treatment for two months. She would wake up at 4am, pack the children off to school, go to work, cook for the family, and take care of her husband. 'I would lift his right leg and drag him along when he needed to move...' With her dogged determination, Uma

trained him to sign with his left hand and walk with the help of a stick. He started going to work again. However, her peace was short-lived.

In 1991, Bhattacharyya had another accident and fell with his full weight on the paralysed leg, dislocating his hip's ball-and-socket joint. Uma had to rake up funds for another surgery and brain scan. An iron rod was inserted into the joint. Her husband was now completely bedridden, couldn't speak, or use his right side at all. Uma started a saree business to make ends meet. Once again, she trained her husband to walk and attend office.

It's been an excruciatingly difficult journey for Uma. But life has its own rewards. Uma's children performed superbly at school. 'They're compassionate and sensitive to others. What more could I've asked for?' says Uma.

Today her sisters are well-settled and live close by. One of them is a music teacher; one is a nurse and the third is a school teacher. Uma has moved to her own house. In 2000 her son graduated from IIT Kharagpur and completed his M.S. from BITS Pilani. Today he's an engineering manager at Adobe, Bangalore. Her daughter is married and settled in Naihati.

Uma continues to work: She still has 12-hour days – she walks 40 minutes every morning, takes care of her family and teaches full-time! She has faith there's light at the end of the tunnel...

A wake-up call changed her life forever...

Elizabeth Yarnell's story has a surprise twist, like her recipes. A world traveller, she's lived off take-outs and fast foods all her life. The Denver, Colorado-based Elizabeth couldn't cook and never spent time in the kitchen. Today, she's a top-selling cookbook author, a certified nutritional Consultant (CNC), a member of the American Association of Nutritional

Consultants (AANC) and a culinary school teacher. She's also married and the mother of two children.

Two weeks before turning 30, Elizabeth woke up blind in one eye. She could not read her computer and suspected she had optic neuritis. She was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS), an autoimmune disease in which the body's immune response attacks

the central nervous system (brain and spinal cord).^{*} For her, it was a rude awakening to the fact that there is a deep connection between the food you eat and the way you feel. Although her sight returned, the medical reality stared her in the face.

Instead of melting under the stress and sinking into depression, Elizabeth reassessed her eating habits and life-

Photograph courtesy: Uma Bhattacharyya.

^{*}Check **Resource Details** for a real-life story on MS closer home, and for contact information on the Multiple Sclerosis Society of India.

style. She took the disease head-on by throwing all processed, toxic foods out of her house and her life. She turned to whole foods. She took cooking lessons, but felt quickly fatigued, because of her condition.

At a whim, she turned one day to her Dutch oven – one she'd received as a wedding gift – to cook a meal. (A Dutch oven is an oven-safe, heavy pot with a tight-fitting lid and two side handles. Its straight sides are vertical and the bottom is wide and flat.) Elizabeth threw some meat and veggies into the pot and baked it for 45 minutes. 'It smelled so heavenly!' she says. The veggies and grains retained their bright colours, shape and texture, unlike what normally happens inside a casserole or a crock-pot. What's more, the meal was loved by the pickiest of eaters, her children, which is the real test of any recipe. Elizabeth had hit upon a revolutionary cooking idea!

Elizabeth began experimenting and ultimately landed upon a solution for whole-food, complete meals that require little preparation and 30 to 40 minutes to cook. She tried diverse culinary styles and created her own unique recipes, using the cast-iron Dutch oven. She drafted a 12-page manuscript explaining the concept and a couple of recipes. In 2001, she expanded the booklet, pitched a number of publishers, launched a website and began the patent process to protect her "infusion" cooking method.

It wasn't an easy task. Publishers were not interested, since she wasn't a restaurant owner or a chef, but an ordinary housewife. She was just some-



ELIZABETH YARNELL

From Colorado, USA
One shocking incident changed her life forever... This ingenious homemaker revamped her health and changed the way people think about their food

one determined to show people her healthy infusion cooking technique. 'The things I'd been working on for five years fell through completely,' she says. 'Even my agent expressed a lack of faith in me, so I fired him!' Instead of giving up, Elizabeth put all her resources at stake. She published 2,000 cookbooks at her own risk and expense. She named her work *Glorious One-Pot Meals*, her first book in a series. She sold all the copies within the first month and over the next few years sold another 10,000! It got picked up by one of the leading publishers in the US, Broadway Books (from the Random House imprint). In January this year, she released a new edition with 60 new recipes – from Indian-style to Mediterranean cooking – in the Dutch oven. There's something for everybody – from hearty,

filling dishes, to hot-and-spicy meals and light, clear flavours. Her infusion cooking method is also now patented. 'The key to achieving your dream is tenacity,' she says with a smile.

Emails and letters pour in every day from people whose lives have been blessed by her new way of cooking in the Dutch oven. 'Being a busy mother who home-schools her three children, I never had the time, but with these innovative recipes I now have extra time on my hands,' says a mother from Texas. Another fan writes, 'I love your cookbook and cooking method. Since doing the one-pot meals, I cook every

night. I have lost about 14 pounds. I feel very healthy. It's changed my life!'

Elizabeth is a tireless innovator. 'Touching peoples' lives is what keeps me going,' she says. Today she travels around the US reaching out to people with MS from all walks of life. Many of them are young women, in their early 30s. Though the disease is incurable, since 2001, Elizabeth has been lucky – she's not had another attack.

The best thing about her one-pot meals is that they're versatile. One can replace carbs, veggies, spices and herbs with ingredients of one's choice and adapt recipes to one's palate. Elizabeth's Indian recipes are real crowd-pleasers. They're quick, healthy and perfect for busy mums, foodies, diabetes patients and people with allergies.

Today Elizabeth is 40, and lives with her husband and children in Denver, Colorado. She has never felt healthier or been in better shape!