

## Do you need Wings to Fly?

Not if your name is Rajinder Johar. A Senior Occupational Therapist working at King George's Medical College, Lucknow, Rajinder Johar did not know that his life was to change forever when intruders pumped three bullets into him in 1986, one of which hit his spine, rendering him Quadriplegic for the rest of his life. From being a Therapist heading a unit to being declared 100% disabled, paralysed neck downwards, the founder of Family of the Disabled – (FOD) & winner of 13 awards to date, Rajinder Johar, has proved that Disability need not be a constraint if one has the will to overcome...and it has not stopped him from getting hundreds of others like him onto their feet.

Starting out with the country's first magazine on Disability in 1992 – called 'The Voice', (including a Humor Special edition in 2007) FOD then started promoting artists with Disabilities (one of its prime objectives) printing & marketing cards designed by them since 1994. Starting with a borrowed capital of Rs.1000 & 4 card designs from Shivani Gupta it sells around 20,000 cards today, each card with a unique having been designed by artisans who are Disabled. Sales of cards however are decreasing. In 1998 FOD evolved with its triple mission of decreasing unemployment of those marginalized due to poverty & disability & mainstreaming them with its unique Apna Rozgar Scheme (ARS). Under ARS, FOD economically rehabilitates those below the poverty line, who are unlettered, & semi or unskilled entrepreneurs with disability by providing them a interest free loan to procure materials into a trade of their choice. This enables them to financially support themselves as well as their dependents. Till date ARS has supported 352 Disabled persons in & around Delhi in gainful employment with a success rate of over 80%. Majority of ARS entrepreneurs are physically impaired, leprosy cured, hearing impaired & some even with other impairments.

ARS follows a simplified procedure & candidates approach FOD directly or are referred. They are required to fill up a form with a photograph, Disability certificate, a proof of residence & 2 references. FODs staff visit the candidate to verify details & once completed FOD assists them in procuring materials to commence the trade of their choice. Special needs of the candidates are kept in mind & a maximum of only 2 visits are required to be made. The whole procedure does not take more than 30 to 45 days & regular monitoring is done to provide support as required with intermittent workshops are held by FOD to enhance business skills & build confidence. Financial assistance is in the modest yet critical range of Rs.2500 to Rs.3000/- & earnings range from Rs.2500/- to even Rs.8000 to Rs.10,000 per month.

Trades range from Petty shops, to PCOs, vegetable & fruit vending, sale of cassettes, soft toys, stationery, cosmetics, general merchandise, clothing, clocks, etc. Earnings have led to independence, respect in the family & society, savings, self reliance & dignity for people with Disabilities. Regular earnings lead to a better quality of life, improved medical facilities, aids & appliances, education to siblings, children. FOD is one of the few agencies economically rehabilitating Disabled people with Micro finance. Regular feedback is sent to Donors to ARS giving details of the person, trade, progress, etc as FOD believes in accountability. The power of small amounts made available without bureaucratic hassles cannot be underestimated. People often need timely, critical & sensitive interventions to be able to be independent & if this is achieved they are able to move on & cope well for themselves.

Vikas, one of the entrepreneurs sells fruits for a living in the market. He earns about Rs.6000/- a month & the same goes for Chandraprabha who runs a mobile PCO cum shop near the Hospital. Vikas is diversifying his range while Chandraprabha aspires for a permanent booth. Dreams begins to soar, find wings...

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While promoting artists amongst the community by converting paintings into greeting cards FOD felt a need for a broader platform to do justice to the abundant talent they saw & the idea of displaying paintings through a national Level exhibition –“Beyond Limits” was born in 2001. Such opportunities open the floodgates of imagination & creativity & while it earns financial returns & appreciation it also encourages the public to look at the artists beyond their visible disabilities....Beyond Limits has thus emerged as a platform to Artists, focusing on their strengths & uplifting their spirits....4 Exhibitions have been held so far (2001, 2002,2004 & 2006) the canvas growing with each exhibition with paintings from all over the country. The Artists who participated in the 2006 exhibition include Arveend Budh Singh, Yog Raj Dang,Sreekant,Shilpa Gupta,Jamaluddin,Mukesh Rajesh,Reema from Delhi, Pradeep from Noida,Ashis Kabash, Beetan Goswami,Debashis,Nilanjana,Nirmalaya,Santanu from Kolkata, Ram Raghubir from Allahabad,Siddharta & Sriharsha from Orissa,Imamuddin from Rajasthan with his spectacular Tiger paintings amongst others. Imammudin who is hearing impaired started off as a sign board painter for 8 years before he joined the Ranthambore School of Art.

Gallery Space is donated by Arpana Caur just as ‘The VOICE’ of FOD is supported by the generous contributions of the Krishnan family of Surajkund. **RCMFT** has supported ARD & aids & appliances. FOD is sustained largely through individual donors & does not have institutional support. The Team of eight headed by Rajinder Johar & his daughter Preeti employs 50% people with Disabilities, practicing what is preached. Rajinder takes no salary while for the rest of the team FOD is only able to afford modest honorariums as there is no regular funding or business plan for sustainability available for FOD itself.

FOD encourages through GYANPATH education of economically weaker disabled students with focus on the girl child. It conducts SAHYOG - educational tours & excursions, arranges free aids & appliances for those who are economically disadvantaged & provides ongoing counseling to its many entrepreneurs. The organization is constantly looking for volunteers who can provide time, marketing, managerial & networking skills & even raises funds from donated newspapers. With a supportive family & an sensitive engineer brother who innovatively designed a low cost writing device Rajinder Johar continues to dream....a hindi version of the magazine to reach out to more people, a Multiple Rehabilitation center with treatment, library & recreational facilities to cater to all categories of disability is a dream yet to take flight....All it needs is 200 sq yards space on the ground floor & accessible, anywhere it Delhi....Knowing FOD & its track record it will not take too long to take wings, to fly beyond barriers, to soar to new heights....for you don’t need wings to fly.....

*Contributed by Ms Amita V Joseph in the February 2008 issue of Civil Society magazine.*

***For joining the mission, volunteering time or skills support to FOD contact: Ms.Preeti Johar.***

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