

## Divya's Self Determination and Journeys through Success

*Dear Readers:*

### *Introduction*

*The Hindu God Krishna makes clear in the Bhagvad Gita, the Hindu Holy Book that Hindu peoples are not to talk about themselves in the first person as such self-reference is an example of ego. Divya will therefore refer to herself only in the third person.*

Divya Goel was born in 1986 in Ontario, Canada with a severe illness that caused her to lose some of her hearing. When Divya was about three years old, she flew with her family to India for a vacation where, in a awful and shocking turn of events, Divya developed a high fever. During this illness Divya lost most of her hearing and slowly her vision. The doctors in India did not know what caused the fever. Divya and her family flew back to Canada and the doctors in Canada found that Divya had Usher Syndrome Type 1 but still could not find what caused her illness. Communication with her family and hearing friends became very difficult for Divya. She and her family relied mainly on gestures and body language to communicate with each other.

Divya became a student at Metro Toronto School for the Deaf (MTSD) in Toronto, Ontario in early 1990. At first Divya did not know anything about Deaf people and did not know sign language. She learned both Canadian and American Sign Language when she was seven years old. She was aided by an “intervenor” who provided 1:1 support for learning sign language and navigating her environment.

Communication improved but continued to be challenging. Some close family members knew Canadian or American Sign Language, Signed English, and some Indian signs. With other family members and friends Divya had to write back and forth on paper. This manner of communication continues to this day.

Divya was the only DeafBlind student at MTSD. She was still emotionally traumatized by the loss of both hearing and vision and was not familiar with DeafBlind culture. However, she enjoyed learning sign language and how to communicate with deaf classmates. She started participating in different events, such as Indian fashion shows, plays, performances, and many other activities. Moreover, the MTSD librarians and teachers awarded Divya a gold medal for being the best reader at MTSD. As a child, Divya enjoyed reading many children books because reading is her passion. Divya followed the standard education curriculum and studied the same subjects as students in hearing schools.

Divya attended MTSD until she was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. In early 1998, Divya and her family moved to the United States of America to start a new life.

Divya became a student at Gotha Middle School in Orlando, Florida, a public school that had a small Deaf Program. Gotha Middle School was very different from MTSD. Divya was not satisfied with the Gotha Deaf Program because the education was not comparable to standard education. However, that school did help her to learn some American Sign Language (ASL), which is quite different from Canadian Sign Language. Canadian Sign Language is similar to British Sign Language (BSL). Most confusing was that BSL and ASL use similar signs but with different meanings; for example, the sign for “bird” in BSL means chicken in ASL.

In mid-1998, Divya was selected to represent Canada and India in the

World Festival Parade at Gotha Middle School. She carried the flags of both countries and demonstrated their heritage and culture.

In 1999, Divya was selected by the school principal and staff as the top student in the Deaf program; she received a plaque displaying a gold medallion and inscribed with the following words: “1998-99 Principal’s Honor Roll – Presented to Divya Goel”. The award signified her hard work in achieving excellent behavior and grades.

In late 1999, Divya transferred to the Florida School for the Deaf and Blind (FSDB) in St. Augustine, Florida. She attended FSDB for seven and a half years. There she had experiences that impacted her life in both positive and negative ways. She encountered significant challenges as she was the only DeafBlind student and neither the staff in the Deaf or Blind department had experience meeting the needs of a student with both hearing and vision loss. In addition, there were no legal mandate that a DeafBlind student receive a standard education. Some FSDB staff pitied Divya and told her she could not master the standard curriculum or go to college. The school board did not allow her to take standard education classes. Divya was placed with the Special Diploma/Vocational group of 2005. Divya felt frustrated, angry, and upset. Some of the other students were envious of her recognition for good behavior and academic performance. They cursed at her and tried to get her in trouble.

Since Divya's home was in Orlando, Florida, she lived in the dorm at FSDB. She lived in the regular girl's dorm for a year until she was in 8th grade. When Divya was in 8th grade, the middle school supervisors, staff, and residential administrations selected her to transfer to the middle school honors girl's dorm. Divya was one of four 8th grade students who were chosen for the middle school honor s dorm. In order to be selected, the student had to have excellent behavior and academic achievement, and to have demonstrated responsibility and independence. In 2001-2002, Divya transferred to the high school. In 9th and 10th grade, Divya again lived in the regular dorm. However, in the summer of 2003-2004 and 2004 - 2005 when she was in 11th grade and her senior year, 12th grade, Divya was again chosen to transfer to the honors dorm. The high school honors dorm was a very different experience from the middle school honors dorm. The middle school honoring dorm expected excellent behaviors hard work, and a high Grade Point Average (GPA). The high school honor dorm also expected excellent behavior and hard work and a high GPA but added a new level of responsibility. The high school honors dorm also had more activities. For example, honors dorm students could go off campus anytime they wanted in order to duplicate real world experiences. Divya mentioned previously that some Deaf students were cruel to her, bullied her, and attempted to get her in trouble. However, school and residence staff knew that Divya was an innocent, mature, hard-working student with excellent behavior. This is why Divya was one of the students chosen for the honors girl's dorm.

However, there were some good times. One of the most treasured memories of Divya’s life was from 2003 to 2005 when Divya participated in the Miss Florida School for the Deaf Beauty Pageant. In 2003 and 2004 when she was in 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade, Divya performed an Indian dance of Bollywood songs and won the Miss Florida School for the Deaf Talent Contest. In 2005 when she was a senior, Divya again performed the Indian dance of Bollywood songs. She was crowned Miss FSDB Queen. This was the first time in FSDB history that a DeafBlind student was crowned queen. At

the time, Divya felt, “The dream I have had for a long time has come true, that if I persist and do not give up I will succeed. I truly believe that when my own dreams come true I can inspire others to believe that they can do it just as I have. That light of hope shines brightly in my heart.”

One of the other treasured memories was when, during her senior year, FSDB took one hundred fifty students from both the Deaf and the Blind departments to the Super Bowl XXXIX in half-time performance to sign America the Beautiful. The singer was Grammy Award winner Alicia Keys. The reason for this event was to honor the famous blind musician Ray Charles, who attended FSDB in his youth and who died in 2004.

Divya felt excited to earn opportunities to participate in many varied special events. Opening her heart and mind to a world filled with many awesome events was like a dream come true. She will always treasure these precious memories of her life.

Divya graduated with a Special Diploma in 2005 and then had an unhappy experience. Divya had to return to the FSDB post-graduate program to complete some classes in the Blind Department. However, that program did not offer the classes she was promised and the staff did not follow her Individualized Education Plan (IEP). The IEP requires a special meeting with students who have disabilities, their families, and school staff. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that all students in Special Education programs have an IEP. For four months Divya received no academic education. She was upset that this waste of time would have a negative impact on her future, which was very important to her. Divya made a decision to advocate for herself. She repeatedly asked the staff to take academic classes but her request was always denied. The staff continued to pity her and to believe that she could not succeed academically. Divya insisted that education was very important to her as it would enable her to embrace future challenges and to become a successful student. Looking back on that event, Divya realizes that that was the first time she truly advocated for herself. That experience enabled her to advocate regarding other issues that affected both her life and the lives of other DeafBlind people. Divya often thought of her prior experiences. She had participated in many DeafBlind events, such as a two-week seminar at the Helen Keller National Center and the Southeast Transition Institute Retreat. These experiences taught her about DeafBlind culture and about self-determination and self-advocacy. DeafBlind leaders taught her how to find many ways to break down barriers and to be successful.

Divya expressed her anger and frustration to Emily Taylor Snell, a Florida State Project Collaborator who works with DeafBlind individuals from infancy to the age of twenty-two. One day before the start of Christmas break, Divya spoke up and asked the staff to arrange a last minute emergency IEP meeting that would include her parents, a sign language interpreter, school staff, and Emily Taylor Snell. At the meeting, Divya decided to withdraw from FSDB and to transfer to William R. Boone High School, a local district public high school in Orlando, Florida. She started attending Boone in February 2006.

At Boone she was allowed to re-take high school academic courses. This was a step in a new direction for Divya. Boone developed a new IEP for Divya that included her educational goals, challenges, and the equipment she would need to access materials despite her vision loss. Divya had no time to be involved in clubs, community

service, or special events. She was too busy doing homework for eight classes a day. Her hard work paid off and she completed all required twenty-four regular high school education credits in two and half years instead of the usual four years. In addition, her grades were mostly A's and B's. Divya graduated from Boone with a standard high school diploma in the summer of 2008. Divya has this to say about this accomplishment. "I did it and I am successful. This is proof that I can overcome the most difficult challenges and break down the greatest barriers. I can have an impact on the people at Boone High School and on family and friends. I am proud of myself and confident in who I really am and in how my natural abilities have enabled me to take charge of my own life."

In spring 2009, Divya entered Valencia Community College in Orlando, Florida. At first Divya was very overwhelmed by the college experience. However, many wonderful people guided her to choose a major that would enable her to pursue the career she wanted. At one time Divya wanted to be a co-owner of her family's Indian restaurant business. However, some awesome news impacted her and inspired her to change her mind. She decided that her real calling was to work with the DeafBlind community.

The staff of the Office for Students with Disabilities, the Writing Center tutors, some amazing instructors, and other Valencia College staff supported and encouraged Divya along her journey as a successful college student.

All these chapters of Divya's life explain how her life changed and how she became a talented young lady.

In June 2009, Divya had the unique honor to be selected one of six DeafBlind leaders of the DeafBlind Youth Adults in Action (DBYAA). The name was later changed to DeafBlind Citizens in Action (DBCA). DBYAA included two representatives from Florida and one each from Wisconsin, Texas, California, and Georgia. DBYAA went to Washington DC to convince the legislature to pass laws that would improve the lives of the DeafBlind community throughout the United States. On the morning of June 26, 2009, the group was tremendously excited to tour the White House. Later in the afternoon, they returned to the Oval Office to meet the first African American President of United States, Barack Obama. How did this come about? It was Divya, who suggested that the group meet President Obama. She felt it would demonstrate that just like Helen Keller, this group of DeafBlind individuals with various types of hearing and vision loss would meet important people around the world. There was no guarantee that they would meet President Obama as he was very busy with other meetings. Nonetheless, Divya did not give up; once again, she believed her dream would come true and it did. In the Oval Office, Divya stood next to President Obama while he congratulated DBYAA for being the first DeafBlind organization in history to meet the President of the United States of America. When he finished his speech Divya gave President Obama a big hug. Divya was so excited and remembers that event this way: "It inspired me to give the President a big hug. My heart was filled with the brightest joy because I learned that President Obama is a wonderful role model of advocacy, success, and his leadership. He is an excellent example of to become a leader by overcoming many difficult challenges. President Obama empowers me by his example. I too have embraced difficult challenges and have fought to break down barriers. I will learn how to be a leader and an advocate."

Another key event in the journey of Divya's life happened in November 2009. Six

American women from Deaf Blind Citizens in Action went to Kampala, Uganda in Africa for the Helen Keller World Conference. Divya was exposed to many cultures of different countries as well as to their DeafBlind cultures. It is very interesting how different countries use various kinds of communications with their Deaf Blind community. For the next several days the group visited two Deaf Schools in Uganda. One of these was the Browada School for the Deaf. Divya was very touched by the lack of school supplies at Browada School. Divya and her group brought many supplies from America to give to the teachers and Deafblind children. The other school they visited was the Ntinda School for the Deaf. The DeafBlind children in Ntinda School for the Deaf were learning how to sew clothes, rugs, and other materials. They were also learning woodworking and other vocational skills. Here too Divya and her group donated academic supplies, clothes, and toys to the DeafBlind children.

In December 6, 2013, Divya was proud and honored to be invited to the Valencia College 37<sup>th</sup> Annual Incentive Award Ceremony. She received an award for being one of the best students, a hard worker, and for being the first DeafBlind person to have received an award in Valencia College's history. She was introduced with the following words: "Divya Goel is an International motivational speaker and a member of the Deaf Blind Youth Adults in Action. She has presented for the Helen Keller National Center for the Deaf and Blind and for the Helen Keller World conference in Uganda. Divya was one of the signers/singers in the Super Bowl Halftime Performance for XXXIX in Jacksonville, Florida. Divya has visited the White House and met with President Obama." Dr. Deborah Larew, the Director of the Office for Students with Disabilities who nominated Divya, said, "Divya has the drive to empower women in challenging situations, and has taken her challenges and turned them into opportunities to impact legislation and empower others. She approaches her challenges with good spirit and the support from her family."

Divya's acceptance speech I narrated my speech. Was as follows:

"Good evening Ladies and Gentlemen,

This evening is so unique for me; I am honored to have this award. I am incredibly blessed!! It is a surprise to have my first award in my college life. I would like to thank all the people that have helped me to succeed. Thanks to Deborah Larew and Julie Balassa for all your support; I could not have done it without your continuous support. Most of all, I would like to thank to my family for all your supports, encouragement, and help through my college years and the rest of my life. You raised me. I am asking for your blessing and I love you all very much!! All of you, family, friends, and people of Valencia College are all in my heart,. Your blessings and support have enabled me to be successful. I have taken very difficult courses and I have passed them, despite being DeafBlind. I have had the opportunity to do presentations to encourage self-determination and I have had the honor to meet the President. Receiving this award is also one of those special moments I will always treasure!! All people should encourage themselves to earn their education for a better life and they should earn success for their future. "IF I CAN DO IT, YOU CAN DO IT!" ALL the people in the audience gave Divya a standing ovation!! Many of them told Divya with tears in their eyes that she had inspired them and made them happy. They told Divya that they would always remember the spirit of her speech. It was the best evening of Divya's life, an evening she will never forget!!

Divya's story is a summary of her work experiences and of how her career

choice changed from wanting to be a co-owner of her family's Indian restaurant to working with the DeafBlind community. Divya made this decision after meeting President Obama.

At first Divya participated in DeafBlind workshops, conferences, and events as a student. She then became a mentor at the Southeast Transition Institute Retreat, Deaf Blind Youth Adults in Action, Helen Keller National Center two-week Summer program, and other organizations. She continued that work for seven years. She also became committee co-chairperson of the American Association for DeafBlind's Symposium for young adults in Kentucky. She transitioned to the level of facilitator at the Helen Keller National Center two-week summer program. She has also traveled to Florida, Kentucky, Texas, New York, the Virgin Islands, and other places to make presentations about several topics, including "Self Determination and Journeys of Success".

In the future, Divya would like to offer tips to help people understand the importance of life. She wants to encourage people to get involved in societies, to have an active life, and to be successful in school, at work, and in their future lives. Her gift of empowerment to those who read her autobiography and attend her presentations is her own example of success through hard work. She wants to inspire people to face challenges by having determination and by striving to achieve goals no matter how long it takes. Remember that, it is alright to fail as long as one tries hard to succeed. We learn from our mistakes.

Divya borrowed four words that she learned in college: "Think, Value, Communicate, Act"

Thinking helps you to plan and consider what you want to be in the future. Thinking positively will help you be successful. It will guide you to reach your goals.

Value refers to things that are important in life. People value things based on their individual experiences and points of view, the things they care about and are passionate about. Some examples are career, hobbies, religion, and cultural customs.

Communication involves more than just talking. We can also communicate through body language, sign language, and certain types of technologies. Communication is an important way for us to come together and work things out.

Action means rolling up your sleeves and getting the job done, using life experiences to increase your level of achievement and being involved with different organizations. Just imagine a mountain and yourself ready to climb to the top. Your ascent up the mountain includes short, medium, and long-term goals. When you reach the summit it means you have achieved your goals and have succeeded, have grown from an infant to an adult. From the summit you can see all the chapters of your life. You will be surprised when you see your successful future filled with action.

A person has to have clear and concrete goals with a plan to reach them in order to have success. One cannot get to Paris, France without having a map or plan to follow. In addition, one must be persistent and not give up too easily if there are obstacles to reaching the final goal.

- Do not be afraid to stand up because you do not feel comfortable with your needs. Do not hide your needs so that people do not know what you need.
- Do not give up or lose hope. Keep faith in your life and future.

If you follow your dreams step by step you will make it no matter how long it takes! Just be patient and stay positive. When the time is right you will step into a new

chapter of your life; you will learn from new experiences and embrace new challenges.

Divya empowers and encourages you to look in your heart and mind until you find your answers. Then you can make your own decisions.

Families and friends should support their loved ones' decisions.

After Divya graduates with a university degree, she hopes that she will have many opportunities to travel and share her life experiences, to show that she knows who she is despite having faced many barriers. She wants to share her life and experiences with others. She wants the opportunity to talk to international leaders and leaders at the United Nations about her experiences as a DeafBlind person. She wants to help improve the political system to assist people with disabilities nationally and internationally.

In conclusion, in her autobiography Divya has looked back at all her experiences, good and bad from Self-determination and self-advocacy have helped her to face many difficult and frustration challenges. Life action has guided her to succeed and to and improve her life. She looks forward to her never-ending journey of success.