

The CEO With Muscle

by Malay Desai



Nipun Malhotra was born without muscles in his limbs. But as the co-founder of a foundation for disability issues and Director at a leading fastener company, we discover he has many in his head

Why should Nipun Malhotra, a person with disability (PWD) living in Delhi, be irked about anything, some might wonder. Unlike other PWDs, he has access – to a specially equipped car, to a plush job, to many public utilities in the capital, which comparably is more disabled-friendly than any other Indian city. But then, if you chat with him, he's not.

Malhotra is the type that irks others. He irks the powers-to-be in administration and government to see the plight of wheelchair users. Last year in March, he irked a tony South Delhi restaurant by getting it reams of bad press after it denied him entry. In his latest act just last month, Malhotra returned to the headlines by pointing out to the state that their latest odd-even car rule overlooks wheelchair users.

Bespectacled and sweater-laden these days, Malhotra, who was born with Arthrogryposis (a lack of muscles in his arms and legs), may look comical enough on his wheelchair to evoke sympathy in our society.

But the Executive Director at Nipman Fastener Industries commands nothing but respect as he goes about his life. "I'm up by seven, begin work by nine and get done in time to meet friends for a drink in the evening or read a bit," he tells us, adding that he squeezes in a few hours every day for work on Nipman Foundation, his "true passion".

Growing up in the Bombay of then, Malhotra's condition got him labelled a "wooden doll" but his parents did everything to remove it. "My mom insisted in sending me to a normal school and made it happen," he says, but it wasn't a cakewalk thereafter. "Throughout my school life, I didn't have any friends as most people, including my classmates, didn't know how to react to someone in a wheelchair," Malhotra recalls. Things got warmer when the family moved to Delhi and Nipun found both, friendships and sensitivity at the liberal St. Stephens and later at Delhi School of Economics.

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Usually, a man with these credentials finds more than "good" job prospects, but Nipun's travails with employers were a different story. "At one company, I went through seven rounds of interviews and was eventually rejected as their office didn't have a disabled-friendly toilet! Another employer asked me if I'd ever read a book," Malhotra says straight-faced. However, had it not been for these experiences, that too in urban India of the 21st century, he may not have made strides towards creating the Nipman Foundation.

"I was shocked at this discrimination and felt it would be better to come from a position of strength. I decided to join my family business to back-up my livelihood and also venture on my own alongside," he talks of 2012, when he began another family business of the social kind with mother Priyanka. Thus, the 'Nipman Foundation' was founded, with a vision to "serve this country in the spheres of health, dignity and happiness" and at its core, ensure that other Nipun Malhotras of India who do not have a back-up, get fair treatment and equal rights. The Foundation is a formidable force today when it comes to accessibility audits of the city, advocacy and activism for disability rights and upliftment of the disadvantaged sections of society.

Remarkably, the Malhotras have pooled in their energies and resources to connect with organisations across the board and made subtle but vital impacts in many lives. "We set up the Equal Opportunity Awards to appreciate employers who are sensitive toward persons with disabilities. I worked with Zomato to add the wheelchair accessibility feature in their app, with Uberon "Uber Assist", a service for PWDs, with the NH7 Weekender (a popular music festival) to make it completely disabled friendly." Malhotra shoots off, boasting of an impressive resume.

The Foundation's most recent victory was poking the Delhi government (of course, through a Public Interest Litigation) and getting an exemption to the "odd-even" car formula. It is these victories that drive Malhotra, and not at the cost of his day job of controlling procurements at the fastener business.

All of 28, this man on a wheelchair has long-term plans for himself and his foundation to see a more equal, inclusive society. And perhaps, he knows he will irk many more people along the way.

THIS-ABILITY is an advocacy initiative of TRINAYANI, an NGO working with a mission to Respect, Empower and Include persons with disabilities. Founded by Ritika Sahni, Trinayani works towards creating mass awareness about Disability issues, hoping to alter perspectives of non disabled persons on the strengths, problems and discrimination faced by persons with disability. www.trinayani.org