The only way is forward

A

Like most sixteen-year-old teenagers, Amar Latif loved riding his bike.

He’d often fall off, but undeterred he’d always get right back on. Then one day, after yet another accident, his parents decided that enough was enough, and sold it. It was his first major setback in life, but he managed to get over it. ‘You are constantly told the world is your oyster,’ said Amar later, ‘but it didn’t feel like my oyster ... you’ve [just] got to get out of that way of thinking.’ This positive attitude helped Amar later. After successfully completing his degree, he travelled across Canada and North America with his friends. Travel was Amar’s passion, but it soon became clear that he would have to overcome significant obstacles to do it. This was his second major blow. ‘There were two ways forward,’ he said. ‘I could just accept that I was not able to travel. Or I’d need to change something. I chose the second option.’
B

On his return home, Amar started a career in finance where his perfectionism and constant efforts to do his best led to success and promotion. Then, after nine years he gave up his job to pursue his real passion, setting up an innovative travel company called Traveleyes. Amar had always loved to travel, but since his trip to America, he’d been painfully aware of how difficult it was for people like him.

C

The reason was his eyesight. At the age of four, Amar was diagnosed with a rare degenerative eye condition. By sixteen, his eyesight had deteriorated so much that he couldn’t ride his bike. Today, Amar is blind – and Traveleyes organizes holidays for visually-impaired people.

D

Amar’s idea for his company is revolutionary, based on a ground-breaking concept that partners blind travellers with sighted ones. Sighted guides are offered a discounted holiday in return for acting as ‘eyes’ for blind travellers. As a guide, they are constantly expected to notice and describe the world around them and to think about how best to transfer the details of the places and sights to their blind companions. It requires commitment and staying power, as well as patience and perseverance in the face of new challenges – and they need to get on with their partner, too. But despite these demands, sighted guides find the holidays both inspirational and educational. They challenge people’s perception of ‘disability’ and illustrate the importance of social inclusion.
This sense of community brings out the best in human nature, encouraging tolerance, compassion (a concern for others), and good humour. Sighted guides also take home an understanding of how a blind person experiences the world. ‘Some things are more intense as a blind person,’ explains Amar. ‘When you’re walking along cobbled streets, hearing church bells in the distance. Feeling the spray of Niagara Falls on your face when you’re on the Maid of the Mist boat.’ What might first be perceived as a hindrance turns out to be an unexpected benefit and most guides return home with more vivid and richer memories of what they’ve experienced.

But this change of perception isn’t limited to travellers. In countries such as the Gambia and Cuba, holidays often include a visit to a local blind school. Travellers take time to interact with the children and their teachers, sharing knowledge and talking about their own life experiences. It provides the children with role models and gives them optimism and more confidence in their own abilities. ‘A lot [of the blind travellers] have great jobs back home, running their own businesses, accountants, lawyers, that sort of thing,’ says Amar. ‘So that changes [the kids’] perceptions ... It can give them hope, that they can do this as well.’

Amar has come a long way since he fell off his bike all those years ago. His enthusiasm, ingenuity and ability to reinvent himself have made his story an inspirational tale. Single-mindedness and focusing on his passion have helped him conquer adversity and realize his dreams. ‘Life is short, with or without sight,’ he says. ‘And you’ve got to get out there and do what you can. This isn’t a dress rehearsal. You can’t stop life. You can’t rewind it. The only way is forward.’