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Martha Abed

Massage Therapist

What at first seemed a debilitating condition, has spurred on this young lady to become a sought-after massage therapist at a local spa.

Meet 25-year old Martha Abed. She wasn't born visually impaired. However, diagnosed at an early age with an inherited, degenerative eye disease that causes severe vision impairment, Martha started losing her sight. Today, Martha Abed has no eyesight, but she has turned her disability into an asset. This is her story.

Career Choice

Martha Abed is a massage therapist. Using her hands, fingers, forearms, elbows, and sometimes feet, she treats clients by using touch to manipulate and knead the muscles and other soft tissues of the body.

With their touch, massage therapists relieve pain, help heal injuries, improve circulation, relieve stress, increase relaxation, and aid in the general wellness of clients. Massage therapists also provide guidance on stretching, strengthening, overall relaxation, and how to improve posture. "I really love what I do. It gives me a strong sense of self-worth and confidence. Being visually impaired, it's so easy to fall into a trap of self-pity and depression. However, practicing as a massage therapist gives me the motivation to face challenges head-on and to rise above my circumstances", Martha says.

Early Challenges

Martha's mother enrolled her at the Eluwa Special School at Ongwediva. Her school years were





not easy. Her sight deteriorated and by age 12, Martha lost her eyesight completely. She dreamt of becoming a Psychologist or a Life Science and Agriculture teacher. “School wasn’t easy at all. Being visually impaired, somehow you realise that your dreams might just be out of your reach. But, I kept on dreaming. I simply had to. To stop dreaming would’ve been very self-defeating”, she notes.

But, struggling to cope at school, Martha failed her Grade 10 examinations. An attempt to complete her Grade 10 through the Namibia College for Open Learning, NAMCOL, also did not bear any fruit. However, this did not deter this young woman from staying positive and to make the best of her situation. “I realised that despite these setbacks, I had to do something with my life. I couldn’t sit idle at home and I did not want to be a liability to others. And when the opportunity came to join Nomad Spa and undergo

training as a massage therapist, I grabbed it with both hands. Yes, I might not be a Psychologist or a Life Science Teacher today, but still I am in a position where I can help others and make their lives better. I am making a contribution”, she explains.

Exciting Career Path

Today, Martha is employed at the Nomad African Spa, on the corner of Sanderburg Road and Jan Jonker Street in the capital.

Nomad has recently won an award as the best day spa in Africa. Specialising in African-based treatments, the spa offers a wide range of packages, such as the Night Spa Experience, where you and a loved one can enjoy multiple treatments followed by a delicious dinner under the African sky.

It is at the very same establishment where Martha received her training. And within a short period of time,

she has established herself as a favourite amongst clients. “The Nomad family has been very supportive. We are a close-knit and caring group and my colleagues go out of their way to accommodate me and to make my work easy. They always encourage me to do my best, but most importantly, their support has made it possible for me to dream again. They are my second family and I love them all to bits”, she says.

Dexterity and Communication

Massage Therapists need to understand the human body. They need to be fit as they may give several treatments during a workday and have to stay on their feet throughout appointments. Therapists must be strong and able to exert pressure through a variety of movements when manipulating a client’s muscles.

Martha fits the mould. Although small in stature, she is strong. Proof

that dynamites indeed come in small packages. “Clients are often surprised that a woman so small in stature can be so strong. People often think that you need to be big and strong for this type of work. That’s not true at all. In fact, what is more important is that you are skilled at what your doing. I need to be fit as I may give several treatments during a workday and have to stay on my feet throughout appointments. I must be strong and able to exert pressure through a variety of movements when manipulating a client’s muscles”, she explains.

She also highlights communication skills as another key skill massage therapists need to master. “Massages normally happen in a very private and intimate setting. Communication is key to a successful massage. Clients need to feel that they can trust you and that you care. I make it a point to listen carefully to every client during the

course of a treatment. And many of my clients appreciate the special attention I pay to their problem areas”, she highlights.

Fighting Perception

For centuries, visually impaired people have found work as massage therapists. It is claimed that their heightened and superior sense of touch make them better therapists. Massage therapists who are visually impaired rely very much on touch alone. And the right touch is the key element in massage therapy.

Martha is a good example. She brings a positive energy that brightens up the lives of everyone she comes in touch with. “The biggest reward is always a satisfied client. Nothing beats the thrill of their positive feedback. That you were able to help them and that they are more comfortable, relieved and relaxed, because of what you have done. That’s the biggest reward, indeed”, she relates.

Visiting with Martha, it is abundantly clear that she is someone who loves people and loves to help them with her special skills. She says while sighted people tend to make judgments based on visual impressions, it is different for her. “I see the spirit of people. Sometimes I do sense that people are a bit uncomfortable when they

realise that I am visually impaired. But, I give them the benefit of the doubt and take it on as a challenge to win them over. They come back and when they do, they ask for me”, she says.

Passion

Martha underscores that passion in what one embarks on; confidence and resilience to make it work; trust in one’s instincts; and an unrelenting quest for growth and success. “I have been lucky, I guess. Despite struggling at school and initial setbacks, I am now in a space where I enjoy a lot of support and encouragement from my friends and colleagues, who care about me and who want me to succeed and grow in this chosen career path.

They keep me focused and positive and they encourage me to grow. I am so fortunate to have them around me”, she notes.

People seeing her disability, and not her as a human being, does not faze her, at all. “I simply can’t allow myself to be distracted and derailed by able-bodied people and their unfounded fears of people with disabilities. However, what I can do is to do my best. And demonstrate that although I’m visually impaired, I am very able. I am able to do my work, I am able to earn an honest living and I am able to support those around me, including my family. In fact, come to think of it, I am not disabled. I am just differently-abled”, Martha shares.

Martha appreciates that her story serves as an inspiration to other people living with disabilities to pursue their own dreams for a better life. “I am happy if my story can inspire them. Living with disability is not easy at all, and as a society, we must do more to support people living with disabilities, in a manner that is truly inclusive. Paying mere lip service to inclusivity will not help us. It’s about action and more action”, she highlights.

Martha Abed. Courageous. Unapologetic. Determined. Positive. Confident. Her story teaches us to be comfortable in our imperfection. That the difference between a successful person and others is not a lack in ability, strength, or knowledge, but rather a lack in will. That each of us has a personal calling that’s as unique as a fingerprint. And that the best way to succeed is to discover what you love and then find a way to offer it to others in the form of service.

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