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Annemarie Johnson

Diamond Cutter

A JOURNEY OF INSPIRATION AND FLIPPING THE SCRIPT ON DISABILITY AS JUST A LABEL

A Diamond Cutter is a skilled artisan who cuts and polishes a rough diamond into a faceted and sparkly shape; enhancing the value of the stone. Meet Annemarie Johnson, a diamond cutter, employed by local diamond cutting and polishing company, Schachter & Namdar Namibia. Despite being a wheelchair user, Annemarie's technical proficiency makes her a big asset to her employer. This is her story.

CHALLENGING CHILDHOOD

Born at Keetmanshoop in the //Kharas region, Annemarie Johnson injured her spine in a swimming pool in the capital, at age eight.

“Before my accident, I was just a normal child and school at Moses van der Byl Primary in Katutura was fun. You learn to read and write during those early school years and as such, the accident proved very disruptive, as my spinal cord injury kept me confined to a hospital bed for a long time. Left paralyzed, I had to eventually transfer to the Augzikas Primary School, which was in a way, better suited for my needs as a paraplegic”, she recalls.

“So, it goes without saying that growing up was really challenging. It was very, very difficult for my family as well and they struggled to adapt. Not only had I to navigate this new reality of ending up in a wheelchair at the age of eight. Adapting to an environment and surroundings not in tune with the needs of a paralyzed child, proved cumbersome. I lost most of my childhood friends. I had to change schools. It was really challenging”, Annemarie shares.

CAREER DREAMS

Annemarie completed primary school and enrolled at the Cosmos High School, in Khomasdal. It was here where she started harbouring dreams of working in the media sector. “I've always been very talkative, but I'm also a good listener, I thought that becoming a radio host could be a good way through which to reach out to people and show the world my talent. At least, through radio, they would only listen to my voice and will not see my wheelchair”, she shares.

This was not to be, however, as the challenges brought about by the societal stigma led her to abandon school early. “Often, I would experience that people, in considering my situation, would arrive at baseless conclusions, assuming that since I was a wheelchair user, I was also disabled by mind. Decisions were taken on my behalf that I needed to go to a special school. So, I never got to finish Grade 12 and I was taken out of school in Grade 8. That's where my dreams to enter the media sector were shattered”, reminisces Annemarie.

"I really felt destitute at the time. The sense of hopelessness and futility was overwhelming. I was not in a good place, at all. I felt that this was the end; that there was nothing I could do to change my circumstances. Because, who would want to employ a wheelchair-using young girl who was also not well-educated. I felt cursed", she adds.

CHANCE ENCOUNTER

A unexpected encounter turned Annemarie's fortunes around. One day, a stranger noticed her on the sidewalk and asked what she was doing in life. She shared her journey, the man promised that he had something in store for her. "It was really out of the ordinary. This stranger came across as sincere, and he promised to pick me up the next Monday morning. Not expecting him to turn up, I nonetheless got ready and when he came as promised, I was there, waiting", Annemarie says.

"I noticed something was going on when he kept on driving and started picking up other disabled people. After the pickups, he started explaining to us about this company looking specifically for talented people living with disabilities to train and employ. Not knowing what to expect, we all went along with his explanation. I guess, all of us saw it as an opportunity to escape our circumstances and find a purpose in life", she adds.

The stranger was a representative of diamond cutting and polishing firm, Schachter & Namdar Namibia, as a local affiliate of the world renowned Schachter & Namdar International, an industry pioneer in diamond branding. When it kicked off its local operations, the company took a deliberate decision to identify people living with disabilities to train as diamond cutters and polishers. "That's how I landed my first job. Just by chance. I never typed a CV, or went for an interview", Annemarie notes.

APPRENTICESHIP

Schachter & Namdar Namibia took in Annemarie and others as apprentice diamond cutters. Diamond cutting is a challenging process and takes years of apprenticeship under a skilled diamond cutter, before one in training is allowed to cut rough diamonds. "I took to my apprenticeship like the proverbial fish to water. And yes, it was so exciting to see a rough diamond for the first time. Under the supervision of experienced cutters, I learned the finer tricks of diamond grading and the operation of cutting and faceting equipment", Annemarie recalls.

"I didn't find the apprenticeship too challenging. In fact, learning about diamonds and the cutting and polishing industry was very interesting. I've always been technically inclined and I'm a fast learner. It helped that all of us were so eager to make a success of the opportunity afforded to us. Coupled with the support and patience of our mentors, it also helped that our mindsets were right. We all wanted to succeed", she adds. The apprenticeship covered aspects such as terminology, diamond grading, the 4 Cs of carat, color, cut and clarity, and operation of cutting and faceting equipment. "It was very interesting

learning about cutting techniques and how to regulate the speed of revolutions of drilling mechanisms. But, more importantly, it made you look forward to upskill yourself to a level where you could also become part of the national effort to add value to our country's natural resources. That's exactly what we do now. We are adding value to our diamonds", she adds.

CARING EMPLOYER

One third of Schachter & Namdar Namibia's factory employees in Windhoek, are disabled, deaf or mute. In catering for the special needs of its workforce, the company has made significant investments in modified polishing benches, handicapped restrooms and a modified mini-bus that accommodates wheelchairs. The firm's commitment to the creation of viable employment opportunities for people living with disabilities in Namibia, allows Annemarie and her colleagues to thrive.

"I'm really proud to be a Schachter & Namdar Namibia employee. Here, it is about teamwork and togetherness. It's really a caring and conducive work environment. Here, no one sees your disability. Not at all. Here it is all about your skills and commitment in a corporate culture of caring and respect", Annemarie highlights.

"I've been lucky to have been afforded this opportunity. However, I often think of other people with disabilities out there, just longing for an opportunity to also be empowered with a skill set through which they can demonstrate to others that they too are of value to the society. This company is leading the way. It is the biggest employer of disabled people in Namibia. It made substantial investments making its factory environment more conducive. More companies need to follow suit. Mere lip service to inclusive work is not enough", she emphasises.

PROFICIENT ARTISAN

Diamond cutting is physically demanding and requires high levels of attentiveness and focus. Annemarie takes it all in her stride and she doesn't mind putting in the hours. Her ability to perform often-complex work without direct supervision makes her an asset to her employer. "Diamond cutting requires intense focus and concentration. If the diamond shoots, you need to identify the direction it went into. You cannot overpolish. You cannot let your guard down, at all", she stresses.

"A key part of our training focused on us developing not only the technical skills, but other softer skills, such as the ability to work under pressure, problem-solving skills and communication skills, as well. These skills are important because diamond cutting and polishing is cutthroat work. A mistake by a cutter follows through to other aspects of our production process. International purchasers of diamonds only want the best quality, and all of us in the production chain need to be on song", Annemarie highlights. Annemarie's calm demeanor and ability to follow complex technical instructions in her work not only adds value to the polishing of diamonds



to reach their full potential; but to Schachter & Namdar's bottom line, as well. "Our Director, Mr. Marc Friedman always encourages us to do our best. This company has given all of us an opportunity to turn our lives around. We know that if we continue to do our best for the company, it will continue to do its best for us. We've been taught the values of teamwork, togetherness and positivity. It is the Schachter & Namdar culture. Here it is not about disability – on the contrary – it is all about ability. I've lost the use of my legs, but there's absolutely nothing wrong with my mind and my hands. Today, I am a skilled diamond cutter", she adds.

WORK COMMUNITY

The Schachter and Namdar programme also reunited Annemarie with her closest friend, who she got to know at age eight, whilst in hospital. Today, the two Annemaries are joined at the hip - at and away from work. "Annemarie Engelbrecht is my best friend. We were hospitalised together and we lost touch after I was discharged. We reunited in 2011 when the stranger who picked us up explained that another wheelchair-bound lady from Rehoboth was going to join us the next day. To my surprise, and as fate had it, it was my namesake. The two Annemaries are besties now. We're joined at the hip", she jokes.

"Together, we have developed a bit of a reputation here at work. And a good reputation, I must say, because our colleagues and supervisors say they always appreciate our positive spirit, and that work is not the same when we're not here. I guess they like our friendliness and light-heartedness. We know when to make jokes, but when it is time to get down to the business of work, we know how to deliver", Annemarie notes. The two Annemaries are also inseparable, away from the office. Next on their bucket lists are driving their own cars and skydiving. "Skydiving sounds so exhilarating. I've heard that a Swakopmund-based skydiving company helps paraplegics to do so, and it is definitely on my radar to go there and tick this adventure off. I need to convince Annemarie still, but I know she'll come around, eventually.", she adds.

ROLE MODEL

Annemarie appreciates the value of her journey in giving hope to other physically disabled people and in overturning the negative societal perceptions and attitudes that often create further barriers for people living with disabilities. "The worst part of living with a physical disability is often not the disability, or the lack of opportunities to help us turn our disabilities into abilities. The worst part is people living with disabilities feeling disconnected from the world by their limitations. They feel cursed and they need help and support", Annemarie shares.

"It starts with society helping people living with disabilities to see what they can do, instead of what they can not. Visually impaired people are the best massage therapists, because of their enhanced sense of touch. Hearing impaired people are excellent diamond polishers, because sounds cannot distract them and their focus levels are very high. People born with restricted growth are excellent jewelry makers because their small fingers make easy work of intricate designs" she explains.

"Disability doesn't need to be a barrier. I've been given an opportunity and I'm using my disability to fuel my determination to live independently and to show society that I can indeed participate fully and actively in life. Others share the same dream. They too can do so, if only supported and given an opportunity", she concludes.

Annemarie Johnson: Proficient, adept and able. Her story teaches us that just because someone lacks the use of her legs, does not mean she lacks direction; but more importantly: that physical disability does not have to equate to disability in spirit; that attitude is a little thing that can make a big difference. She has opted for a career her disability doesn't prevent her from doing. She has chosen not to place the 'dis' in her ability. She is living her passion.

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