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Vision – Power or perception?

Mimi Batliwala met life's challenges head on in spite of her visual impairment, making us wonder whether our sensory organs are as powerful as we make them to be. **Jyoti Kalsi** brings us the details.

Mimi Batliwala is a bubbly, vivacious person who loves to dance, play the piano, swim, play golf, travel to new places and make friends wherever she goes. She is also involved in many social causes, including teaching at a school for visually impaired slum dwellers and running an orphanage and a centre for women's empowerment. She conducts yoga workshops for sighted as well as blind people and has taught yoga in India and the US. Since moving to Dubai last year she has made many friends and plans to conduct yoga courses at the Dubai Ladies Club. Nobody who meets her would ever guess that Mimi is almost blind.

Mimi's world became blurred when she was 12 years old. But she did not allow that to affect her life in any way, fighting every challenge with courage, resilience and a positive attitude. "I believe in counting my blessings. How can I ever complain when I have so much to thank God for and I see so many people with bigger problems than mine," she says.

Mimi belongs to a rich and well-known family from Mumbai and had an idyllic childhood. When her sight suddenly became blurred at 12, the doctors diagnosed it as macular degeneration of the retina, a condi-

tion with no known cure. Mimi accepted the fact with fortitude. Taking her cue from her parents, who treated her no differently from her siblings, she never spoke about her condition to anyone and asked for no special favours at school or elsewhere.

Despite difficulties in reading her books and what was written on the board, she did well in school. She continued her piano lessons by devising a way to play without having to read the notes. At 13, she even coaxed her parents to send her to boarding school. She managed well on her own and got good grades. Mimi even played netball and hockey, though years later one of her schoolmates confided that they always worried about which direction she would whack the ball.



Mimi is always impeccably dressed, her jewellery and other accessories perfectly matched with her dress

"I was able to do these things mainly because my parents and teachers never made me feel I was any different from others and always encouraged me to do everything I wanted to do," says Mimi. In fact, she began playing golf because her father insisted she too should learn the game like other members of the family. But, as is typical of her, she took it further to a competitive level, winning many golf championships. Mimi cannot see the green or the flag, but her trusted caddy points her in the right direction and tells her how hard to hit the ball.

Mimi did well in college and won medals at inter-collegiate and inter-state swimming tournaments and even qualified for the college hockey team. But with her vision deteriorating further, keeping up with studies proved to be more difficult. The last straw came when a keen suitor arrived to seek her hand in marriage. "I didn't want to marry a rich man who would treat me like a possession, so I decided to flee," recalls Mimi. "I enlisted the help of an Italian friend to convince my father to let me go to Italy to learn Italian." Thanks to her mother's support, she was soon on a ship, bound for Italy. "I was extremely nervous but then I saw my cabin mate was in a worse state. She was on her way to be married off to a man she didn't even know and was terrified. Looking after her made me forget my own fears," says Mimi.

She stayed in Europe for several years, becoming fluent in many languages. She has many comic tales to tell about her futile attempts to find a job. "I would do well in the interview, but when I was asked to fill out forms or read something, I would put on this act of searching for my spectacles and flee from the scene," laughs Mimi.

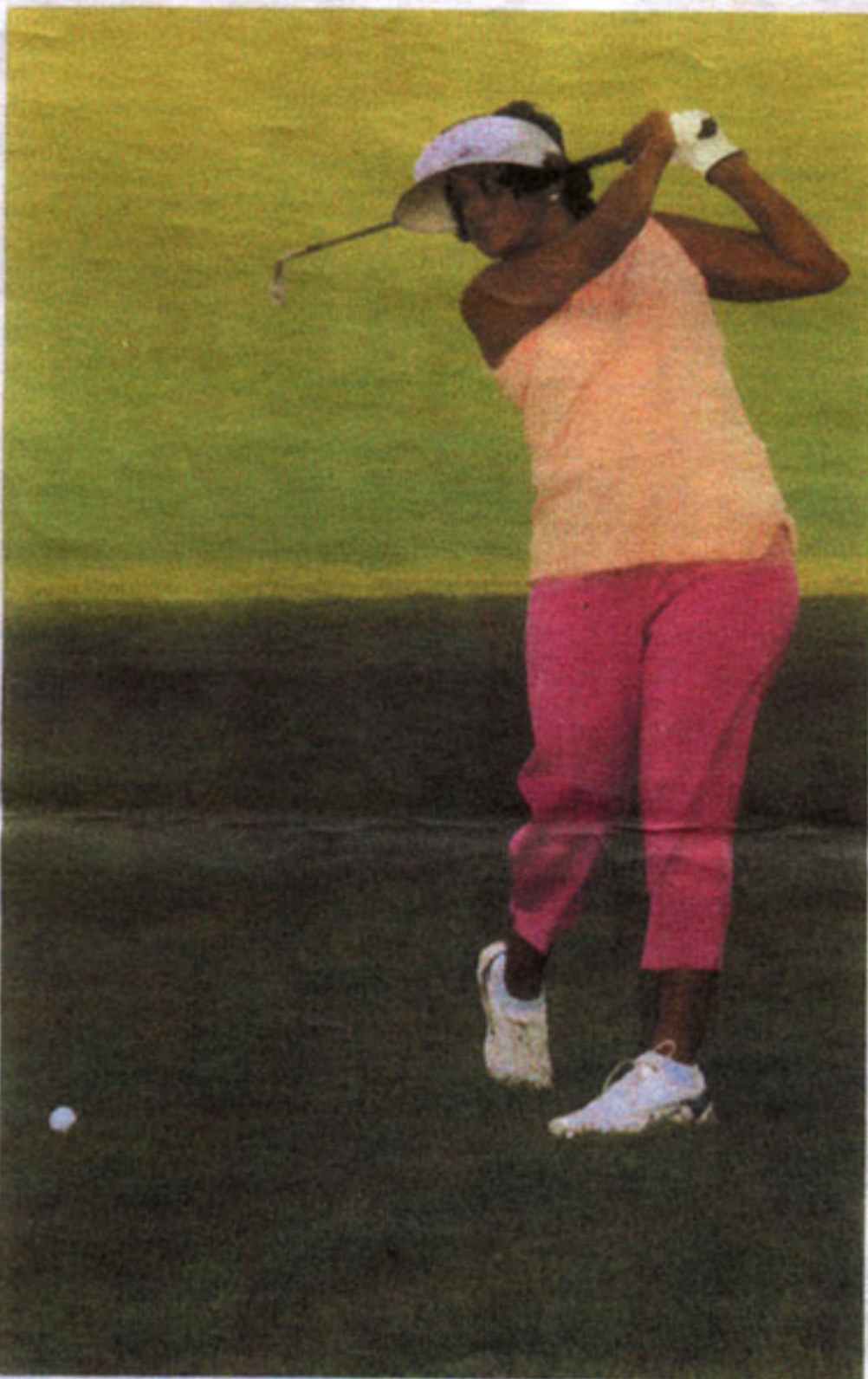
Eventually, she did manage to get a job with the Indian Tea Board in Brussels. Thanks to her linguistic and social skills she was soon recognised as one of the best employees and travelled all over Europe to represent the company at international fairs and promotional events. After

returning to India, she married a childhood friend and has a son. "I feel bad that I could not do things like reading bedtime stories to him," she recollects with regret. "But he has grown up to be a sensitive person and has inherited my love for music."

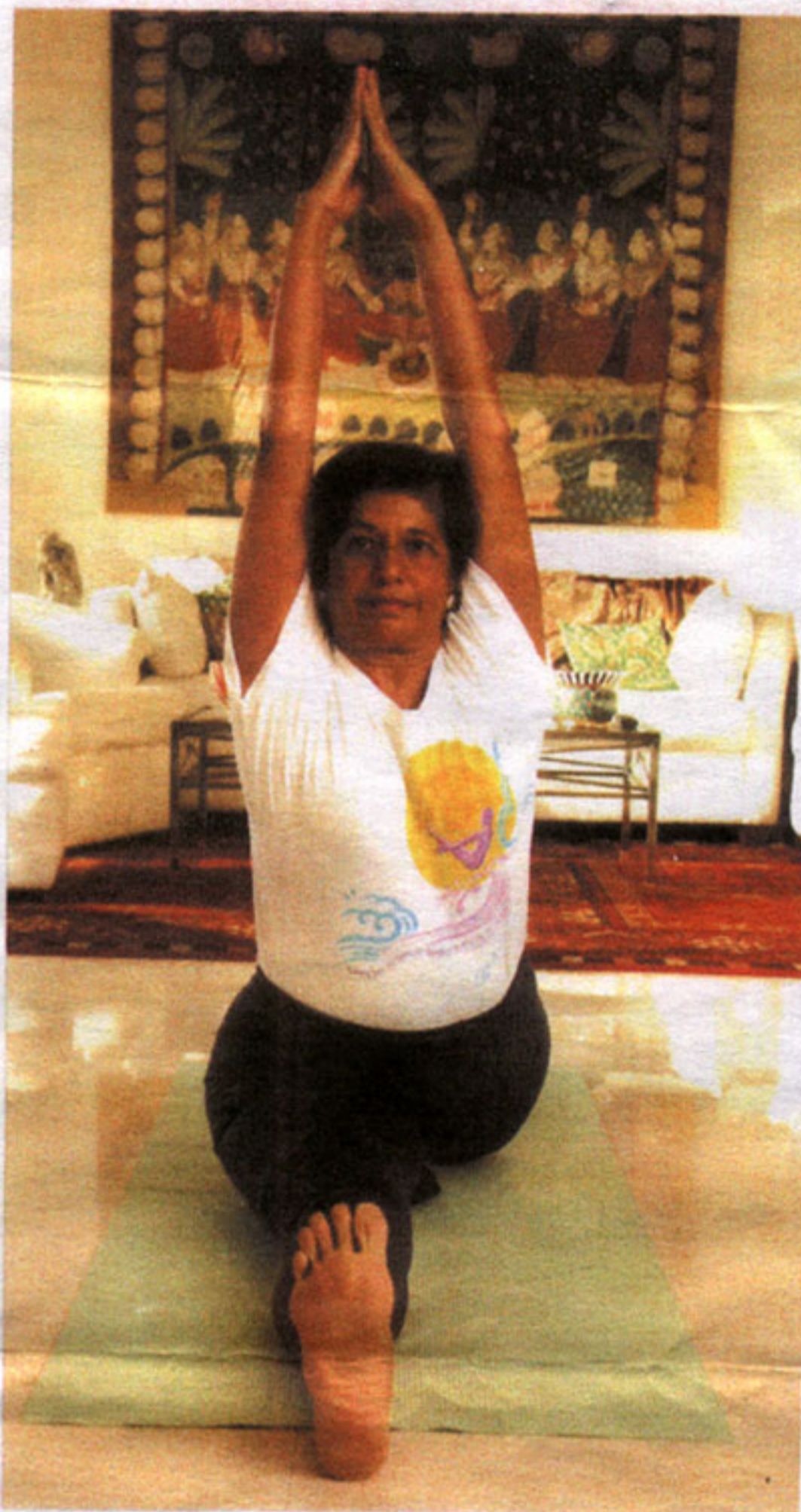
Yoga has been an important part of Mimi's life since her twenties and she is a qualified teacher of Iyengar Yoga. "I was fortunate to be accepted as a student by guru B.K. Iyengar, who gave me special training to teach visually challenged students. I have taught in India and the US and would love to teach yoga in Dubai," she says.

But Mimi's pet project is the Women's Empowerment Centre and Network (WECAN) that she runs in Mumbai with her sister. Her big dream is to expand an orphanage and school for girls, started by her father, into a vocational training centre that can help underprivileged women become economically independent. "I feel a divine force has been watching over me and helping me overcome every hurdle in my life and will help me to achieve this dream too," she says optimistically.

A defining moment in Mimi's life came when she joined an EST course and the instructor coaxed her to come on stage and talk about her eye condition. "All my life I had successfully hidden the problem behind sun-



She has won the Golfer of the Year trophy at the Wellington Club, Mumbai several times



Yoga has given her inner strength and balance

glasses and a confident gait. Speaking about it in public was cathartic. A great burden lifted off my shoulders. It was an emotional experience and many people hugged me afterwards, apologising for thinking I was a snob because I often ignored them. That day I learnt that admitting I had a problem was not just good for me, but made it easier for others to interact with me," recalls Mimi.

"We grow and evolve spiritually when we have a cross to bear. I have certainly grown spiritually and hope my story gives courage to others. It is best to live life to the fullest and achieve your full potential. That's the true inner vision," she adds philosophically. ☺