

INTERVIEW WITH YAMINA

Yamina attends the Thursday remedial class for neurological issues. She has spinal cord injuries and uses a wheelchair.

What is your condition and how was it caused?

I was 15 years old and living back at home in Algeria. I went onto the roof of my house to adjust a satellite dish. I was wearing high-heeled shoes, slipped from the second floor and landed in my neighbour's garden. My parents weren't there but my siblings found me. I was very lucky! I could have been dead. It was a tragic time for my parents and me. I stayed in hospital for eight months after an emergency operation. My lumbar vertebrae 1/2 was smashed but my spinal cord was not totally severed. However, I was not feeling much from the upper lumbar downwards. I went to a Chinese medical practice outside Algiers where they helped me with acupuncture. I managed to regain some feeling down to my knees. Now I have patches of feeling in my legs.

Psychologically, I was in denial. When I woke up in hospital and I saw the wheelchair next to me, I refused to think it was for me. I just thought I would go back to normal. We had to change the house around as we were living on the first floor. My sister helped me a lot with the psychological side. Also, as far as they could, my parents treated me as 'normal'. We always had tasks to do at home, so I continued to carry out household chores and was even asked to fetch water. I thought it was so mean but it really helped me to feel more normal. I never went back to school. I had some home schooling but access to my mainstream school was impossible with a wheelchair.

What made you come to Iyengar Yoga London?

My sister, Samira, is an Iyengar Yoga teacher in Perugia (Italy) and she recommended that I come here. Whenever I saw her in yoga postures, I thought she was crazy to suggest yoga to me. How could I do all this?! But she said that I would be able to do it step by step. I also have very high levels of anxiety, especially since lockdown. I have never had panic attacks before but since lockdown my mental health has got worse. When everything went back to normal, my family went out more and I was left with a big void. I decided that I needed to do something to help myself.

What happened in your first class?

I contacted the office at IYL to enquire about the class for neurological conditions which sounded more suited to my needs. I was, however, doubtful whether I would be accepted. When I got there, I was warmly welcomed and told just to do what I could. The teacher admitted that she had very little experience with people in my condition (paraplegic). I felt so happy to do something with my body. At the end of the first lesson, I was prepared to be told that I could not continue, especially as I saw that the other people with MS, Parkinson's and peripheral neuropathy could stand up with or without support or lie on the floor. When the teacher approached me I thought, this is it, she will tell me that it is too difficult to have me in the class. But it was the opposite. I was welcomed by everyone. I was so happy. The teacher told me that I was very body aware. As I have strong arms from swimming, I could actually lower myself to the floor and get back up onto the chair. With practice, this has become easy.

“

When I am at the studio, I turn my mobile off and I am not connected to anyone. I lie down and look at the sky and I am literally in heaven.

Do you find that the access facilities at IYL meet your needs?

It is so easy to reach IYL. I drive and park in the Paddington Recreation Ground car park behind IYL. It has a special disabled bay and I can stay there for three hours for free. Then I reach IYL with my wheelchair via the park or the road, which gives me some nice fresh air. The path to IYL takes me straight to the ground-level entrance, where I take my shoes off and then use the big toilet. I open the door to the studio and then help myself to all the equipment. I even go and get my yoga chair from the storeroom. Sometimes I fetch equipment for some of the others by piling everything onto my lap.

What are the benefits of coming to the class?

Yoga has changed my life dramatically: physically and mentally. My posture and breathing have improved. It is my 'me' time. I will not miss it for anything. Sometimes I have appointments on Thursdays, but I will always change them to be able to attend class.

When I come to yoga it makes me get out of the house. I have a rendezvous with myself. I see everyone there and I am Yamina, not the mother of my children, not a sister. When I am at the studio, I turn my mobile off and I am not connected to anyone. I lie down and look at the sky and I am literally in heaven. Both helpers, Jackie and Alison, are amazing. They know what I need and sometimes we just exchange glances and they know how to adjust me. I am so grateful for their assistance as I have one-to-one help. [Ed. – Jackie McCaul and Alison Barty are Yamina's dedicated helpers.]



Are there any specific asanas that make you work more?

My upper back takes a lot of stress when I sit in the wheelchair so I love the Pune shoulder belt for my shoulders. I often do it at home. All the shoulder work is great as it lifts my lower back and my spirits. I have a strong lower back lordosis from sitting (arched lower back). I could almost put my fist into my lower back, this is how arched it was. My lumbar lordosis has also improved and I have less backache now.

Backbends are a huge challenge because my hip flexors are so tight from having my legs bent when sitting in the wheelchair. So Setu Bandha Sarvangasana, even on one foam block, is very strong. I need to have the legs higher or bent on a chair. The first time I did this, I suddenly felt



things in the back of my legs, something I had not felt for years. I burst into tears. My helper called the teacher and she said that it was probably the opening of the chest, because that can make us quite emotional. It was only after the class that I told her that they were tears of joy and amazement at feeling my legs. She was relieved and, I think, this prompted us to do this interview for Dipika. On that day when I felt my lower body it was like a reconnection with the rest of my body. I really understood what 'good pain' meant. It took me to my body memory of when I was walking. I was happy and sad at the same time. My sister was right that I would do poses that I thought I could never do. She was right.

What do you expect for the future and what pose would you like to do one day?

I would like to be more flexible and healthy. People tell me that I should use an electric wheelchair but I enjoy the manual one as it keeps me working out and keeps my arms strong.

I would love to do chair Sarvangasana and also rope Sirsasana. I am so impressed when I see the others hanging from the ropes.
