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Blind athlete overcame tough childhood to find strength within

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Laura Caparroso, of Edmonds, is an advanced student of yoga.



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Laura Caparroso (middle), of Edmonds, gladly accepts affection from her two twin daughters, Daniella (bottom) and Isabella, 5, following Caparroso's yoga class, Wednesday, June 11, 2012 at the Lynnwood Recreation Center. Caparroso is an advanced student of yoga, despite being blind her entire life.



Weekly Herald/CHRIS GOODENOW

Laura Caparroso, of Edmonds, performs yoga poses with classmates as instructor Elizabeth Kovar watches during their yoga class, Wednesday, June 6, 2012 at the Lynnwood Recreation Center. Caparroso is an advanced student of yoga, despite being blind her entire life.

LYNNWOOD — Laura Caparroso kneels on her yoga mat and folds one edge down. She places her head and elbows on the mat and takes her time easing her legs over her head and holding still in a headstand.

Even more impressive than her nonchalance about the move is that Caparroso is blind.

Caparroso, who turned 51 earlier this week, has traveled around the world, competed in the Paralympics and is raising twins as a single mom.

Not once has her lack of vision prevented her from seeing her dreams become reality.

“Various people along the way made a difference in my life,” she said.

She's lived in the Seattle area since 1995 and currently lives in Edmonds with her 5-year-old twin daughters, Daniella and Isabella, her nanny, and her 10-year-old guide dog, Gemma.

“I'm self-sufficient and independent but I can't do it alone,” she said. “I depend on my network of support.”

Weekdays she leaves her home by 5:20 a.m. to catch a bus to her job at the Environmental Protection Agency in Seattle. The job has allowed her to follow her dreams of supporting a family and being a homeowner.

Caparroso was born in Mexico City with infant glaucoma. By the time she turned 7, Caparroso completely lost the little vision she was born with.

Her family dealt with Caparroso's blindness by ignoring it.

Learning to be patient is one of the virtues of folks who are blind, she laughed.

Growing up in Mexico without a cane or guide dog required Caparroso to sit patiently and wait for a relative to take her places.

“I spent a lot of time sitting and waiting,” she said. “I didn't go to school and I followed my family around.”

At age 15, Caparroso earned a scholarship to attend the Perkins School for the Blind in Massachusetts. Caparroso had no idea whether she could learn to read and write. But she knew she liked the idea of learning. Caparroso has never wanted to move back home.

“I love my family but I wanted to see something different,” she said. “I was driven by my ambition and wanting to change my current situation.”

While attending Perkins, Caparroso met a Mexican family who was visiting the school for their daughter, who was blind. The family took Caparroso under their wing and paid for her to attend a prep school.

At Perkins, she learned to speak English and to be independent by using a cane.

“It was liberating and awesome,” she said.

After high school, Caparroso earned a full-ride scholarship to attend Wellesley College, also in Massachusetts. In college, she learned yoga and instantly realized it was an outlet for relaxation. Her instructor taught Caparroso the nonexplanatory names of the positions and helped position her body to do the moves properly.

“People have always been helpful,” she said. “The more verbal they are the better.”

She took a five-year break from yoga after her daughters were born. About a month ago, Caparroso got back into yoga at the Lynnwood Recreation Center. There, instructor Elizabeth Kovar works with Caparroso to master the moves through verbal descriptions.

“Yoga is a way of releasing tension,” Caparroso said. “Sports have always been my stress management.”

A personal trainer at the Recreation Center who is quadriplegic offered Kovar perspective. He said when life takes something away, you appreciate and miss it.

“That really hit when I saw Laura do a headstand,” Kovar said. “When life takes something from you or a tragedy strikes, it's an eye-opener of the things we take for granted.”

After college, Caparroso worked in Boston where she met her now ex-husband. Together they ran an international export and import business. They spent six months trekking from England to Russia on trains and on a tandem bicycle. They were there to witness the Berlin Wall come down. They spent another six months backpacking around Latin America.

Her love for bicycling morphed into a knack for running and cross-country skiing. She trained for the 1998 Winter Paralympics in Japan and made it to nationals, but was 20 seconds too slow. Training consisted of working with a trainer skiing three feet ahead of Caparroso who gave verbal directions. Caparroso competed in the 2000 Summer Paralympics in Australia in tandem bicycling.

It hasn't always been easy, Caparroso admits. But once she sets her mind to something and is patient, good things come.

“I have found a way to make my dreams a reality,” she said.