

New Sunday Times 26/04/2009 m/s r-1

Look ma, no hands

Born without arms, Jessica Cox lives a normal life using her toes for everything from brushing teeth to flying a plane, writes VIMALA SENEVIRATNE



Cox...what's amazing for others is normal for her.

JESSICA COX calmly uncaps a bottle of mineral water, pours the contents into a glass and drinks it. Nothing unusual about this except that she did it all with her feet... or toes, to be precise. No, this was not a stunt show. Born without arms, she's always used her feet as her hands.

"Using my feet for doing just about everything - combing hair, dressing, brushing teeth, driving a car and piloting a plane - has become so natural for me," she says giving a broad smile as she picks up her glass again with such ease and takes another sip of water. Her throat is dry, she states giving a soft smile. A short while earlier, she had given an astounding account of her life to a room full of audience attending the Women of Independence Conference held in conjunction with International Women's Day in Kuala Lumpur.

"I am in every sense a normal person living a normal life. True, I was born without arms, I live in a two-handed world but I have never looked upon that (being born without arms) as a

disability," says 26-year-old Cox, who last year created aviation history by becoming the world's first armless licensed pilot to fly using only her feet - one foot manning the controls and the other guiding the steering wheel. Her Sport Pilot certificate qualifies her to fly a light-sport aircraft to altitudes of 10,000 feet.

"Oh, that feeling..." says the petite Cox, closing her eyes for a second or two as if recalling that moment when she took to the skies without her instructor.

"Nothing is more empowering than that moment when you are up in the air. You are there alone for the first time... the person in command. At that moment your life is in your own hands or should I say feet! Believe me, something about that moment changes your forever," she says as she looks you straight in the eye.

It was during her primary school days that the idea of flying took root. "It was on my elementary school playground. I was limited to the swing while the other kids were on the monkey

motivational speaker who lives in Tuscon, Arizona with her parents, attributes her sense of independence to her Filipina mother, Inez, a former nurse who came to the US in search of a better life.

"I inherited her genes, the independent streak, turning what is considered impossible into accomplishments and never taking 'no' for an answer."

Doctors, she says, could not figure out why she was born without arms but she decided early in life that she was going to use her feet as her hands. She learned to feed herself and write with her feet and throughout childhood took part in numerous activities such as tap dancing and gymnastics that provide her with balance.

"These activities are useful especially when you have to top up petrol for your car. Try standing on one foot and using the other to work the nozzle," says Cox, who drives around her hometown in her 2001 automatic Volvo car. She steers her car with her right foot while her left works the accelerator and the brakes.

She had, at one

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Jessica Cox



the monkey bars. This frustrated me, so I would close my eyes and imagine flying over the playground like superwoman while everyone watched in disbelief.”

Fly she did.

Cox plans to become a flight instructor to those with physical disabilities and admits that she took a little longer the normal time required to get her license. “Three instructors, 89 hours, three light sport Ercoupe aircraft and three-and-half-years later, I got my licence and fulfilled my childhood dream of flying like superwoman!” exclaims Cox who defied standards of what she calls “two handed” world by taking up swimming, gymnastics and tap dancing.

She also holds a black belt in Tae Kwon-Do. She enrolled at the University of Arizona – attending regular lectures, taking notes with her feet and typing out her papers using a regular computer keyboard at a speed of 25 words a minute. And she graduated with a degree in psychology.

There is no mistaking her fierce sense of independence that surfaces when she relates her experiences adapting to the “two handed” world.

“As a child, I was hurt, angry, disappointed. It didn’t help that some kids made fun of me. I resolved to prove that I was just as good, if not better, than all the able-bodied people.” The second of three children, Cox, a

She had, at one stage used prosthetic arms but gave them up at 14 because it was getting in her way. “It was so cumbersome and I didn’t like the idea of having hooks instead of fingers. So I got rid of it and went back to using my feet as my hands.”

Cox still swims and she walks as much as possible to maintain strength and flexibility in her legs.

“Anything physical is not a challenge to me. It’s people who think I’m disabled and therefore, feel sorry for me. Frankly, I don’t need that.”

One of the most challenging tasks is getting dressed. She wears regular clothes, including zipped pants and buttoned blouses and shirts. “Of course there are times when I do ask for assistance especially when you have the occasional button or hook that refuses to co-operate.”

Is there anything that she physically cannot do? “Yes, having my hair tied up in a pony tail. I haven’t come around to mastering that yet and jet skiing,” she says laughing. Like most people, she too has plans on eventually getting married and raising a family.

“No reason for me to shelve that. I think I’m in the best position to judge if a guy is really in love with me. Does he see me without arms or is he able to see beyond that. I’ll keep you posted on that,” she says with a mischievous glint in her eyes.