

Eye for helping others

CEO AND FOUNDER of Not My Eyes, Annalee Bowen-Smith, who is visually impaired, is working to uplift and empower people from all strata of society.
(Picture by Lennox Devonish.)

by **JOHN BOYCE**
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WHAT COULD have ordinarily caused another person's world to crumble, gave founder and chief executive officer of Not My Eyes the impetus to turn it into a blessing for others.

Annalee Bowen-Smith realised that her sight had significantly deteriorated at 21 years old, but instead of closing the doors of society on her life, she is resolved to opening windows of opportunity, not only for the blind, but all strata of society.

At 12 years old, she was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa (RP), a rare eye disease that affects the retina, causing the person to lose their vision.

As her family migrated to the United States, she prepared to fulfil her initial dream of becoming an occupational therapist and pursued that course of study at Long Island University, where she graduated with a bachelor's degree and later a master's.

"It took me a while because in the midst of my studies I had my daughter," Annalee told the **MIDWEEK NATION**.

Soon after having her daughter at 21 years old, she realised that her sight was deteriorating rapidly.

One of three siblings, the St Philip resident, who is now visually impaired, said that she and a brother were diagnosed with the hereditary condition from her mother's side, but her elder brother did not have the condition.

The diagnosis, however, was devastating for both of them as they received the news the same day.

"We both cried, but he took it very hard to the point that he went into depression. After a while, I shook it off and I was like, it is what it is and we are going to make this work."

Fashion

This caused her to recalibrate her plans for the future, as occupational therapy is a hands-on task. Along with her love for occupational therapy, there was a passion for fashion and she took a job as a production assistant at a company for the blind.

Annalee, 42, also participated in several plus-size runway shows, but though she was not immediately in the top three, one of the judges, on seeing her poise, was inspired by her potential, and gave her pointers on how to make a mark in the industry.

Though she was armed with the words of encouragement, the journey

was still long and arduous.

Annalee had discussed participating in a show with an agency, but added that as soon as she pointed out that she was visually impaired the agent shunned her.

"It came as a shock because we had discussed this before, and it put a damper on my whole dream of becoming a model."

As one door closed another opened, as an employee at "my favourite store in the States", called Ashley Store, complimented her on her beauty and asked if she would participate in their competition.

However, the disappointments of her journey up to that point had left her broken. The employee, though, was persistent and recommended someone whom she felt could be of assistance. Annalee's mum, who was with her, insisted that they follow up on the recommendation, and, as suggested, it opened many doors for the model.

She competed against several experienced models in the **Face Of Curvaceous** show in 2022 and emerged runner-up.

As she delved deeper into the world of modelling, Annalee was taught her signature walk and other "tricks of the

trade" by some of the reputable names in the industry, leading to her becoming a cover girl for **Smooches** magazine and being featured in **New York Fashion Week**.

"Because of my hard work and dedication, I ended up reentering the **Face Of Curvaceous** competition and won," Annalee said proudly.

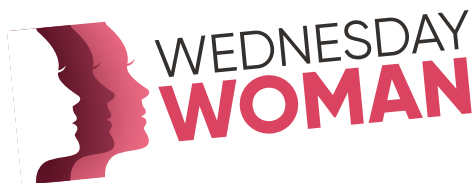
With her name now rising to prominence in the industry, she was pursued by several magazines for interviews.

Now a brand ambassador for the **Face Of Curvaceous**, the plus-sized queen said that part of the journey was to give back to the visually impaired community.

"Knowing that we are the last for everything and are considered to be the bottom of the barrel, and people don't take us seriously, I decided to create Not My Eyes in 2022 with 15 young ladies who were either visually impaired or blind."

Added to that, she held a show with a DJ who was visually impaired, a comedian who was blind, and the founder and chief executive officer of Not My Eyes said that their show went viral. The following year, Not My Eyes was certified in the United States as a non-profit organisation.

"My goal is to grow the organisation and show the world that we are somebody," she said.



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