

**... AND LAST BUT NOT LEAST  
Andrea's story**

by Nilpushpi White

2 am Monday, November 5th, 1991. Tavern on the Green at 67th Street in New York City's Central Park. Television spotlights focus on a lone woman racing under the finish banner of the New York City Marathon. Atop the banner the black digital clock's yellow numbers flash 20 hours. A volunteer puts a medal around the runner's neck. The TV cameras focus on the medal.

The runner's dark laughing eyes and wide smile, the right hand held oddly awkward and the left hand grasping a glass, wonder come. She's last in the 1991 New York City Marathon, but 23-year-old Lourdes De Mello is grinning — every bit the winner. Crumpled by a stroke 10 years ago, the 20-hour marathon means victory for Andrea. Her first marathon victory? No, it's her fifth.

This is the story of a young woman who refuses to recognize limits. It's a tribute to the human spirit — an Everest conquering story — a story of outer tragedy and inner power. This is Andrea's story.

It's summer 1981, an amusement park in Brazil. On a windy bird ride 13-year-old Andrea inexplicably loses consciousness. Her family, distraught, rush her to a hospital. The doctors shake their heads. They find no cause for the tragedy, and no cure. They wait — expecting the child to die. But she doesn't die. After 15 days, Andrea regains consciousness. She's paralyzed on her right side and has difficulty speaking. The doctors suspect brain damage. Certain that the child will be a vegetable the rest of her life, the Brazilian doctors urge Andrea's mother, Lourdes, to put the child in a home — and to visit her as and as frequently. Thus, the De Mello family rid themselves of the burden of a child in a wheelchair.

That's when the fight began. Lourdes De Mello, a registered nurse, was determined her daughter would walk again. Her ambition for a cure brought her in

1983 to New York City's Columbia Presbyterian Medical Centre. There Lourdes learns for the first time that Andrea had suffered a stroke. Doctors perform a by-pass operation on the left side of Andrea's skull and Lourdes marvels as Andrea begins to improve. But the real breakthrough comes two months later, when Andrea's older sis-



ter, Claudia, brings her to the Achilles Track Club — a running club for athletes with all kinds of disabilities.

Club founder, Dick Traum, remembers that when the sisters first came to the club they spoke only Portuguese, had no friends, and little interaction. Claudia says, "We used sign language." Andrea began her athletic career by running with Dick from one Central Park lamp post to another. Andrea grew stronger, more active and very popular. "Everyone wanted to be with them," remembers Traum — "they were always up."

In a year Andrea built up to 2 miles, which took her one hour. In 1986 she ran 5K. In 1987 Andrea completed her first New York Marathon in 14 hours and was voted the "most inspiring woman runner." She earned her place in history as the first female stroke victim to complete a marathon. "Andrea," says Traum, "is one of my favorite people."

What's Andrea's secret? Her sister Valeria, a medical doctor, explains. "She always says that she has an inner power that keeps her going and helps her have the feeling that she can overcome her disability. Her body is not as perfect as everybody else's — but she can do it."

But how does she do it? Valeria, a volunteer with the Sri Chinmoy Marathon Team's medical unit, says, "We met them about mile 19 on 125th Street. Andrea's pace was 30-40 minutes a mile. She was stopping frequently. She changed shoes. Then it was 55 minutes to 1 hour a mile. She was stopping more, to ease the pain. I used everything I know about massage. We gave her a massage every half hour."

It's 12:45 am in Central Park, Mile 24. Andrea's final fatigue. She sits down, her two sisters next to her. After massage and a change of shoes, there's not much more her helpers can do. Andrea slouches, head hanging down. The helpers begin to sing. "It worked," says Valeria. They started singing and she revived.

It is 1:30 am. The little team — Andrea, her sisters Valeria and Claudia and the helpers — struggle towards mile 25 at 59th Street. Andrea's limping painfully — almost falling with fatigue. A limo pulls up. Out jumps Andrea's mother, Lourdes, and Mr. G, the Weatherman. Exhaustion suddenly gone, an exhilarated Andrea starts walking fast. "Andrea, would you wait for us!" shouts Mr. G as the startled support team scurries to catch up.

The inspiration is magnetic. As Andrea reaches Columbus Circle, her joy attracts an impromptu cheering squad. An Englishman, about 40, in evening jacket and tie, slams the brakes on his car, opens the door and climbs out. With him are three ladies in heels — one wearing a black full-length evening dress. "We're going to finish this race with you," shouts the man, throwing off his jacket and jogging to join Andrea. "Anybody still running this marathon? I'm going with them." The three ladies race alongside — high heels clacking.

Suddenly, Andrea spurts forward in a final burst of speed. She races across the finish. "She's home!" breathes Lourdes. The English tourists applauded Andrea racing toward one goal. They don't know about her next goal: Barcelona.

It's now two weeks after the marathon. I'm sitting with Andrea, Lourdes and Claudia. Andrea's winning 7 gold medals won't be leaving out her swimming. Two days after the marathon,

Andrea and Valeria travelled 31 hours on AMTRAK to a swimming competition in New Orleans. Her winning times short-listed her for the Para-Olympic Games, being held in the Olympic stadium, Barcelona, in 1992, one week after the Olympics.

The Para-Olympics are for athletes with physical disabilities. "Andrea," explains Valeria, "is classified in swimming as an S 4. There's an international classification based on a special analysis of muscle function. So she's going to be competing with people with all kinds of disabilities that have, in the end, the same capacity — so they can compete together."

Preparing for the subway ride home to Manhattan, Lourdes takes the seven medals off Andrea's neck, wrapping each one in its blue and white ribbon and placing them carefully in her handbag. I'm rushing to ask more questions — to put the last pieces of the Andrea puzzle into place. "You started meditating about a year ago, didn't you?" ask Andrea. "Do you find it helps you?"

"Yes, it helps a lot. It's the power inside. I can do it. I finished and I can do whatever I want, inside is powerful. I can do everything, no barriers."

Lourdes De Mello and Valeria stand up to go. But the story isn't finished. There's one more question: What's Andrea's secret? What is this inner power? Unless I get an answer Andrea's story won't be complete. I rack my brain for a way to ask the question — to uncover the secret. Suddenly I have it. "Andrea — what makes you get up in the morning — it's so much work, swimming, training — what makes you do it?"

Andrea is looking directly at me and glowing her radiant smile. She's silent. Why? I'm perplexed. I begin to rephrase the question when I notice her left hand. It's raised. Her index finger directs my gaze skyward — straight up. The final piece of the puzzle slides into place and the picture is complete. Andrea just said "I can do it."

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