

SPORTS

MS Survivor Proves Setbacks Are Never Permanent

by Thomas Green Jr.

Dolores Elliot thought her life was over three years ago when she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. A doctor told her she would no longer be able to continue her career as a film editor. She was 40 years old and unwilling to start all over again.

"I knew what was happening, but I was in a severe denial," Elliot said during an interview near her upper Manhattan apartment building.

It was the vivid thought of how people laugh or discriminate against those with disabilities that ran fear through the personable, attractive Elliot's mind and soul. Multiple sclerosis has affected her spine and the left side of her body. She wears a brace on her leg and walks with a noticeable limp.

"We are trained at a young age to laugh at people with disabilities," Elliot said. "In cartoons and television shows disabled people are ridiculed."

Elliot, who grew up in Jamaica, Queens, graduated from Springfield Gardens and graduated from New York University with a degree in Communications. She has worked as an assistant film editor for Sesame Street, Electric Company and ABC's Wide World of Sports. She has also done work on five feature films, including *Evil Dead* in the late '70s. Her fine resume in the film and TV industry is capped off with her work for St. Claire Bourne, a Black filmmaker.

Her rise from the ruins she thought was her life began when her rehabilitation counselor told her she would not be able to return to her job as a film editor. The traveling and long hours would be impossible for someone with a steady problem with fatigue. It was time to find something to do — a new career.

And, while looking, it became obvious: Her desire to want to help others and her quest to find a new career to occupy her mind clashed.

"I saw that there weren't enough African American or Latino rehabilitation counselors to service the many minorities who were talented in various areas," Elliot said.

Thus, she ventured back to school to embark on an entirely new career. She is now in her last year of work on her master's degree in Vocational Rehabilitation Counseling at Hunter College.

"It was frightening at first," said the 43-year-old Elliot. "Everyone was so much younger. When they told me I was accepted, I thought I had gotten in on a fluke or something."

Once she settled into school life, Elliot has proved she belongs. "I get mostly A's and it has been a good feeling."

Although she misses the entertainment industry, Elliot finds her new daily grind as rewarding and challenging. She added running to her life two years ago, and last year, as a member of the Achilles Track Club, Elliot finished the New York City Marathon the first time she ever ran in it, in 14 hours and two minutes.

Elliot explained, "I got into running because I was always very physical and I wanted to have an outlet."

The Achilles Track Club has 110 chapters in 31 countries promoting running for over 3,500 disabled athletes. The Achilles athletes have all types of disabilities, including: blindness, cerebral palsy, diabetes, paraplegia and polio.

She began walking six blocks once a week before getting into races. And once she heard the crowds' positive reactions to the Achilles runners, she was hooked. She now works out twice a week.

"It was very emotional," Elliot's smile faded. "I started tearing as I was going. People were chanting and cheering."

"I wanted to carry those cheers over to my



Dolores Elliot addresses students at Junior High School 72 in Jamaica, Queens.

everyday life."

When she finished her first marathon, it was even more exhilarating.

"I cried when I came across the finish line," Elliot remembered. "By finishing the New York City marathon, I knew I could finish the marathon of life."

As a member of Achilles, Elliot hooked up with Chemical Bank's Ambassador Program and again became an instant success. This year she was named the ambassador of the year.

"She's our star ambassador," said Kathleen Boyle, Assistant Vice President at Chemical Bank.

Chemical's Ambassadors are the first public school assembly speakers to introduce the disabled population with elementary students. Last year, the Ambassadors spoke with over 5,500 students in 25 schools throughout the five boroughs. Last week she spoke at Junior High School 72 on Guy Brewer Boulevard, around the corner from where she had grown up.

"This program is very important," Elliot said. "I see the knowledge and encouragement the kids gain from me. It is what helped keep me going."

Elliot, whose combination of confidence and elo-

quence makes her an excellent speaker, was invited down to the National Rehabilitation Association's Governmental Seminar in Washington, D.C. earlier this year. She recalls the trip with a bright smile. It was there she met former Knicks star Bill Bradley, who is now a Senator from New Jersey. She handed Bradley one of her Achilles trading cards and he was impressed.

"After I was introduced to him as a disabled athlete and gave him one of my cards, he said, 'She don't look disabled to me,'" Elliot remembered. "And that made me feel good."

Elliot sat back in her chair and sighed. She snapped her constant eye contact for a second and said once again how she had come a long way in just three years. She smiled again and slid forward, eager to express the pleasure a journey down what she thought to be a frightening road has been.

"My counselor once told me that MS would be a small part of my world," she said, and her head shook at the memory. "I thought that to be so far from the truth at the time. But now, you know, it is a small part of my world. I have so many other things to occupy my life."

"Basically, I still do everything I used to."



Elliot signing autographs for seventh graders after the assembly