

BLUE ZONES

“Man needs difficulties; they are necessary for health.” – Carl Jung



Nicole Coratti
PHOTO COURTESY OF NAPLES
PERFORMING ARTS CENTER

Living life on purpose

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Some say that you don't find purpose but rather purpose finds you.

For 41-year-old Nicole Coratti who was born with cerebral palsy, a condition that affects a person's ability to move and maintain balance and posture, purpose finds her each day through building resilience, learning self-reliance, and serving others.

Self-reliance is not a new concept for Nicole having grown up in a house with working parents and becoming a latchkey kid.

“My mother knew that if I was going to grow up in the world, that I was going to have to figure it out because they weren't always going to be around,” she said. “While they supported me as much as they could, I learned from my parents that I was in control, and for my situation it worked. I picked up my ‘bootstraps’ and began to seek out the necessary resources for help.”

Nicole also received strong and loving support from neighbors.

“I got to know each one of them and they made sure I got on the bus each day.”

While her resilience and self-reliance play a big role in overcoming adversity, as an adult Nicole admits that seeking and accepting support is also necessary to rise above her condition.

“Yes, I learned to be resilient, but I still find myself trying to recognize what world I'm in,” she said. “Am I in the additional needs world or in the able-bodied world?”

Knowing both worlds, Nicole recognizes that in seeking help, she is supporting others who may be fulfilling their own purpose.

“There are some things that I can't do like driving and at times I struggle with it,” she admits. “But I look at it as an opportunity for someone else's blessing in being able to use transportation as a gift they can provide. The same goes for organizations that have supported me.”

Local nonprofits like STARability Foundation, Best Buddies International, and Naples Performing Arts Center have each played a role in setting Nicole up for success. For Nicole, saying thank you to these and other organizations that offer help in the community is simply not enough. She has set herself up to inspire others and offer her support back to these organizations.

Nicole went on to help start the Citizens Program which is a branch of Best Buddies Florida,



Carrie, STARability Participant Brett, and John Cooney are all smiles at Hamilton Harbor Yacht Club. STARability Foundation's premier virtual fundraising event, Dining for the STARS, on Feb. 27, raised \$1.2 million to support programs for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

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a nonprofit organization dedicated to create opportunities for one-to-one friendships, integrated employment, leadership development, and inclusive living for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). The Citizens Program provides support for those ages 21 and older with IDD looking for jobs.

She also participates in STARability's Trailblazer Academy that offers community-based skill development experiences for young adults with IDD, whether they are on a path to life enrichment or have vocational aspirations. Participants regularly volunteer throughout the community to give back while also helping with training and learning life skills.

Nicole served as case manager for a year at Youth Haven, a local shelter offering a safe harbor for traumatized, abused, neglected, and homeless children and teens. She proudly states that Youth Haven staff are always happy to see her every time she goes back to visit.

Dealing with her own visual impairment stemming from her condition, Nicole was a reader for NPR Radio to help those overcoming the same obstacle.

Just before COVID began, Nicole participated in Ms. Wheelchair Florida, an advocacy program for people with IDD.

Nicole is currently participating in the Naples Performing Arts, “I'm a Star” program that

gives students with intellectual challenges not only the ability to perform for friends and family, but also learn theater vocabulary, choreography, and team work. On March 27, participants will showcase their performance acts that include smash hits from musical theater, challenging ballroom dance numbers, and even standup comedy.

Last year, Nicole was unable to participate due to losing her voice after battling severe pneumonia and nearly losing her life. “This time I have my voice back and I'm singing,” she exclaimed. She notes that her brush with death has helped shape her life this past year and caused her to reflect more on her purpose.

“Somehow it wasn't my time,” she said. I did not want to just lay down and forget about life and life did not want me to do that either. I learned to navigate new paths in my life after recovering.”

Looking forward, Nicole hopes to serve as an example for others and live up to the words of disability activist Robert M. Hensel who said, “no disability or dictionary out there is capable of clearly defining who we are as a person.”

“Too often people have set us up in categories or we are labeled,” says Nicole. “Let me show you what I know first.”

Nicole recently received her Notary license which served as a focus for her throughout COVID. “I tried to keep myself mentally stimulated as much as I could,” she said. “I hope to officially get a Notary business going and continue on with Best Buddies. I also want to write a book someday!”

Nicole emphasizes that stability and consistency are important for people with IDD. “Persons with additional needs, all they want is consistency whether it's with work school, or relationships,” she says.

“My life is a huge blessing, and I could have easily chosen to not do all the things that I've done. I try and make others aware that I am capable and be an example to others.”

To purchase tickets to see Nicole and others perform in the “I'm A Star” event on March 27 at the Naples Performing Arts Center, visit NaplesPerformingArtsCenter.com.

Brought to Southwest Florida by NCH Healthcare System, in collaboration with Sharecare, Inc., Blue Zones Project is part of Southwest Florida's well-being improvement initiative that encourages changes in the community that lead to healthier options. For more information, visit southwestflorida.bluezonesproject.com.