

Victory dance

How my passion for dance and a supportive family helped in my battle against cancer

BY ANANDA SHANKAR
JAYANTH

The bright side to cancer is that it put me in touch with myself. On July 1, 2008, when I first became aware of the disease, my head filled up with questions. Were my life and dance coming to an end? I kept asking my husband, Jayanth, if this was the end of the road for me.

He obviously was thinking about it far more than I was. He calmly told me to take a break (from my job with the railways) to fight the disease. That evening, when we—Jayanth, my mother-in-law, who had moved in with us wanting to be there for me, and I—were sitting around the table, I announced loudly that I'll fight it out. I also made up my mind to talk about it and not keep it a secret. Cancer, I decided, was merely a page in my book of life and I would not allow it to leech out the other pages. I also made up my mind to not ask 'why me?'

I called all my relatives and friends and told them about the diagnosis. I asked them not to visit if they wanted to commiserate or cry. "I will cry when I watch *Abhimaan* but when you come



PHOTOS: G. MURALI

home, come for fun times,”

It all started with a random breast examination at home, two days prior to my three-week trip to the US in June for a Kuchipudi dance convention. I felt around my breasts and found a lump.

The same evening, on my way back from work, I went to a diagnostic centre and got a mammogram done. They did not look too happy with the results and asked me to give a sample at the Apollo Hospitals. I did that and assigned Jayanth the task to collect the report as I had to leave for my trip.

On the day of the result, I called Jayanth, who asked me to return home. On the morning of July 1, I landed in Mumbai to catch a connecting flight to Hyderabad. What came as a surprise was that Jayanth had come to Mumbai to receive me. Here was I thinking that even after 17 years there was still some romance left in our marriage, without knowing what was in store for me.

On our way to catch the flight, Jayanth told me that the biopsy had shown that the lump was malignant and that I would have to undergo surgery. He had already done all the ground work and research, and had spoken to Dr Raghuram, an oncoplastic breast surgeon, and taken an appointment for that day itself. Though I was groggy because of jet lag, we went.

They did another core biopsy. This was the first time I heard the word carcinoma at such close quarters. The fear factor hits you then. While the doctor insisted that the surgery must be performed immediately, I refused as I had a performance on July 21. However, on Jayanth's insistence, it was performed on July 7. I was cheerful before and after the sur-

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gery. As soon as I was shifted to my room, I got out of the horrible hospital gown and wore a pair of Jayanth's old pants and shirt. I had my hair up and put a bindi on my forehead. After two days, I started work on the laptop for the Nritya San Rachana, a five-day dance festival under the aegis of the Sangeet Natak Akademi.

I went home on July 10 and on 13th attended the rehearsals. When it was time for chemotherapy, I discussed with the doctor my apprehensions about losing hair. Once again, Jayanth came to the rescue. He asked me to look at chemo as an 'amrutham' (nectar) that will cleanse me. I had to undergo eight cycles, one every three weeks. For the first few weeks my hair was fine and I was thrilled. But then the saga began. Soon, I was left with a bald head. I started using a wig.



From the day I found out about the cancer, I decided not to stop dancing. I tried to keep myself cheerful at all times by avoiding depressing thoughts and watching movies that made me happy, reading fun books and practising meditation. We must all invest in a passion and nurture it, not for making money or building a career but to enrich one's soul.

I had started a counselling centre but could not carry it forward. However, people still call and seek advice from me. Some even ask me about places from where they can buy a wig or a prosthetic bra.

I have learnt a few lessons from this experience, the most important one being what you make of your life is up to you.

As told to Lalita Iyer
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