

A nurse's tale of hope

Sister Rita Naidoo is the cardiac rehabilitation unit manager at Life Westville Hospital, but she's also an inspirational cancer survivor.

By Catherine Eden

Rita Naidoo will never forget the day in December 2002 when her twins graduated from pre-school; not just because it was an important milestone in their lives, but because it was also the day that she discovered a lump in her breast.

'The news that I had cancer was shattering,' she says. 'When you are a nursing sister you don't ever imagine being a patient yourself, having to be nursed by your colleagues. I was disbelieving, angry and afraid at first. I was only 33, with my life ahead of me – I had a husband, a nine-year-old and two five-year-olds. Like others diagnosed with cancer, Rita had to experience and work through all the classic emotional stages before she finally reached acceptance and came to terms with the fact

that she had cancer. 'It was a long, hard road but I came through with the love and support of my family and friends,' she says. 'My husband was extraordinary from day one: he played a crucial role in helping me adjust after I had the mastectomy. It has been nine years now; years that have been healthy and productive.'

TALENT AND DEDICATION

Rita grew up in Durban and started her nursing training at St Aiden's Hospital in 1987, the year after she matriculated from Protea Secondary School. She received a theatre award during her general training and qualified with distinctions as a staff nurse. She worked at St Aiden's for 13 years, expanding her skills and experience. In 2000, Rita joined the cardiac high care ward at Life Westville Hospital and found the field of nursing that was to become her passion. Five years later, she was appointed to the post of cardiac rehabilitation coordinator – a role that has earned her several awards, including the Heart Centre Member of the Year in 2008, the Clinical Nurse of the Year in 2009 and a number of leadership and service awards in 2010.

During her cancer recovery process, Rita became involved with the Cancer Association

of South Africa (CANSAs) and, in doing so, came to hear of their Relay For Life initiative. The concept originated in America when a doctor chose to walk a running track all night to help raise awareness for 'the illness that doesn't sleep.'

'The Relays are now held in all the major centres of South Africa,' says Rita. 'We have about four in KwaZulu-Natal every summer. Essentially, they are fundraising events but their purpose is also to grow awareness and participation, celebrate survivors and remember those who have died through a very moving ceremony.'

The American Cancer Society introduced the International Hero of Hope awards to acknowledge survivors around the world who have made a significant contribution to cancer awareness in their communities. Rita received an award in 2011 for her four years of service on the CANSAs Relay For Life, Dbn steering committee, her involvement in patient education, public workshops, wellness days, community outreaches and corporate presentations on cancer and cardiac health. She is also the Life Healthcare KwaZulu-Natal regional representative for the Mended Hearts cardiac support groups.

A DESERVING WINNER

'Rita's winning this internationally recognised award is a tremendous achievement,' says Life Westville Hospital manager, Abdool Amod. 'We are extremely proud of her contribution, commitment and dedication to promoting a healthy lifestyle and health education to the general public.'

Linda Cipolla, manager of the Mkhuhla CANSAs Care Lodge – a home-from-home for patients undergoing cancer treatment at oncology clinics far from their homes in Durban – says that Rita is particularly special because she not only rises to every challenge but thrives on it. 'She has an indomitable spirit and is rock solid and dependable,' says Linda. 'She doesn't just go the extra mile – she doesn't even notice that the mile was there in the first place. She is kind, true and loyal – the best friend anyone could ask for. She inspires others to live to the full, remain positive throughout their treatment and encourages them to focus on what is good in their lives. She is an

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outstanding ambassador for CANSAs, using her award as a tool to raise awareness and spread the message about what the organisation offers to support people with cancer.'

LIVING WITH HOPE

'My experience of cancer has changed me profoundly and taken my compassion to a whole new level,' says Rita. 'Nurses are generally sympathetic towards their patients, but I now feel committed to motivating and inspiring them wherever I can.' She also explains that when she was ill she looked for survivors: 'I wanted the reassurance that it is possible to be alive and well after having had cancer. People often receive the diagnosis as if it were a death sentence. Your first thought is, "I'm going to die", and to help you get some perspective you need to meet people who are living proof that cancer can be beaten,' she says.

Rita focuses on the positive aspects that have come out of her illness, saying: 'I can give patients encouragement, help to dispel scare stories around chemotherapy and also assist people to come to terms with the reality of the disease. Sometimes you can't beat it and what matters then is that you have the best quality of life during the time you have left. Life is so fragile – we can all lose it tomorrow in so many unexpected ways – so my message is to live each day to the full. I tell people that a birth certificate shows you were born, a death certificate shows you died, but a photo album shows that you lived. We have to build memories, stop worrying about tomorrow and focus instead on the fact that we still have today.'

Beyond the care that she has been able to offer, Rita also says: 'I've come out of my shell since having had cancer. It has made me so appreciative of my life, my family and my job. I'm grateful to Life Westville Hospital



for acknowledging my potential and giving me the responsibility to do the work that I do. I'm stronger in my faith too. I still have bad days and still feel stressed about having my checkups, but I don't live in fear any longer. This is a new challenge and a new road for me, and I'm greatly honoured to be a role model and an ambassador for CANSAs and Life Healthcare. I'm so grateful for my life, for the International Hero of Hope award, and for the chance to carry the banner of hope for others.' □

Helping Hand

For specialists and other healthcare professionals based at Life Healthcare hospitals, email Janet Young at janet.young@lifehealthcare.co.za or fax 086-500-7535. To contact CANSAs, phone 0800-22-66-22 or email info@cansas.org.za.