

From Cancer Survivors to Social Champions: A Relay for Hope

Standfirst: How does one turn the painful and harrowing experience of battling cancer into one that can inspire others and give hope where it seems to be lost? Sukhveer Kaur and Daljit Singh share their stories.

By Daniel Lee

“We’re going to prepare some vegetarian dumplings, fruitcakes and masala chai,” the sprightly Sukhveer Kaur says.

I was not sure if it was an offer, but before I could politely decline, her husband Daljit Singh asks, “Do you take your chai with or without sugar?”

While sipping on my chai, I notice that Sukhveer and Daljit seem like your average middle-aged Malaysian couple. However, beneath their humble and generous nature, nothing could be further from the truth – both are cancer survivors albeit now with healthy bodies and voluminous hair. How come they have hair?

“That’s a common and hugely misguided assumption,” Sukhveer explains. “The loss of hair has nothing to do directly with cancer. It’s a common side-effect of the treatments used to cure the disease, like chemotherapy.”

I sipped on my tea apologetically.

“Have some dumplings and cake with your tea,” she offers. I obliged even though I was not particularly hungry. Suddenly it occurred to me. Can she feel hunger?

Sukhveer was eager to share her stories. “Ever since my parents and brother fed the poor and homeless outside Kwan Yin Temple on Pitt Street, helping and caring for the general welfare of people has come naturally to me. I even did my MA in Social Welfare,” she relates. Sukhveer joined the National Cancer Society as a volunteer in 2006. A year later, her passion and dedication to the cause paid off with a full-time job.

Then life took a sudden drastic turn. Not long after employment, she was diagnosed with multiple tumours in the lining of the gastrointestinal tract – the stomach. “I was lucky because I had my diagnosis early at stage one, but the tumours had rapidly spread, so there was no choice but to have my stomach removed,” she says matter-of-factly. “The surgeons then connected my little intestine directly to my oesophagus.”

“But to answer your question,” she reverts, “I can’t feel hunger. Well, not in the way most do, but my body tells me that I’m undernourished when I start to shake a little,” she says. “I can only eat small amounts of food at a time, but I get to eat more often,” she impishly adds.

I wondered how one could eat without the aid of digestive fluids. “It’s definitely challenging,” Sukhveer admits. “It took time for my body to adjust. For a period, I was on a liquid diet, but gradually my body

got used to it. Now I am able to take some solid food.” On that note, she bit on a cake for good measure. “But I still occasionally suffer from digestive problems,” she says wistfully.

Indeed, life with cancer is a harrowing journey. Daljit’s brush with cancer came at a tumultuous time for Sukhveer – she was just coming out from a period of mourning over the passing of her mother when life dealt another cruel blow.

“My mother was my pillar of support,” she confesses, “but I had to be strong for Daljit. He was absolutely devastated.”

“I was on a working trip in the Philippines when I fell incredibly ill,” says Daljit, a former design engineer. “The local doctors thought it was tuberculosis and handed me a prescription. I called Sukhveer and she convinced me to have a CT scan when I returned. That was when I found out I had cancer in my left kidney.”

While Sukhveer could readily accept her condition, Daljit could not, and it was particularly severe. Cancer is not merely a malignant tumour consuming its way through the body; it also corrodes the mind and plunges the soul into despair. His diagnosis overwhelmed him and he fell into a depression which lasted nearly two years.

“I had a very difficult time accepting the truth,” Daljit recalls. “I do not drink. I do not smoke. I play sports and I am even vegetarian. So why did it happen to me?”

Daljit only came to terms with his condition after heart-to-heart talks with Sukhveer and his brother-in-law.

Cancer can also affect marital relationships when spouses do not know how to cope with or approach the situation, but for Sukhveer and Daljit, they have come out stronger than ever. “When caring for a person you love with cancer, you realise many things about yourself. We each had to make sacrifices and compromises.” Sukhveer says.

Daljit agrees. “It’s important to take the time to connect and understand how our loved ones are feeling, and to understand the effect on them. For instance, Sukhveer had bouts of tantrums which I knew stemmed from frustration.”

The stresses associated with cancer also affect the dynamics of personal relationships. “People say they can understand what we are going through, but they are mistaken. Each individual’s journey through cancer is different,” Sukhveer says. “But we count our blessings. We have fabulous friends and family to provide us emotional support.”

Sukhveer and Daljit are now motivational speakers, giving their undivided attention to people who are cancer patients or survivors like themselves. “Living with and beating cancer has altered the way I look at life,” Daljit says. “Initially, I was a part of the National Cancer Society only because of my wife, but after experiencing the turmoil of cancer, I wanted to do much more. I wanted to reach out and touch

lives, sharing with others that they are not alone in this journey. It has become very personal and a very large part of my life.”

Life after cancer can be difficult and even lonely. Some develop suicidal tendencies or worry that they could lose their homes, jobs, and the support of friends and family – a misguided fear brought by misinformation. “There’s a huge stigma around it,” Sukhveer says. “Some think cancer is contagious.”

But Sukhveer’s positive outlook at life is just as infectious.

“We were lucky we did not have to face financial difficulties. We try to live a healthy lifestyle within our means. Keeping things simple involves fewer worries. Life is too short. Go out, enjoy good food and have a laugh,” she advises. “To de-stress, we now and then go on extended road trips to discover new places in Malaysia,” Daljit adds.

How does one best persevere in the face of cancer?

“Laughter,” replies Sukhveer. “That is the way I have always handled the situations life throws at us. My husband and I perform outreach work under HIMMAT support group. We advocate laughter therapy, as many forget to laugh and be happy because what they are going through or have gone through can leave them with a deep scar.” It is quite evident that her bouts with cancer have not kept her from living. She is an admirably strong woman, and where most people find despair, she and Daljit (after his long-drawn-out inner battle) found hope. “We actually look at cancer as a blessing – as an extraordinary opportunity for healing and transformation. Now we are able to reach out and touch lives.”

Once treatment is over, cancer survivors cope with their new life in different ways. While some prefer to bury their despondent experiences behind them, others choose to draw on them and champion cancer-related causes. Daljit and Sukhveer belong to the latter group.

“Our wish is simple. We just want to share our firsthand experiences to inspire people to live courageously in the face of steep challenges, fear and uncertainty,” Sukhveer says. “Relay for Life is an amazing event to inspire and give hope where it is lost,” adds Daljit.

Survivors are people pitted against the meanest and toughest of adversaries and have prevailed and emerged victorious. Sukhveer and Daljit are not merely survivors. They are champions of life and hope.

Daniel Lee is a full-time armchair explorer, searching for ways to improve everything but rarely leaving his seat for anything.