

Volunteering for Surrey Hospice Society has been a very rewarding part of my volunteer experience. In supporting those at the end of life I've also been forced to examine my own journey and my own priorities.

Today I'd like to share Amar's story.

When I met her she was 65 in the end stages of stomach cancer. I was asked to support her through her last few weeks. Although Amar's life was full of struggles, poverty, abuse both physical and mental, her spirits were high. Sacrifice, hard work and determination describe Amar's plight to raise 5 children as a single parent, and also care for grandchildren, and a husband.

Amar, her husband, 2 sons and 2 daughters were sponsored to Canada by their eldest daughter in the late 80s. They settled in Surrey living in their daughter's basement suite whilst they saved to buy their own place. Amar stayed at home looking after her granddaughter while her daughter and son-in-law worked. Her youngest two children went to public school in Surrey during the day.

Five years after arriving in Canada, Amar's husband had a stroke, which left him paralyzed. Someone told her about applying for welfare but that was not an option for her; she was strong in her faith and wanted to support the kids through an honest living—a value she was learned through her faith. Amar who had no English skills, and had never worked outside the home, and at 55 she was now forced to look for work. The only job she could find was berry picking; the job was physically straining and required her to work long hours. She would pick up her granddaughter after a long shift. Her own children, now all adults or in their late teens, did not require her care, but most of them were still financially dependent on her.

When her eldest daughter came home from work she quickly make dinner and then turn around to go visit her husband who was now in a long term care facility. She did not drive. She would rely on the local bus service and/or one of the kids to drive her. She recalled having mixed feelings seeing her husband in a dependant state. She would remember the poverty stricken days in India when the family barely had funds to buy food for the kids but her husband would find money for his alcohol. She told me a story about a day he came home drunk, just livid because his sister had advised him that Amar didn't have her head covered during the day, which was viewed as being disrespectful. Amar was in the kitchen when he arrived. He walked in and starting beating her up. She told me that he broke the clay pot she had been cooking the evening dinner in. Amar was just devastated: what would she do now for dinner? There was no other food in the house and no money to go buy anything. She quickly ran over to the neighbour's house. They had a few lentils left over, to which she just added water so that there would be enough for everyone. She remembered cursing him, "one day you'll regret hitting

me... as I'll be the only person looking after you". She kept true to her words, visiting him every day till he passed away 5 years after his stroke.

Amar's daughter would arrange a marriage for her oldest brother and now Amar thought life would be a little easier. As customary she thought the son would now support her and the siblings in a home that they'd purchased by pooling monies. Little did she know that her new daughter in law would soon have Amar and her youngest children move out as she saw them as a burden. Again at 62, Amar was forced to look for work. Amar had little time to take care of herself and/or her health. Just lived life day-to-day no time to think of anything but work and kids.

Amar would soon find out that one of her daughters had been dating which was seen as an embarrassment for the family. She tried to find strength in her faith even though deep down she was starting to feel burnt out and depressed. Amar sold the jewellery from her wedding and the ancestral land in India and quickly made plans for another wedding. Amar's oldest son was not even speaking to her now, he disagreed with Amar's decision to sell the ancestral property so she was on her own once again.

Day by day Amar's health started to deteriorate but all Amar could see was she still had responsibilities. Amar did not have time or extra funds to go to the doctor; she would just really on home remedies to take away little aches and pains. She continued to work hard, sometimes even picking up hours at a local restaurant. When her pain got worse and it became harder to work she did go to the welfare office, in spite of her shame about asking for help. Her English is still not very good and she faced hostility at the welfare office. She is told her family should look after her. The office treats her terribly; she does not understand all of what the worker say, but she feels more ashamed. She does not feel she can go back there for help.

The kids were all working now so financially they were doing a little better; they (Amar, her younger son and daughter) pooled their small savings together and bought a little home. Although Amar was happy about the financial position her family was in, Amar was very disturbed about the rifts within the family. Amar was constantly being asked to mediate misunderstanding between the kids and spouses. Each child would blame her for favouring the other sibling. This tension just added to Amar's depression and overall ill health.

As time passed, Amar arranged marriages for the remaining daughter and then finally for her son. Now she thought she will be able to "enjoy" her golden years.... unfortunately life had other plans for her. After her youngest sons wedding she thought she'd go in for some routine tests. Soon she'd discover the reason for her "blotting" was actually a tumour. Her family physician was Punjabi so she had no issues with communication. The only issue being the doctor would never tell her the whole truth about what was going on, you see "we" don't say

the "C" word. As the children/grand children were all working/in school no one had time to come with her to her appointments and besides Amar was independent, she would just hop on a bus and away she went. Amar did not like to ask the kids and/or grand kids for help so she would just do what needed to be done.

Amar was living with her younger son but now his wife too did not want to live with her mother in law. Amar noticed that the tension was growing within the couple's relationship so she decided she would go and stay with her youngest daughter for a while. Unfortunately this decision would mean that the middle daughter would not come to visit because the two sisters had had a falling out. Amar was becoming more and more depressed and the cancer treatments were leaving her tired and restless. The very kids that she'd sacrificed her life for, were now fighting over who would look after Mom whilst she was sick...

She missed her sons and the middle daughter, who weren't speaking to her. Her last wish was to see all her kids together, getting along and living happily. Unfortunately she would not get this wish while she lived; they did though all somehow manage to be at her funeral...together.