

BCHPCA FORUM | 2014

FRIDAY MORNING SESSION MAY 9, 2014 8:30-9:15

Opening Conversations to engage, inform and educate the public on death and dying, and to initiate discussion on future care for themselves and their loved ones.

FEATURED SPEAKER

Starting the Conversation

RENU BAKSHI, Renu Bakshi Communications Inc.; Former Anchor, Producer and Senior Reporter, CTV News British Columbia

Renu Bakshi spent more than 20 years as an anchor, producer and senior reporter, the last thirteen for CTV British Columbia. She broke many stories that affect British Columbians: the plight of farm workers, a print story later produced as a three-part series for BCTV's News Hour; the roots of gang violence, published in Maclean's; and "honor killings" of women, produced for CTV BC. Renu understands the issues people care about, the factors that sway opinions, and how stories can shape outcomes. She works with organizations to share their vision, core values and messages with clients, stakeholders and the community. The Vancouver Sun included Renu in its list of "Most Influential South Asians in BC".

RENU BAKSHI: I have been in public life for twenty-five years. I'm in my mid-forties. I started in public life when I was eighteen. In all that time I would say that I have been on stage speaking in some capacity, I'm going to say about 500-600 times. But this is the most difficult conversation I've ever had.

I sat with a bunch of moms at my table today and I told them that I've been invited to speak but I don't think the organizers knew when they booked me that my Mom had died in a hospice four years ago coming up June 6th. I told Lorraine [Gerard, BCHPCA Executive Director] that I feel obligated to present here today. It's the first time that I'm speaking publicly about my Mom's death. She was my best friend. We spoke five times a day and she died young.

So the support of the moms at the table and the grandmas ... I was given an elastic band because I was told that every time it gets tough I should start snapping myself, or twisting it, and it might work. Obviously it didn't in the opening. I'm feeling very vulnerable today but I think this is a good room to be that way in. When you live a public life you always protect your private life and I've always protected my private life. So this is ... I'm standing naked on a ledge right now. So maybe I should run for office. [laughter, applause]

Thank you for all your support. Thanks to the moms and the grandmas at my table.

Some cultures, as you know, there's this code of silence. I would say that the Indian culture is one of those cultures. We're a big family. I have four sisters, so there was a total of seven of us: Mom, Dad and all of us girls. God, I could tell you the Bakshis talk a lot. And we talk loud. But we also don't talk about important topics. I joke around with my friends still. I'm still waiting for my parents to tell me about the birds and the bees. I mean we just don't talk about stuff.

My Mom was diagnosed with cancer quite suddenly. She, cancer - everybody is diagnosed with cancer suddenly. No one knows it's coming but she was diagnosed at stage IV. She never smoked in her life. In fact she was one of the original vegans that I know. She never ate meat in her life, never ate eggs, never drank alcohol and never smoked and she was diagnosed with stage IV lung cancer. So you can imagine that sends the family into a great tailspin.

Being a journalist and having covered all sorts of stories – monumental stories, stories that impacted people’s families and their lives – that moment became the biggest assignment of my life because it was a race against time to find something that would help her, cure her. I tell you I pulled out all the stops. I talked to the Premier of the Province, I talked to the Health Minister, I was at the brass of the BC Cancer Agency and I was demanding care for my Mom because she deserved it. Everybody deserves it. I think we have the best cancer treatment in the world. I really do. Really great people at the BC Cancer Agency. But when it’s stage IV, there’s very little that can be done.

My Mom knew that she was dying. We knew she was dying. But we never, ever talked about it. So imagine. I talk to my Mom five times a day – and that’s not an exaggeration – five times a day. We travelled together, we did everything together, but we didn’t talk about the fact that she was dying. She didn’t want to hurt me and I didn’t want to hurt her. As her health very quickly started to spiral, I made the decision to leave my career at CTV. Just outright I left with no plans of coming back because I wanted to spend time with her. We had decided as a family but without my Mom, we had decided that we were going to provide home care with a nurse coming to the house, not of course understanding how ruthless lung cancer is. This discussion happened privately without my Mom.

Imagine, now she’s the one going through this but we shut her completely out of it. I remember my Dad saying to us and to me in particular, “You’re not allowed to tell your Mom that she’s dying.” I said, “What?” and he said “You’re not allowed to tell her she’s dying because if she learns that, she’s going to go faster.” Imagine the level of success that I achieved in my career but when your Dad tells you in an Indian family not to do something, you have to listen. I’m still not okay with my Dad having told me that, almost four years later. This speaks to the importance of having those conversations because they can haunt you after the fact.

We don’t know what my Mom wanted. We have no idea. We know that she didn’t want to leave home. She had said that you know she didn’t want to leave home but we always didn’t know what she wanted. So we just did home care and nobody talked about it. Nobody talked about what was happening right in front of us. Nobody asked my Mom, “How are you feeling about the fact that you’re leaving?” We struggled every day in silence, every one of us, not having that conversation.

Oh God, I should snap this shouldn’t I? [referring to elastic band]

When we realized very close to the end that we couldn’t continue with home care, who did we think we were thinking that we could do that? Well you know who we thought we were? Very loving and devoted daughters serving her. We wished we could have served her longer. But it came time to discuss with/amongst ourselves “When do we move her, where do we move her?”

I can’t remember now how it happened. I guess it would have been a public health nurse I want to say – I don’t really know – but somebody came to our house. Maybe the doctor sent somebody to our house. It was a lovely woman named Linda and she told us that we had two options: that there’s the palliative care at Richmond Hospital and that there’s a hospice on No. 4 Road run by the Salvation Army. She said that having looked at my Mom and she said that we have to move my Mom quickly but there’s no beds available. That’s another dilemma. We’re like okay, the sadness is that have to wait for somebody to die for her to get room and I, that’s the kind of waiting list you don’t ever want to be on. But again, none of these conversations took place with my Mom.

By now, lung cancer had taken my Mom’s ability to talk. Even if we wanted to finally ask her, we couldn’t. The decision would be now made upon which bed where became available first. Again if we had talked about it and planned better, we had an opportunity to move my Mom much earlier into one of the facilities. But it became a scramble, and not a very pleasant

scramble. It was ugly for everybody. We did end up at the hospice with my Mom. She was moved on a Thursday to the hospice and she died on the Sunday – Sunday evening at 9:09 p.m.

We were all there.

We never knew what kind of funeral she wanted. We had no idea ... no clue. When you're on your knees, grieving, and you want to do what she wanted, and honour her, we had no idea. We did what we thought she might want. But we were never really, we were never able to ... think clearly because we were always wondering what did she want? We weren't able to focus on what we were doing. Does that make sense?

There was just a lot of confusion, too many questions. There was a lot of anger at my Dad. Lots of yelling and screaming, which should not be what's happening in those hours. I told you we're loud people, so the yelling and screaming, it was not good. It's supposed to be a peaceful time. We're Hindu. My Mom was a practising Hindu. That much we knew. We knew that the rituals had to be Hindu. We didn't know, did she want a big funeral, did she want a small funeral, what kind of a casket did she want, did she want us to make a donation, are there people that she hadn't heard from for decades that she wanted us to contact?

No clue. No clue.

June 6 will be four years. Mother's Day is always very difficult and June 6 is very difficult. Probably, I struggle probably more than my sisters still about coming to terms with the fact that we didn't know what she wanted and how she died, how we had to rush her to the hospice, in an ambulance, how crazy it was the pandemonium that was involved in all that. For her how hard it was and the anxiety. We actually created anxiety for her, on that Thursday that we were moving her. Because again, it goes right back to the discussion had never taken place. There was no plan and so we didn't help her in any way and then after the fact we certainly didn't help ourselves. Because four years later, I'm still struggling with not knowing and not, and questioning, "Did we do the right thing?" "Did we make the right decisions?" That's something very hard to live with.

So we're here to have these discussions.

One thing, it's unfortunate that there's not a lot of ethnic diversity in the room today because again, some cultures have this code of silence where they don't talk about things and we need the leaders in those communities to initiate these discussions and encourage these discussions.

It's funny, you know, to this day we still don't sit as a family and with my Dad, he still doesn't let us talk about our Mom. It hurts him too much. But we say to him like this silly silence has to stop. You're not helping yourself. You're not helping yourself grieve and come to terms with it. If you don't talk through it, how are you going to get through it? We just sort of function and we have family dinners and we don't talk about my Mom. We don't talk about her.

I'm lucky I have a really good network of friends. They empathize and they knew my Mom, so I talk about my Mom. I don't live in any silence around that at all. I honour her. But it's just as a family, it's very bizarre. We have a very tough time with it. She was the glue, she was everything. She taught us volunteer service. She taught us a sense of community. Her door was always open. We were very poor when they came to this country in the sixties and through the seventies. But I remember people were always staying with us, people who came from India or wherever who didn't have a place to go and whether we had food or

not, we shared it. That's what my Mom taught us. But I just really don't feel that she was honored in the end the way that she should have been, the way that she deserved.

You know, we can only hope and pray that she appreciates the effort we made. We did try. She probably hates my Dad. I wouldn't blame her.

I should say that the end of life care that my Mom received at the Salvation Army hospice was top notch. The nurses were really nice and we made a big donation to the hospice after in her name. End of life care, there's nothing more important. Nothing more important. Everybody deserves to die with dignity and I, for me, hats off to all the nurses. Doctors are great, they are, they are, they are, but the nurses really carry those services. It's the nurses. I learned that first hand. I wouldn't have known that if we hadn't gone through what we went through. But it's the nurses that carried us through, and carried my Mom through.

Thank you for listening. Thank you for being supportive. Thank you for letting me stand naked on a ledge. I appreciate it. I know I didn't go 45 minutes. I believe in shorter, sharper, stronger. I don't have any more to add. I think that the purpose of this Forum is to initiate conversation and the story I've told, it really highlights the importance of that. I want to thank my table for being super nice, supportive and giving me an elastic band. I want to thank Lorraine [BCHPCA Executive Director] and Ross [Waddell, BCHPCA Advisor] for thinking of me for this event. Thank you. [Applause]

LORRAINE GERARD: I think you do your mother great honor by sharing with us because I know how difficult that was and she'd be very proud. [Applause]

RENU BAKSHI: Thank you. I appreciate it. Thank you all.