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## The Crown Jewel Sheds Light on Leadership

The illustrious Indian dancer and Rice University professor Dr. Rathna Kumar, renowned for being the “Jewel in the Crown of Houston Arts”, recounted her astonishing journey of 43+ years from Chennai to Houston at India House on November 17, 2018. She described herself as an “accidental” leader, being the first person to start an Indian dance school in Houston in the mid-70s. Her speech left the high school students of the Youth Leadership Development Program (YLDP) of Houston spellbound with a sense of awe!

In her eloquent speech, Dr. Kumar articulated her beginnings in Chennai as an ordinary Indian middle-class girl finding the courage to choose the then stigma-attached dancing career that she loved. She described her journey from having a successful career as an English professor and dancer in Chennai, to immigrating after marriage to the “culturally-arid” Houston in 1975, and unexpectedly taking on the enormous responsibility of founding the first Indian dance school in Texas, the Anjali Center of Performing Arts. By 2011, she became the first Indian American to receive the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, the highest Indian recognition for practicing artists, for her lifelong contribution to dancing.

The greatest lessons that we gathered from her speech were her perseverance, integrity, and dedication to dancing that are invaluable when passing down one’s *Vidya* (knowledge), to posterity. She expounded that one learns by teaching others and in the process becomes a leader. Dr. Kumar is a trailblazer who planted the seed to establish an Indian dance community from scratch. We learned that amid adversities, we should have a positive attitude and see an opportunity in every challenge. I think many of us can’t help but put ourselves in Dr. Kumar’s shoes and ponder whether we should follow society’s demands or forge our own paths, especially when presented with difficult choices. Right now I am forging my own path as the founder of a Language and Culture club designed to help students learn languages not offered in my own high school.

Taking initiative is often risky but can present unforeseen opportunities. It is this possibility that creates successful leaders.