

On November 17th, 2018, students from the Youth Leadership Development Program, had the privilege to listen to the esteemed dancer, Dr. Rathna Kumar, the founder of the distinguished Anjali Center for Performing Arts, presentation regarding the crucibles of leadership. Throughout her time teaching classical dance, Dr. Kumar has received a plethora of highly respected awards such as the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award; she has also played a crucial role in ensuring that the true essence of Indian culture is imprinted in Houston.

Dr. Rathna Kumar was born and raised in Chennai, Tamil Nadu and began to formally learn classical Indian dance at the young age of four. Her father was an educator with a masters in math and her mother was a professional singer who had desired to learn dance as a child but, was not allowed to due to the social mores at the time. As a child, Dr. Kumar showed great interest in learning the minutiae regarding classical Indian dance. Throughout her time in college, she continued to learn dance and perform every weekend to fulfill her mother's desires and she also became a lecturer in English after acquiring her masters degree.

Eventually, Dr. Kumar married and moved to Houston, Texas where she was faced with a challenging decision to either join Rice University and pursue her PhD or dedicate her life to her obsession – dance. After choosing to devote her time to her passion, I recall Dr. Kumar stating how she “accidentally” fell into the role of being a leader and a pioneer regarding teaching classical Indian dance in Houston.

Dr. Kumar's presentation revolved around the central message: “leaders must rise to the occasion”. When she had become the face of Indian dance in Houston, Dr. Kumar actively pursued opportunities for Houstonians to understand the beauty and intricacies of Bharatanatyam, a classical dance native to South India. Dr. Kumar elaborated on how leaders must learn to actively search for opportunities in order to be successful and how a prominent leader must understand that leadership entails continuous learning and how they should be open to this principle. She continued to elucidate on how she conquered adversity by learning to adapt to sudden change or ambiguity and how sincerity, integrity, and dedication leads to success as a leader. These attributes allow leaders to reflect upon their values and truly prevail when faced with demanding obstacles in life.

Ultimately, Dr. Rathna Kumar shared her hardships and successes to help us understand that it is crucial to move past adversity and adapt in order to be an effective leader. She has taught us that a true leader utilizes his or her obstacles as a crucible to ensure that their impact on society remains.