

A Symbol of Perseverance and Dedication

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Eminent, dexterous, ardent-- these words embody Dr. Rathna Kumar. Dr. Kumar is not only a highly prestigious, decorated, and esteemed dancer; she is also humble and inspiring, serving as a role model for young artists of the new generation. On November 21, 2020, Dr. Kumar walked students of the Youth Leadership Development Program (YLDP) through her life journey from humble beginnings to becoming a brilliant dancer which she believes is her destiny. From growing up in Chennai, to rejecting opportunities, to coming to Houston, Dr. Kumar recounted how her journey was driven by an immense passion and a strong drive to pursue her obsession: Kuchipudi dance.

Dr. Kumar commenced her speech by recounting her beginnings in Chennai and how her mother, a famed singer, akin to her daughter, had a prodigious fervor for the distinct art of Indian Classical Dance. During the time of her childhood, women pursuing dance was a taboo. Regardless, Kuchipudi was her soul and dance was calling her name. She also articulated on her interest in the English Language, which guided her to be a successful English Professor. However, her spirit for dance eventually outweighed her ardency for the English language. Following her marriage, Dr. Kumar moved to Houston, a city that was completely deprived of Indian culture. Her avidity for the English language initially paved a path for a potential PhD from the prestigious Rice University. She narrated how no job was suited for her; she wasn't completely satisfied. Her "magnificent obsession", dance, was destined to shape her future. After extensive contemplation, Dr. Kumar decided her goal wasn't money or fame; her goal was to spread the Indian culture within Houston. She established the first dance school in Houston: the Anjali Center, drawing the attention of numerous aspiring dancers. Dr. Kumar became a highly decorated artist, being one of two Indian- Americans to win the prestigious Sangeet Natak Akademi Award for Excellence in Dance, recognized 3 times as an Outstanding Teacher by the National Foundation for the Arts, and won many more exceptional accolades. In addition, Dr. Kumar has trained over 3000 students from around the country and has choreographed countless productions, breaking cultural barriers.

With her presentation and erudition, Dr. Kumar illuminated all the members of YLDP. One quote that had a great impact from the presentation was "What is life if you don't do what makes you happy?" Her heartening speech was nothing short of spectacular and taught all the young individuals to always persevere, follow our dreams, and above all, to enjoy life to the fullest. Her words of wisdom inspired many young artists like myself to continue pursuing music and Indian classical arts.