

Dr. Rathna Kumar: Pioneering Indian Arts in Houston

Sriya Cheemalamarri

Distinguished and esteemed dancer, Dr. Rathna Kumar expressed her wisdom and bestowed great insight to the students of the Youth Leadership Development Program (YLDP) on November 21, 2020. Dr. Rathna Kumar exemplified fortitude and radiated positive energy to each and every student. Through her eloquent speech, Dr. Kumar illustrated her journey coming to Houston in the 70's and becoming a pioneer of Indian arts in Houston. She recounted many obstacles faced in her journey and conveyed her perseverance in following her passion and spreading her talent across Houston. Through her true dedication, she has received many awards and became a commendable contributor to Indian arts across the world, recognized for her selflessness, commitment to her students, and to the extension of performing arts worldwide.

In her inspiring presentation, Dr. Rathna Kumar depicted her humble beginnings in Chennai learning dance since the tender age of 4. She explained the great comfort and joy dancing brought to her which continued throughout her professional career. When Dr. Rathna Kumar immigrated to Houston in the 70's, she encountered difficult decisions regarding which path she should ultimately pursue: earn a PhD degree in English from Rice University or teach Indian Classical dance. Dr. Kumar chose to follow her heart to pursue what she described as her "obsession with dance". Despite Dr. Kumar's rough start in pursuing her passion to teach dance in Houston to very few students in a small Indian community with minimal cultural influence at the time, she persevered by establishing the Anjali Center of Performing Arts and growing it to be a major institution for Indian performing arts in the U.S.

Being the solitary Indian Classical dance teacher at the time to instruct this intricate art, Dr. Kumar embodies a true leader through her establishment of Indian classical dance in Houston. She chose the arduous path when given the comfortable option of becoming a professor after studying the familiar language of English at the reputable Rice University.

Dr. Kumar enlightened the students of YLDP with many valuable lessons on leadership and various crucibles that a leader may encounter. Dr. Rathna Kumar elucidated to the participants the importance of taking opportunities and "riding the tide" rather than regretting denied opportunities in the future. She taught the students the importance of recognizing and pursuing the right opportunities that are aligned with one's passions, although many opportunities may be presented in their lives.

Through her captivating story, we learnt valuable life lessons such as the heart and mind should agree on decisions made in life. Furthermore, Dr. Kumar demonstrated the importance of being consistent in various pursuits and acquiring a clear vision. I value these lessons as I can apply these to my life since I am a fine arts student involved in varsity choir and pursuing Indian Carnatic music. Dr. Kumar gave important insight on facing difficult decisions and balancing many activities. She is an excellent leader through her capability of taking on multiple roles from being a teacher to a performer. She exemplifies a role model who learnt from hardships and prevailed being successful and inspiring the future generations through her authentic story.