Embracing life after cancer
Asian women talk about their lives

Bunshri Chandaria

In partnership with Macmillan Cancer Support
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Breast cancer

Despite having been diagnosed with breast cancer, Kanchanben relishes life and continues to follow her interests
“My husband’s pride would not allow him to tell anyone about his illness.”

Shazia, prostrate cancer carer

“People feel at ease and uplifted at CYANA.” – Bilquis
Welcome to *Embracing Life After Cancer*. The photographs were taken by Bunshri Chandaria, whose experience of living with breast cancer some years ago inspired her to create this work.

Bunshri is a Cancer Voice for Macmillan Cancer Support and a member of the Asian Women’s Breast Cancer Group.

The photographs and profiles in this book tell the stories of real women who are living with or have been affected by cancer. No two experiences of living with cancer or being close to somebody with cancer will ever be identical, but one thing is true: nobody has to go through the experience alone.

Understanding how these women came to terms with cancer is an inspiration to other women to be strong, confident and to live life to the full – during and after a cancer diagnosis.

The courageous women who have shared their experiences here are living proof that people can live the life they love – both during and after their cancer treatment. We hope this book will help family members, carers and friends to better understand, comfort and support those people affected by cancer.

We hope, too, that this book will promote a cultural shift and remove the stigma so often associated with cancer.

We thank everybody who helped put this book together. Our most heartfelt thanks go to the women featured in this book – Bharti, Bilquis, Kanchanben, Minaxi, Rekha, Shazia and Toral. Your openness, honesty and willingness to share your experiences has allowed Bunshri to transform her vision into a reality. Thank you.

*Embracing Life After Cancer* is a tool – for you to get help should you need it, and to encourage you to tell your story. Let us know how you feel about this book and, if you wish, tell us about your own journey through cancer by logging on to www.macmillan.org.uk.

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**Foreword**

Jagtar Dhanda  
Inclusion Programmes Leader, Macmillan Cancer Support

Carol Gibbons  
User Support and Involvement, Project Manager

Hana Ibrahim  
Equality and Human Rights, Project Manager

Damyanti Patel  
National Diversity Coordinator
My photography comes from direct experience. When I was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2006, my world as I knew it came to a sudden halt. I questioned, ‘Why me?’ I had done all the right things – ate well, played tennis and led an active life. Emotionally I was torn apart and thought that the doctor must have been mistaken: I thought that cancer – the big C – happened to other people, not me.

However, my cancer proved to be a catalyst for profound emotional change. It made me less egotistical and freed me to perceive the world in an entirely new way. I realised that life is not a rehearsal but an actual performance, so I began to embrace my life moment by moment.

During the first year after my operation and treatment, I had very low energy levels. I learned the art of meditation and yoga, followed a healthy diet and was surrounded by the love and support of my family and friends. I also had twelve complementary therapies at Breast Cancer Haven and experienced ten days of silence at a Vipassana meditation retreat where I learned to do things mindfully. I read various books on enlightenment which I hoped would help me think positively. I listened to my body and rested whenever I needed to.

In spite of doing all of these things, I felt completely drained and so I went to my doctor for advice. With her firm belief that creativity is known to heal, she suggested that I resume my photography. As soon as I picked up my camera I began to see things in a different light. From previously loving black and white photography, I started to visualise in colour. I began photographing movement – whether it was people in action or the motion of flowing water. Motion signified living and this excited me. I started to feel alive again and was energised instantaneously. My journey towards healing had begun.

Introduction

I would like to offer my deepest thanks to all the women in this book, for opening their hearts and homes. Together, we really can make a difference.
Self-expression through photography awakened other desires within me and inspired me to follow new passions. I learned Indian dancing, something I had always wanted to do. I also learned how to play bridge in order to challenge my mind and counteract my forgetfulness – a side-effect of my medication, Tamoxifen. And then, in spite of my tremendous fear of heights, I did a tandem skydive from 12,000 feet to raise funds and awareness for cancer. ‘Now,’ I thought, ‘anything is possible.’

As Vincent Van Gogh said, ‘I dream my painting then I paint my dream.’ I once dreamt of collating a book of my images and suddenly I thought, why not now? I wanted to make a difference to other people, to help them to heal emotionally in the way that I had, through inspiration. Within a week of this contemplation, I met Eddie Ephraums of Envisage Books, a publisher who shared my vision. A few months into our collaboration, I met Jagtar Dhanda at Macmillan Cancer Support and together we came up with the idea of photographing Asian women who are living a life they love after their journey through cancer so they could, in turn, inspire others to embrace life despite any circumstances.

Bunshri Chandaria
Photographer and breast cancer survivor

‘I was extremely touched by the support I received from various charities while undergoing my treatment after the operation. This prompted me to overcome my fear of heights and encouraged me to attempt a sponsored sky dive so I could help others like myself.’ – Bunshri
Kanchanben, now 75, was diagnosed with breast cancer at the age of 69. Widowed at 30, she single-handedly raised her two children while running a hardware shop in Thika, Kenya, working 11-hour days, seven days a week. She spent most evenings making clothes for her clients and often had to leave the children in her neighbours’ care when travelling to Nairobi on business.

In 1999, her eldest son, Kaushik, was involved in a car accident. He slipped into a coma for several weeks and suffered memory loss, but she nursed him night and day. With this love and faith he recovered.

When Kanchanben’s right breast had felt hard for over a year she thought nothing of it. However, on attending a talk on cancer awareness, she was prompted to visit the doctor, who then arranged for her to have a scan. When she was diagnosed with breast cancer, her family was shocked by the word ‘cancer’ but she was not fazed. She thought, ‘I have to face what has happened.’ She had two operations on the same breast in the space of three weeks. Her lumpectomy was followed by weeks of radiotherapy.

She is now a member of an Asian Breast Cancer Group (AWBCG) where members can relate to and support one another. She enjoys going to satsangs (group meditation, singing and reciting prayers) in addition to reading, cooking and travelling. Now a grandmother, she lives with her younger son, Rahul, his wife, Minu, and their daughter, Serena. She believes that it is not what you experience in life that is important, but how you live it. Her zest for life in the face of tragic difficulties demonstrates love and fortitude.
KANCHANBEN

1. On being diagnosed her first thought was, ‘What shall I do?’

2. Openness about her illness allowed the love and support of family and friends.

3. Kanchanben’s two younger brothers still live in India. She visits them from time to time.

4. She follows the Jain religion, making notes about ideas that relate to her life, believing that, ‘Things are meant to happen in a certain way, no matter what one does’.
Bharti, now 51, was diagnosed with Hodgkin lymphoma at the age of 24. Her diagnosis came as a shock and left her feeling angry and afraid. ‘I had just lost a friend to cancer, so I thought it must be my turn now,’ she says. Because cancer had always been a taboo subject for her family, they were all at a loss as to how to deal with her illness. ‘I had no idea that I was going to lose my hair during chemotherapy,’ she admits.

At 29, Bharti had a relapse of Hodgkin lymphoma and was devastated. She had to face another agonising round of chemotherapy which prevented her from breastfeeding her baby. Then, at 47, she discovered a lump in her right breast whilst she was scratching in her sleep. During her scan, a second cancerous lump was found in her left breast. She thought, ‘Oh God, not again.’ Because of her past history, the consultant advised her to have a double mastectomy, even though the cancer had not spread to her lymph nodes. A few months after the treatment, as a reaction to Tamoxifen, she developed acute pancreatitis. Her energy levels were low and she felt constantly tired.

Through her hospital’s recommendation, she joined the Asian Women’s Breast Cancer Group (AWBCG) and this completely transformed her life. She now leads the group and empowers others to get involved. In 2010, Bharti will be holding several AWBCG meetings at Maggie’s Centre in Charing Cross Hospital to encourage newly-diagnosed women to join the group and access support.

In October 2009, she was invited by the Prime Minister and his wife to 10 Downing Street in recognition of the amazing work she does for breast cancer awareness.

‘Being diagnosed with cancer has given me a new perspective on life. Now, my priority is to look after my well-being’ – Bharti
BHARTI

1. Bharti is always making a difference in the community and regularly takes part in events to raise funds for cancer charities.

2. The ritual of Hanuman Chalisa is about purifying oneself. The mugat (crown) contains water from the Ganges.

3. ‘My son, Kevin is the light of my life. He was my goal to recovery. My mother was a godsend and looked after him while I was in hospital’

4. In the last few years religion has played a key part in Bharti’s life. ‘Before cancer I practised for the sake of it. Now I do it from the heart’
More than £100 will go to Macmillan Cancer Relief as a result of the staff’s efforts. “We got some funny responses from some people,” said manager Claire Bartlett.
Bilquis, now 52, was diagnosed with ovarian cancer at the age of 25. When she discovered a lump in her lower abdomen, she was a young mother struggling with the loss of one of her twin boys. She felt constantly tired but thought nothing of it. While at her GP’s surgery one day, she asked the doctor about the lump she had found. The doctor immediately sent her for a scan, after which she was told that she had a cyst. However, when the lump was being removed, the surgeon discovered that she had cancer. She felt bitter, angry and wanted to give up, but her son gave her a purpose and a reason to fight for her life.

In 1999, Bilquis felt that there was a general lack of cancer awareness and support so she began giving talks at Asian community centres about how meditation and positive thinking can benefit one’s well-being. She now works as an Asian link worker and a qualified counsellor for Cancer You are Not Alone (CYANA), a charitable organisation run by Newham Primary Care Trust. CYANA was formed in 1983 to give support to Newham and surrounding borough residents affected by cancer. CYANA provides information on all types of cancer, not only in English but also in Punjabi, Hindi and Urdu.

While her job keeps her extremely busy, she is much happier doing something that touches peoples’ lives. ‘There is no comparison,’ she says, ‘in this role I can make a difference to people affected by cancer.’

Bilquis firmly believes that, in her words, ‘cancer does not have to be a death sentence.’ CYANA offers its members an outlet whereby they can free themselves from isolation and find a helping hand or a sympathetic ear, no matter how trivial their problem may seem.

‘Every Monday people of all ages come to eat and dance. That is invaluable. They feel less alone’ – Bilquis
1. ‘My job at CYANA was originally set up by Macmillan’

2. At CYANA people feel less isolated, more confident and better informed

3. By having contact with others, people feel less alone

4. Under one roof, people can access information, psychological support and complementary therapies

5. ‘Sharing can reduce heavy burdens. Anyone can come to CYANA and share their problems’
Shazia
Carer for prostate cancer patient

Shazia, now 63, lost her husband when she was 55 years old. In 1970, when she came to London from Lahore, she had no one to talk to while her husband was at work. She literally lost her voice. Eventually, she found a job in a meat factory, packing pork and sausages. After nine years, she decided to work in a nursing home where she looked after elderly, retired female nurses. She loved talking with the nurses, dressing them and helping them choose their jewellery.

In 1996 Shazia and her husband emigrated to Pakistan. There, the custom was that women would stay at home rather than go out to work. Her husband could not find a job; he started drinking and soon became an alcoholic, although he never admitted it. Three years later, they returned to London. They had no job, no house and lived on income support. ‘That is a bad thing,’ she says. ‘One becomes more and more useless.’ That same year her husband was diagnosed with cancer. He drank to forget the pain and she stopped seeing her friends. She cooked, but her husband could not eat anything. ‘I felt like banging my head on the wall,’ she says. She went for counselling and was on anti-depressants and sleeping tablets for three months.

Shazia’s husband was diagnosed with cancer in July and in October he was gone. After the funeral everyone left and she was on her own. She talked herself into working again, this time as an actress. ‘I have transformed,’ she says. ‘I can now talk to anyone and go anywhere. I go to a support group every Monday and its members are such a jolly bunch. I feel so healthy and alive.’

‘My family are in Pakistan. At first I was so homesick, but now I’m happy, acting in television dramas again’ – Shazia
SHAZIA

1. ‘I took my husband to the hospital. He stayed there for a month and never came back’

2. In 1999 Shazia came to London. In that same year her husband was diagnosed with prostate cancer

3. ‘I was housebound with him, it was bad. His pride wouldn’t allow him to talk about his illness. He said, ‘There’s nothing wrong with me’

4. ‘Another door has opened for me. I have more friends and more support’
Top-of-the-world mum shows she is made of write stuff for exams

by KAMAL PANDYA

Mother was no newcomer to academia, as she was already a fully-qualified pharmacist with a science degree.

But the effort and concentration required to become the best in the world that day were especially taxing.

Because on the morning, she was due to sit the exams, her family’s house was broken into by burglars.

The traumatic event would have been too distressful for most but Rekha took it all in stride.

She said: “It was very stressful but I’m used to working under pressure and I just had to get on with it.”

For the past three years Rekha has been managing her own business. But she found the routine of running a local shop did not give her enough intellectual stimulation.

“It’s long hours and hard work managing a small shop,” she said.

The Barnet and Potters Bar Mum becomes number one in the world – P3

WHAT would your reaction be if you were told you had clinched first place in the world in an internationally-renowned examination?

Especially if on the morning of the exam, you had been traumatised by having your home being broken into?

This was the feat achieved by Rekha Shukla of Sunningdale, who last week took the London Chamber of Commerce’s exam.

Rekha, 40, is originally from Uttar Pradesh in India and has lived in London for 15 years. She moved here to study for a degree in pharmacy, before returning to India to work as a pharmacist.

The Barnet and Potters Bar Mum becomes number one in the world – P3

The experience was daunting, but Rekha was determined to succeed.

“I’ve always been good at maths and science,” she said. “I wasn’t too worried about that part of the course. But I was really surprised I could write as well.”

“When I found out that I had got the highest mark in the world I was so pleased, particularly because it was for writing.”

At a ceremony last week at Barnet College’s Russell Hall campus, Mrs Shukla was presented with a special certificate to mark her achievement.

The Barnet and Potters Bar Mum becomes number one in the world – P3

Rekha said: “I’m incredibly proud of myself and the achievement. It was a long and hard journey, but I’m so glad I did it.”
Rekha, now 54, was diagnosed with breast cancer at the age of 50. She had just completed adhai (eight days of fasting). She felt great until she was called for a routine screening and her mammogram showed cancer cells. It was a traumatic experience. Her first thought was, ‘What am I going to do? It is tearing me apart.’ For days she would burst into tears and wanted to be isolated from everyone around her. ‘I didn’t want to face the world,’ she remembers. ‘I was afraid.’

As much as she tried to take it in her stride, Rekha’s mastectomy, chemotherapy and Herceptin treatment brought turmoil to her life. She was tormented by rashes all over her body, mouth ulcers, hair loss and other side effects. To help ease the pain, she underwent alternative therapies at Cherry Lodge in Barnet, London and met other people to whom she could relate. She says, ‘My unfaltering family support and faith in God pulled me through this treacherous illness.’

Before cancer, she used to be constantly running around, juggling her time between housework, children, working in hospitals as a pharmacist and helping her husband run a mini-supermarket. In 1985, she lost her two-day-old baby to a diaphragmatic hernia. A health visitor met with her regularly and that made a tremendous difference to her well-being. ‘Now I want to empower other people to follow their vision and embrace life,’ she says.

Rekha found inspiration in Jainism and has been on a religious pilgrimage to India with her daughter. She pursues her passions – teaching Gujarati to children and reading literature on Jain religion. ‘Now I have a driving force in me,’ she says. ‘What I learned in childhood now has a meaning. If I want to do something I do not hold back.’

‘What is more important, achieving goals or living in a family environment?’ – Rekha
1. ‘It is the inner self that is most important.’ This realisation helped Rekha heal

2. ‘I thought creativity would help me heal, so I designed my new house’

3. ‘Darshan (prayers) make me feel that I am in a different world, on a higher level’

4. ‘I love listening to religious music’

5. ‘I want to get more spiritual, life is a journey’
Minaxi and Toral
Mother and daughter – breast cancer

Minaxi, now 60, was diagnosed with breast cancer when called for screening at 50. She was extremely upset; her son went into denial and disappeared for three days. She had a mastectomy and wore a cold cap during chemotherapy. She thought, ‘If I lose my hair then I will look like a cancer patient.’ Her husband was very quiet and would not approach the subject of cancer. In spite of her family and friends supporting her, she felt lonely so decided to join a support group and work again.

‘As a result of experiencing cancer, I have transformed,’ Minaxi says. ‘I have become more compassionate. I understand people better and appreciate each person’s point of view.’ She runs a support group, attends Jain (religion) classes, spends time with her loved ones and values life a lot more.

Her daughter, Toral, now 33, was diagnosed with breast cancer at the young age of 29. She was fit and had just tackled a half-triathlon. Toral found a lump in her breast when moisturising. Her GP advised her to monitor it and not to worry. Another doctor agreed to send an urgent referral – but this never happened. Finally, when she had a fine needle biopsy, she was formally diagnosed. She was devastated at the thought of having a mastectomy. Even with her mother’s support, she struggled and felt completely isolated for the first year.

To overcome her pain, she had complementary therapies at Breast Cancer Haven and attended self-development courses. She began to perceive the world in a new light and felt good about life.

Now, she embraces life by volunteering to work for cancer charities, spending time with her friends and family and running her own business.

A year after her diagnosis, Toral started training for a triathlon to raise money for cancer charities
MINAXI & TORAL

1. ‘A positive feature of having had cancer is that I know there is a light at the end of the tunnel’ – Minaxi

2. ‘I loved that part of my body. After my mastectomy I just cried and cried’ – Toral

3. ‘I run a breast cancer group in south London supporting people, which includes filling in forms for social help or accompanying them to hospital’ – Minaxi

4. ‘I began to perceive the world in a different light’ – Toral

5. ‘I only sleep for a few hours every day, but live life to the full’ – Minaxi
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to say a huge thank you to my dearest husband, Kash – my rock; to my entire family and friends for their love and support during my period of healing; to my doctor, Sarah Lotzof, for her perpetual insistence and belief in my creativity – which encouraged me to live life to the full; to my consultant, Kefah Mokbel for his support even though he is so busy saving lives; to all the members of my cancer support group (AWBCG) for their guidance and warmth. Also, to Jagtar Dhanda, Damyanti Patel, Hana Ibrahim and Carol Gibbons of Macmillan, for their input and enthusiasm; and to my editor and publisher who helped make this book happen – for inspiring me to empower others to embrace life. For all the people who have been affected by cancer...

Bunshri Chandaria
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SUPPORT GROUPS AND CENTRES

Asian Women’s Breast Cancer Group (AWBCG) – This group arranges outings and events, including seminars with speakers who discuss various cancer-related issues. It is open to people suffering from any type of cancer and for their family or carers. It aims to provide a friendly atmosphere for those in need. (www.awbcg.co.uk)
‘At AWBCG I can relate to everyone.’ – Kanchanben

Breast Cancer Haven (Fulham, London) – This organisation creates individual programmes combining counselling, nutritional advice and complementary treatments for anyone who has experienced breast cancer – all free of charge. (www.breastcancerhaven.org.uk)
‘Breast Cancer Haven was a big support during my difficult cancer journey. Now I chair a young person’s committee there.’ – Toral

Cherry Lodge Cancer Care (Barnet, London) – Cherry Lodge provides specialist information, support, comfort and complementary therapies. Services are available to everyone living with cancer, their carers, family and friends – free of charge. (www.cherrylodgecancercare.org.uk)
‘Cherry Lodge was a godsend for me whilst going through chemotherapy. Their complementary therapies and support eased the pain.’ – Rekha

Cancer You Are Not Alone (CYANA) – This is an organisation which provides support to Newham and surrounding borough residents affected by cancer.
‘I am a qualified counsellor at CYANA. We also provide counselling at peoples’ homes and at their hospitals.’ – Bilquis
‘At CYANA we chat and I get more information from interacting with other women.’ – Shazia

Maggies Centre – Maggie’s Centre provides access and help with information, benefits advice, psychological support and stress-reducing strategies, all free of charge. (www.maggiescentres.org.uk)
‘Maggie’s Centre in London has invited me to hold several meetings for my support group. This is to encourage Asian Women, newly diagnosed with cancer at Charing Cross Hospital, to access help and support by joining our group (AWBCG).’ – Bharti

Croydon Breast Cancer Group – A group which provides support to people who have experienced cancer and their families, assisting with whatever individual needs they may have, from filling in forms for social help and claiming benefits to accompanying patients to hospitals for their treatments. The group arranges for various medical experts to speak about different types of cancer, cures, remedies and diets.
‘With Jackie’s help I run a support group in South London.’ – Minaxi

Laughter Therapy (Harrow) – This organization is one of 6,000 laughter clubs worldwide. They believe that laughter unleashes a rush of stress bursting endorphins which promotes good health and happiness. Their workshops are based on a series of laughter exercises devised by Dr Madan Kataria, the founder of the laughter yoga.(www.artofeating.co.uk).
‘We laughed just to laugh. During the workshop, laughter naturally created humour and was infectious within our group. It left me feeling lighter but energized.’ – Damyanti

For any information on support groups please log on to the Macmillan website (www.macmillan.org.uk).
Please feel free to order more copies of this book through be.macmillan.org.uk
Laughter Therapy workshop: ‘Cancer does not mean death, people live a good life and embrace it more.’ – Damyanti (Member of AWBCG and National Diversity Coordinator for Macmillan). During the production of this book, Damyanti was diagnosed with breast cancer and at the time of going to print was undergoing chemotherapy.
For anyone affected by cancer...

Macmillan Cancer Support improves the lives of people affected by cancer.

We provide practical, medical and financial support and push for better cancer care.

Cancer affects us all. We can all help.

We are Macmillan.

If you have any questions about cancer, ask Macmillan. If you need support, ask Macmillan. If you just want someone to talk to, ask Macmillan.

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