

“my daughter’s **Cancer** made me stronger”

When Komathy’s four-year-old was diagnosed with cancer, she battled her way to see the light at the end of the tunnel

by Pamela Ho

On her daughter’s fourth birthday, Komathy wasn’t preparing party bags. Instead, she was sitting by Rohini’s bedside at KK Women’s and Children’s Hospital (KKH), watching her toddler undergo chemotherapy.

“I felt very sad, but I told myself if she recovers, there’ll be many more birthdays to celebrate,” says Komathy, 30, a homemaker.

Four months earlier, in June 2003, Rohini had a high fever. When it did not subside after a week, Komathy took her to the family doctor. Till this day, she is amazed that Rohini, then only three, was able to tell the doctor she felt a pain in her tummy. This piece of information saved her life.

“After the doctor examined her, his face changed. I immediately knew something was wrong. He brought my hand to Rohini’s abdomen and I was shocked to feel a huge lump.”

Rohini was instantly admitted to KKH. “She was so small they had to put

Komathy left her abusive husband and demanding job to help Rohini fight liver cancer. The cancer is now in remission, and she hopes Rohini can grow up healthy and lead a normal life.

her in a cot. I recall doctors and nurses doing x-rays and scans, but no one told me what was going on."

The following afternoon the head surgeon came with an entourage of doctors. "When he told me they had to operate on Rohini and remove three-quarters of her liver, I broke down."

Overwhelmed By Problems

Rohini was diagnosed with liver cancer. Although the operation was a success, the tumour in Rohini's liver had burst, sending cancer cells all over her body. She needed chemotherapy.

"When I saw Rohini in intensive care after the operation, I couldn't stop crying. She had tubes running all over her body and she was restrained to the bed. I kept asking myself, why her and not me?" The 10-day stay at KKH was a tough experience. It was the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) period and no one was allowed in hospital with Komathy.

Separated from her husband, Komathy had only her mother, aunt and uncle to rely on for emotional support. Her mother took care of her younger daughter, then two, while she stayed in hospital with Rohini. "I hardly had time with my other child Nirosini and I missed her. It was a difficult time for me."

She could not afford the hospital bill with her salary as a preschool teacher – the operation alone cost \$18,000. With help from a social worker, she applied for financial help from the Children's Cancer Foundation (CCF) and the Community Development Council (CDC).

Coping With Changes

Every month for nine months, Komathy brought Rohini to KKH for chemotherapy, with each stay lasting a week. "Packing a hospital bag became a sad routine, and whenever Rohini saw me packing, she'd wail and scream. She was so terrified of being alone in hospital that she wouldn't even allow me to go to the washroom!" Komathy says.

Rohini vomited excessively and she lost all appetite. Gradually, she started to lose weight and her hair began to fall out. "Rohini was very self-conscious about losing her hair. She'd often pull her sister's hair in frustration, and once even asked me to shave her head bald."

Constant stares from strangers also drove her to tears. "Once we overheard a lady remark, 'her head is so shiny, it's like a mirror!'. I could see the hurt all over Rohini's face," Komathy recounts. "I told Rohini not to be sad because her hair will one day grow back beautifully." Always one to sit pretty for pictures, Rohini would shy away from the camera, so the family album doesn't have pictures from those dreadful years. "It's only recently that her hair has grown to a short crop, so we are taking pictures again," says Komathy.

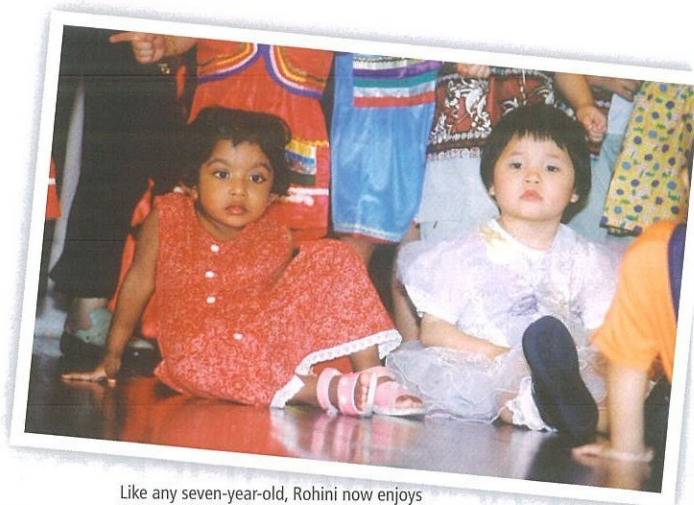
Rohini was also discouraged from going to public places. "Until today, we hardly go out, except to the library on weekends to borrow books. But Rohini loves to stay home to watch VCDs and she can draw for hours!"

Meanwhile, Komathy did try going back to full-time work. "But Rohini kept falling sick and my boss couldn't understand the situation. More than once, I was forced to drop my sick child off at my mum's place and go to work. Then one day I decided it wasn't going to work out. My kids, especially Rohini, needed me more."

Blessing In Disguise

Komathy's 39-year-old ex-husband, a driver, could only provide \$200 a month for household expenses. "It was not enough and our water and electricity supplies were cut many times," she recalls. So, she sought help from Beyond Social Services. Komathy and her girls now receive free provisions every month.

"It was a marriage from hell," she recounts. Bad-tempered and always in debt, her husband would hurl abusive and derogative expletives at her. "Since the day we married, I cowered in fear of



Like any seven-year-old, Rohini now enjoys attending school, watching VCDs and drawing.

him. Even when Rohini was ill, he would ask me very unkindly how I could have managed to 'care' for her until she contracted cancer," recalls Komathy.

The turning point came earlier this year when Rohini asked her "why Daddy was always scolding Mummy". "I realised then that I don't need this useless man in our lives," she says. Komathy has since filed for a divorce.

She now faces a new chapter of her life as a single mother. "Initially, I was terrified. I've always been a timid person who'll cry at the slightest thing. But Rohini's illness has forced me to be more independent. When I bring her for check-ups, I'm constantly making decisions. I've become more outspoken and brave as a result!" she says.

Komathy admits she was an "inexperienced" mum when Rohini fell sick, as her kids have always been taken care of by her mother. Even taking them on a bus alone was an ordeal for her. But now, she not only takes care of them single-handedly, she also juggles their homework and Rohini's hospital visits.

Komathy looks forward to seeing Rohini grow up and lead a normal life. "Rohini helped me see that life shouldn't be taken for granted, but cherished and lived fully. Whenever I face an obstacle now, I tell myself it's not the end of the world. There's much more to life!" **IWI**

HAIR FOR HOPE 2006

The Children's Cancer Foundation (CCF) aims to enhance the lives of cancer-stricken children and their families. It is holding the annual Hair for Hope (Hfh) event at Suntec City Mall, Fountain of Wealth on July 23 and 30, 2006.

As a symbolic gesture to lend moral support to children with cancer and to celebrate their courage, CCF invites members of the public to shave their heads. In 2003, nine volunteers came forward, and the number grew to 310 in 2004. Funds raised will benefit these children and their families. Since 1996, CCF has helped 1,200 families. To find out how you can help, visit www.ccf.org.sg/hfh.