

# Radhika Kannan to Receive UC Berkeley's University Medal

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BERKELEY, Calif. — Radhika Kannan, who was recently named UC Berkeley's top graduating senior and recipient of its University Medal, is determined to carry out a career plan she made with her mother, Geetanjali, who died suddenly and inexplicably at age 45 during Kannan's junior year.

How the 21-year-old Kannan, an Indian American student, coped with the 2013 loss of her mother, who was her mentor and best friend, and then went on to graduate with the highest distinction in economics, conservation studies and a near-perfect GPA, is a marvel of personal fortitude and determination, according to a UC Berkeley press release.

“Her resolve to excel academically despite this blow, and to continue to provide emotional support for the rest of her family, truly reflects the intensity of Radhika's will and the strength of her spirit,” wrote Kate O'Neill, an associate professor of environmental science, policy and management, in her letter recommending Kannan for the University Medal.

UC Berkeley's University Medal honors outstanding scholarship, public service and strength of character, and comes with a \$2,500 award. As this year's recipient, Kannan will address thousands of her peers on May 16 at a commencement ceremony at Memorial Stadium. Her speech, she says, will touch on the unpredictability of life, a topic close to her heart.

“As a Cal grad, you really want to be prepared, but sometimes you just can't be,” Kannan said in the press release. “Always know that your Cal family is there for you, and don't be afraid to ask for help.”

This fall, Kannan is headed for the University of Oxford in England for a master's degree, after which she will pursue a law degree at Columbia University. She has her late mother to thank for



Radhika Kannan

Radhika Kannan, an Indian American student at the University of California at Berkeley, was named the recipient of the University Medal, its top graduating honor. (UC Berkeley photo)

setting her on this path to success, said the press release.

“My mom had the clairvoyance to know what I’d be passionate about. She knew me better than anyone,” said Kannan. “We made this plan and I’m going to stick to it because it’s a good plan.”

Kannan was born in Mumbai, India, in 1993, the only child of Kannan Subramanian Ramakrishnan, a chartered accountant and software entrepreneur, and Geetanjali Kannan, a schoolteacher and dancer trained in Bharathanatyam. Both mother and daughter studied with the same dance teacher.

The family moved to Singapore when Kannan was 3, and continued to shuttle back and forth between India and Singapore, which meant Kannan changed schools a half-dozen times.

“Every time I switched schools I would start from scratch, and would have to learn the culture of the school, how different teachers worked, how to get into an inner circle of friends,” she says. “It made me a flexible person and more outgoing.”

Having developed a passion for environmental justice while at UC Berkeley, she conducted an independent research project in which she found that farmers in south India were not changing their crops in response to changes in rainfall, forecasting serious implications for food security in India.

“I think her project would hold great promise as a doctoral dissertation in economics,” wrote economist Edward Miguel, her supervisor on the project, in his letter recommending Kannan for the University Medal.

Down the road, Kannan hopes to pursue a career with the United Nations Environmental Program: “I want to help indigenous groups and farmers in India, who have a hard time defending themselves against large institutions,” she said.