

# Top graduating senior dips, then soars in face of tragic loss

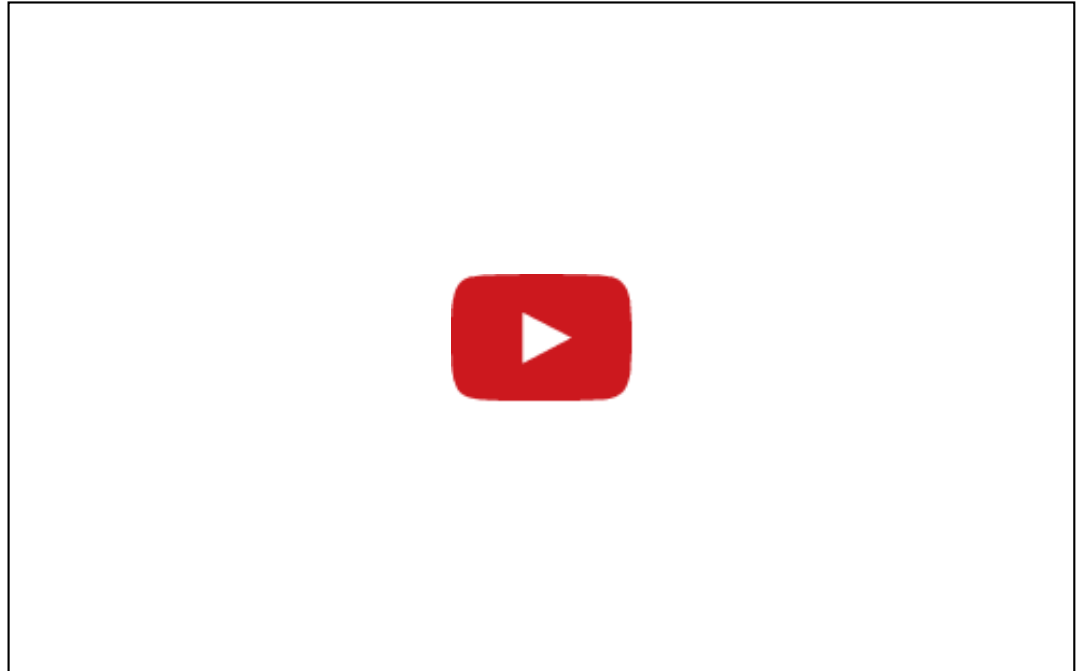
By Yasmin Anwar, Media Relations | May 4, 2015

BERKELEY —

The Earth could use a tough litigator like Radhika Kannan, who was just named UC Berkeley's top graduating senior. She dazzles whether she's defending the environment or performing a classical Indian dance.

But beneath the eloquent voice and flashing dark eyes, a deep well of sorrow propels Kannan, 21, 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 Kannan 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.



UC Berkeley video by Phil Ebner

“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, associate professor of environmental science, policy and management, in her letter recommending Kannan for the University Medal.

## Shines in scholarship, strength of character

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 Saturday, 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,” says Kannan. “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 setting her on this path to success.

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



Goofing around with her cousins (Courtesy of Radhika Kannan)

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 school teacher and dancer trained in Bharathanatyam, a style that originated in the temples of Tamil Nadu. 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.”

## Droughts, floods hit close to home

Climate change hits close to home for Kannan, who grew up in countries plagued by droughts and floods. She was 10 when the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami of 2004 narrowly missed her island state of Singapore.

“I’m driven by a threat to my security and the need to protect people and countries vulnerable to climate change,” she says.

When she was in sixth grade, the family moved to Bangalore, India, and Kannan stepped up her academic game. That competitiveness stuck, she says.

Back in Singapore in high school, she joined the Model United Nations, a program that teaches the diplomatic skills used in international relations. She learned how to write resolutions, pass an amendment and listen to all points of view. She also developed lasting friendships and a desire to travel beyond Asia.

When it came time to go to college, Berkeley was among her top choices. A generous financial-aid package, bolstered by a Regents’ and Chancellor’s Scholarship, eased the decision. But it was the Cal mascot that sealed the deal for the Kannan family, who had long nicknamed themselves “the three bears.”

## A Bear for life

“When we found out the mascot at Cal is a bear, I was like, ‘OK, this is it. I’m going to be a Bear for the rest of my life,’” she says.

Kannan arrived at Berkeley in the fall of 2011 at the height of the Occupy movement. She marveled at the open debates on campus about politics, sexuality and mental health and other topics that were less talked-about where she came from.

“Cal really opened my mind,” she says.

She took a dizzying array of classes including oceanography, statistics, bioethics and even swing dancing: “I didn’t want to box myself in and only do one thing,” she says.

But all the while, she kept her eye on the prize, pursuing economics and environmental law, and spent her first summer interning with a small law firm. Later, she joined the Cal Mock Trial team, and traveled around the country arguing cases. Her team placed second to Harvard in this year's national championships, and she won an All-American award as an expert witness.

Meanwhile at Berkeley, she aced all her classes. But her ambitions and accolades were eclipsed during finals week in December 2013 when her mother was hospitalized in Chennai, India, with a serious case of the flu.

Worried, she called to see if she should head home immediately, but her mother assured her she was fine and to stay put. On her way to India after finals, Kannan checked her phone during a layover in Amsterdam, and was shocked to see a condolence message from a friend.

When she finally heard from her family that her mother had died – falling sick on a Wednesday and dead by Sunday night — she was stunned, and replayed their last phone conversation over and over in her mind. “The last words I had said to her on the phone were, ‘I love you,’ ” she says.

## Heartbreak and hope

The exact cause of death remains unknown, “which means we don’t have closure,” she says. “It’s so hard knowing I’ll never hear her voice again.”

After the customary 13-day Hindu period of mourning and reflection, her father urged her to return to Berkeley and resume her studies. Kannan volunteered at the campus’s student advocate’s office, where she gave financial-aid advice to students who had fallen on hard times.

“Knowing I contributed to lessening someone’s hardship made me feel less alone,” she says.



A champion inside and outside court

Gradually, she threw herself back into her studies and, with her support network of friends, family and faculty, regained the passion for environmental justice that had brought her to Berkeley in the first place.

Among other things, 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 says.



Cal Mock Trial team in front of the U.S. Capitol building in Washington, D.C.

But for the moment, she is focused on what to tell her graduating peers at commencement, many of whom are worried about what the future holds. As someone who has survived the unimaginable, she has faith that things will work out.

“We’re Golden Bears,” she says. “We survive.”