

In Memoriam for our Member who has Passed



*Like branches on a Tree, we all
grow in different directions; but
our roots keep us all together.*



*Usha
Bali*

Member of Coleraine Historical Society: 4 years

Obituary

USHA BALI

April 6, 1946 to June 14, 2022(Age 76)

Usha was active in the Colerain Artists Group and brought their artwork to the CHS 55th Anniversary celebration in 2019.

Usha was a retired educator. To the students of Westwood Elementary in the Cincinnati Public School District and St. James School in White Oak, she was Miss Bali. To the Desi community, she was Usha Auntie. But to so many, she was simply Usha.

In tribute to Usha and her parents, her brother and sisters had 2 trees planted in front of the CHS Museum.



CHS Member Usha Bali
poses for a picture with her family

June 30 2022, Usha's nephew RAJIV SATYAL wrote:

Yesterday, Ushy passed away.

"Ushy" is the term of endearment my brothers and I use for my Mom's sister, Usha Bali. To many, she was simply Usha. To my Mom, she was Didi. To the students of Westwood Elementary in the Cincinnati Public School District, she was Miss Bali. To the Desi community, she was Usha Auntie. To many of my cousins, she was Usha Masi. But to me, she was always Ushy.

As many of you learned during the tribute I wrote last year when my college friend, Marty, died, I've been blessed to have avoided experiencing much loss at all. I lost my dear high school friend, Matt Wiebe, in my late 20s. And that's about it. Needless to say, this one is going to hurt a lot.

I've known Ushy — wow... I knew Ushy (not easy to use the past tense) — since I was born. My Mom told me this only recently: over the course of more than seven decades, she and her older sister, only two years apart in age, had hardly ever lived more than a few miles from each other. The brief span of time was when Ushy came to this country in 1969 and my Mom in 1970. One day, on the campus of Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, a lovely woman by the name of Nancy asked if they wanted to live with her and her husband, Mac, in Harrison, Ohio. In fact, Ushy got to hear me describe this in my show, *The Man in The Middle*, when I performed it in 2019:

"I very much love 'the real Americans' and how welcoming they have been to my family. When my Mom and aunt came to a small town in Ohio, the McGary couple took them in. They converted to vegetarianism - two red-blooded Americans, in a red state, who ate red meat. THEY converted to vegetarianism — in the early '70s."

Perhaps it was the McGarys who inspired her or perhaps this was already in her big heart, but to this day, she's the only Desi American Baby Boomer I know who actually had a diverse set of friends. I don't mean the way most of them do it: a brownie with vanilla sprinkles on top. I mean a number of East Asian and Black friends, too. She even hosted many foreign exchange students in her home. And up until a few months ago, she was hosting talent shows for the kids in her neighborhood. Everyone on the street was invited, even her next-door neighbors who erected an "Impeach Biden" yard sign a few hours into his administration. Gotta love the West Side.

Of course, some of what drove her manifold interactions is the fact that Ushy never married. As I myself aged, I thought a lot about what it was like to grow old by myself. Eventually, I asked her pointblank. She advised that I absolutely needed to get married, that though she had made her way in this world, it was no way to live. When I probed further, she stated that, at least in her generation, the Desi community was simply not set up to accommodate single people. "Why not?" "You have to understand the dynamics. You can't easily go to parties by yourself." "Why not?" "Because the entire foundation is couples. If you show up as a single woman, the other women always worry when you talk to their husbands." This was the sort of insight that she'd provide that I'd get nowhere else. I never heard anyone break it down like that before, packed with logic but also loaded with emotion. We'd have these deep conversations that would somehow end in laughter.

That's one thing I must tell you: Ushy was very funny. She absolutely loved writing poems and telling jokes. Towards the end of that conversation, she remarked, "Living alone, you can lose all your marbles." I replied, "Or your dishes. What's the deal with single people not having a full set of dishes? I might get married just because my OCD requires me to see six plates in a stack." We laughed and laughed.

Back when I was around 13 and my brothers were around 9, Ushy housed a couple of Chinese girls at her place. They might've been Korean, but this was the '80s, so they were Chinese. And one of the fondest memories I have was when we were trying to explain this pair of jokes: "Why did the chicken cross the road?" "To get to the other side." No problem so far. But here came the follow-up: "Why did the punk rocker cross the road?" "Because he was stapled to the chicken."

First off, when you're a kid, that's enough to send you into splits. But when we had to try to explain what a punk rocker was to people visiting from the other side of Earth, that's when we all lost it. None of the punk rock names were translating, so we finally came up with, "OK, you know Bon Jovi?" "Yes, yes." "OK, so imagine Bon Jovi is stapled to a chicken..." I don't even think we could get through the explanation, because Ushy, my brothers, the two students, and I were cracking up so hard. Total giggle farm. It's a salute to Ushy that these are the moments that are flooding my heart today.

Ushy frequently came to my shows, oftentimes bringing her (diverse) set of friends with her. She was the one who referred to me as "Warm, Witty, and Wise." And she was the one who spoke to the Fairfield Community Arts Center

about “her nephew.” Mere weeks later, they booked me to do my biggest show in my actual hometown of Fairfield, Ohio.

And it didn’t matter how many times we told her the same jokes; she’d chuckle just as hard when we quoted Johnny Carson to her: “For three days after death, hair and fingernails continue to grow but phone calls taper off.”

In interviews the last few years, I did my best to credit Ushy with not only my sense of humor but also a broader appreciation of art. Ushy painted a lot. Indeed, her artwork is displayed in several schools and banks on the West Side of Cincinnati.

Ushy loved India and went every year for decades, visiting her father (my Grampa). But her favorite place in Cincinnati was Mt. Airy Forest. She couldn’t stop describing its splendor to us every time she returned from a long stroll. Of course, as a teenager, I thought that was about the lamest thing I’d ever heard. “Who cares about trees?” Now, though, I’ll forever thank my aunt for opening my eyes to the wonder of nature. She was a living embodiment of stopping to smell the roses.

Beyond the natural beauty of Cincinnati, she adored its architecture and features; she’s the one who told me about Eden Park, Mecklenburg Gardens, and Putz’s Creamy Whip. Whenever we met, we’d go to LaRosa’s for pizza or Graeter’s for ice cream (or both). Somewhere in my closet at my parents’, I still have the T-shirt she got for me when I was small: “Somebody in Cincinnati Loves Me.”

Speaking of beauty, I remember sitting in our kitchen when I saw a picture of Ushy and observed, “Wow, she’s really pretty.” My brother, Rakesh, concurred oh-so-matter-of-factly, “Yes, she’s the prettiest of the sisters.” Standing at the stove, my Mom goes, “Thanks a lot, guys.” Rakesh: “Well, she is.” Gotta love the gays. The way they can declare something plainly and with such finality. And go about eating their rajma chawal... that our Mom just cooked.

When Ushy was diagnosed with liver cancer a couple of years ago, it felt so unfair. She never once consumed alcohol. In fact, she was a strong devotee of Hinduism, not once touching meat. But if there’s one thing we’ve all learned, it’s how cruel and arbitrary that disease can be. She and my Mom are firm believers in “when it’s your time, it’s your time,” so Ushy didn’t want to go through cancer treatments. Many family members and friends encouraged her to do it anyway. I was deeply conflicted about this. Not saying they weren’t, but I’m of the belief that this is the most personal of decisions. I don’t go as far as to

say, "It's your life, so do what you want," but once you've made your peace with the world, there's no need to carry on when you know what the outcome is going to be. It's up to all of us to spend the last bit of our lives the way we want. After three-quarters of a century, she'd earned at least that. Casting aspersions aside, Louis C.K. summed this up in his TV show sublimely:

"It's not YOUR life. It's LIFE.... Life isn't something that you possess. It's something that you take part in and you witness."

And even in her weakened state, she kept the most upbeat attitude you can imagine. She'd go on and on about how she'd lived a blessed existence. She continued taking care of everybody. She could barely walk, but there she was in the kitchen, insisting on making soup or chai, and messaging us on WhatsApp to organize the next family reunion, a tradition she pioneered. It was truly inspiring to see how she approached the end. And here's the topper: as her last act of selflessness, she donated her body to science. The folks from my alma mater, University of Cincinnati, picked it up a short while ago.

