Before she died of cancer, Shin Na was open with her two young children about impending end. -ST

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[Top photo: Blogger Shin Na died of cancer in late January, leaving behind her husband Tony Raza (left) and their children Toby, 3, and Josie, 6. The family has thousands of photos of her as well as her blog and journals, which they say will keep her alive in their hearts.]

By Radha Basu, Senior Correspondent

IT IS way past his bedtime, but little Toby Raza, three, is perched on a sofa, his nose buried in a coffee table book containing photographs of his family.

"This one's my favourite," he chirps, a fat little finger pointing to an image of his mother who is captured in midair, jumping into a swimming pool on a sunny morning.

His sister Josie, six, sprawled nearby, turns the pages to a photo of herself, nestled in the warmth of her mother's lap. "I like this one," she says softly, gently touching the cold, glossy page. "She's beautiful."

The children's mother, former TV-producer-turned-housewife Shin Na, died of cancer in the family's Siglap condominium on Jan 27. She was 42.

Their father, American finance professional Tony Raza, lets on that at one time, the family took more than 6,000 photographs a year. "It's easier now, I guess, than it would have been 15 years ago," he sighs, referring to the physical and digital treasure trove of memories they are left with.

With two young children, a soulmate for a husband and a happy home, Ms Na was 39 - at the prime of her life - when she was diagnosed with breast cancer in December 2005.

Yet, despite the threat of it all being wrenched away, she lived the rest of her life without regret or recrimination.

By her own account, her final years were her happiest, when she savoured life and love with an intensity she had not known before.

Even as she battled the deadly disease, the tenacious American of Korean descent, who was a Singapore permanent resident, compiled a rich archive of blog posts, letters, journals, videos and photos.

They now serve as a priceless legacy of her life for her family and friends across the world.

After her diagnosis, her loved ones put their own lives on hold to spend time with her.
Mr Raza, 41, who is of Pakistani-American descent and has lived here for 13 years, quit his Merrill Lynch research job and took a six-month break from work.

Together with Toby and Josie, they travelled all over the region and visited friends and relatives in the United States and South Korea.

Ms Na's best friend, Australian Michelle Ring, 38, flew in from Sydney many times to spend time with her. "I think my death was worth it," Ms Na wrote in a letter read out at a memorial service after she died.

"I know that sounds terrible but I would not trade in these past two years for a hundred more years of living an ordinary life, not knowing what amazing creatures we human beings are capable of being."

As others rallied around her, Ms Na opened her heart to the world, posting her thoughts online about life, love, disease and death thrice a week in a blog that often got about 1,000 hits a day.

As in many societies, death has long been considered a taboo subject in Singapore.

However, new research shows that many are now open to the idea of talking about death - especially their own.

More than 60 per cent of 800 people interviewed here in the first large-scale survey on attitudes towards death and dying said they were comfortable with discussing their own deaths. Commissioned by the Lien Foundation, the survey results were made public yesterday.

However, roughly the same proportion - 60 per cent - were reluctant to discuss death with someone else who was terminally ill.

People here also considered dying well as being free of pain, surrounded by loved ones, conscious and able to communicate, in that order.

**CONSPIRACY OF SILENCE**

About 17,000 people die here every year.

Cancer is by far the single largest cause of death, followed by heart disease and pneumonia.

Most people go about life regarding death as a "necessary but ignorable ill", as a recent Newsweek article put it. But a campaign, launched by the Lien Foundation last month, is under way to enhance care for the dying here.

The foundation's chief executive officer Lee Poh Wah says discussing end-of-life issues has been a "long neglected niche" in Singapore.

"Death has become a stranger and enemy that is feared. But the fear will be less paralysing when we can talk more openly about it," he says.

"We will be a better society when all people are assured that they will be well looked after in life's final chapter."

The foundation has also produced a caregivers' booklet, documentaries, radio talk shows and advertisements on what it is to 'die well'.

He acknowledges that while public awareness campaigns attempt to take the sting out of dying, they do not attempt to sugarcoat what remains one of life's saddest certainties.

"Dying is a messy, protracted and difficult life episode," he says. "No death is truly 'good', but we are talking about making the best of a difficult and very human event."

Indeed, many caregivers like Mr Raza say the current conspiracy of silence on the topic leaves many patients imagining the end is far worse than it actually is.

His wife, for instance, became anxious when she heard about a fellow cancer patient who died on a plane: "Her husband said it was so horrible that they could not talk about it."

But when her own end came, she was free of pain. "She said her goodbyes, the morphine worked well and she was at peace," he says.
But is it really possible to die well, even in cases where death is premature and untimely?

Dr Tan Yew Seng, medical director of Assisi Hospice, reckons that if dying well is to be free of pain - as many respondents in the survey hoped - the goal is very achievable. More than 90 per cent of pain during the last stages of terminal illness can be controlled by modern medicine.

Dying well is also about living well, says senior principal medical social worker Crystal Lim at Singapore General Hospital, who counsels terminally ill folk and their families.

"People need to remember that preparing for death is not to die more quickly.

Talking about death does not hasten death," she says.

The Lien Foundation survey showed a marked rise in the awareness of palliative care, which seeks to alleviate suffering rather than to cure. About eight in 10 said they had heard of hospices which provide in-patient care for the terminally ill.

About half had also heard that hospice services can be provided at home. Barely four years ago, only about one in three people had heard of palliative care here.

But while awareness of services and physical care is increasing, many families still struggle to understand the emotional needs of loved ones at death's doorstep.

For instance, caregivers often confuse 'talking about death' with overloading the patients with information on their medical condition, says Ms Lim.

"They talk about what needs to be done, the treatment effects and so forth.

But the patient may want to talk about how he or she is feeling."

**POWER OF POSITIVITY**

Being open about death helps many to overcome fear.

Mr Chua Buay Lim, 55, for instance, is approaching his illness with the same equanimity and courage as Ms Na. [Go to page 2]

For the past three years, the chief executive of a local company that makes sanitaryware has been living with end-stage liver cancer, a condition that is known to kill in six months. He still works and is in relatively good health.

The secret, he says, is that he has remained "positive" without "hoping too much".

High fever - which the doctors suspected at first to be dengue - signalled the onset of his disease. Since there were no overt signs whatsoever, the prognosis, made in early 2006, came as a shock.

But instead of becoming mired in depression or asking "Why me?" endlessly, Mr Chua tackled the disease just as he would a challenge at work. "My attitude was: Let's see what the doctors can offer," he says.

He has begun preparing his wife, Madam Quek Chay Hoon, 47, for when he is not around, telling her how to handle their finances, which undertaker to use and what he wants for his funeral. They have no children.

Yet, even as he prepares for his own demise, the staunch Buddhist prays for "some more time to do good".

"Each day is a bonus. We must all die some day so what's there to be frightened about?"

Not everyone who is terminally ill, of course, is eager to learn every little detail of their illness and take charge of their treatment. Older folk, especially women, tend to leave all that to their children.

All Madam Kua Seh, 93, for instance, knows is that she has an "old person's disease" but nothing about her end-stage ovarian cancer.
"We're afraid that she will not be able to take the news," frets her eldest son, Mr Dew Eng Seng, 60.

She may be physically frail and hard of hearing, but her mind is still alert. The proud grandmother of 11 says she looks forward to Sundays when her grandchildren come to visit. "They chat with me and give me massages," she says in Hokkien.

Her only wish now is to get a chance to see more of her grandchildren get married and to become a great-grandmother.

Two of her grandchildren are planning to get married this year.

She would be thrilled if her last wish came true, but Madam Kua is content with the way her life has turned out. She has no regrets, since she has successfully fulfilled her biggest temporal duty - raising her four children.

"I'm ready to go," says the Buddhist calmly. "All I ask is to go in peace."

Mr Mohamed Said Sahari, 56, also has wish fulfilment on his mind - just that they are his wife's wishes, not his own.

A heavy smoker for the past 40 years, the former delivery man suffers from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, a lung disorder. Shortness of breath and a near-death experience last year, that led to emergency hospitalisation, changed his outlook on life.

"Now that I know I may go any time, I want to take good care of my family while I can," says the father of two.

Not only did he give up smoking, he recently spent over $40,000 renovating their five-room Jurong West HDB flat, buying new furniture and a new 38-inch flat screen television, which his wife wanted.

"Previously, when I asked to buy anything, he would just wave me off and say: "Next time". Now whatever I want, he will buy for me," beams his wife, Madam Zubaidah Abdullah, 56.

**DYING YOUNG**

Even though Singapore has one of the highest life expectancies in the world - more than 80 years - cancer is still reaping a grim harvest among the young.

According to the Ministry of Health, an average of 4,886 people under 65 were diagnosed with cancer here every year between 2003 and 2007. Of them, about 440 every year were below 35. Figures for 2008 are not available yet.

At 38, Madam Azizah Mohmad knows she is on her last leg of life. Her fourth-stage breast cancer has spread to her bones.
But she believes remaining positive will help win her a fresh lease of life.

"Being angry or upset will not make the illness go away," she says, touching her left breast where the tumour first took root. "So why bother?"

Instead, the former salesgirl and mother of two is concentrating on living life to the fullest, even against her doctor's wishes.

Till a couple of months ago, the feisty woman with a love for the outdoors used to regularly swim and cycle with her daughters, Nur Afiqah, 15, and Nur Athirah, 11.

The disease has made her bones brittle and a fall could prove fatal. But Madam Azizah is undeterred. "Enjoy now, suffer later," she says quietly, wiping away a stealthy tear.

Her appearance masks her inner pain.

The sensuous fragrance of Chanel perfume clings to her pretty pink shirt. The colour and the perfume are her favourite.

She loves "girly things like dressing up".

She still goes out to eat or shop with her girls, albeit with a nifty walking stick that doubles as a stool.

There have also been a couple of trips out of Singapore to Malaysia. "Staying in bed will make me even more sick."

As she chats easily at a cafe in a Woodlands mall, wearing a white tudung and impeccably-applied makeup, it is hard to fathom that just a couple of days earlier, she was huddled in bed, drained by radiation therapy, too weak to move.

There have been plenty of dark days, she admits candidly. The early part of the chemotherapy was especially difficult, when she would scold her children for the "smallest things". At Afiqah's suggestion she picked up the Chinese martial art taiji, which calms her down, she says.

Indeed, even as public awareness campaigns like the current one by Lien Foundation try to soothe frayed minds, caregivers acknowledge it is near impossible to watch calmly as a once-vital loved one fades away.

For all her zeal to share her cancer woes with the world and help others heal, Ms Na - like Madam Azizah - also had occasional angry and tearful breakdowns.

One evening early on in the illness, for instance, Mr Raza returned home to see her in a rage, throwing plates against the wall, upset that the ongoing renovation of their home was not going the way she wanted.

Another night, watching baby Toby sleeping peacefully, she broke down and cried at the thought of the little boy being left motherless soon.

Knowing full well that duelling with death was futile, she then set about creating her little treasure chest of memories for her children.

Aside from the blog posts, videos and photos, she put together a 'memory box' laden with letters, cards and gifts for her children, to be opened on special occasions.

The biggest gifts are reserved for their 16th birthdays - Josie will get a Tiffany locket containing a photo of herself and her mum, and Toby will get a Tiffany keychain, also with a photograph.

"The only reason leaving behind any kind of legacy is important to me is for my kids," Ms Na wrote on her blog.

"It's about giving the kids something, anything, to replace the mother who had to leave them too early."

radhab@sph.com.sg
About Me

SHIN

SINGAPORE

I was born in South Korea in 1966. My family immigrated to the U.S. when I was eight years old (I'm now a U.S. citizen). We lived in Nashville, Tennessee and New Jersey. I went to college in New York City, worked as a schoolteacher in Indiana and Philadelphia, and as a legal assistant in New York. I worked as a reporter in Seoul, South Korea and as a TV news producer and Internet news editor in Singapore. I've lived in Korea, U.S., France, and Singapore. My favorite travels have been to Peru, Belize, Botswana, Zimbabwe, and Zambia. My proudest moment is now. My least proud moments are too many to list. My happiest moments are now. My unhappiest moments are too few and too unimportant to remember.