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INSPIRATIONAL

Stoic Jyoti is able to achieve her dream

By Rhea Turner

rhea.turner@burtonmail.co.uk
@rheturnerjourn
01283 245047

This month marks 100 years since the suffragettes fought tooth and nail to secure change for women everywhere and we have been talking with some of the many inspirational women from the Burton and South Derbyshire area.

The suffragettes campaigned tirelessly to secure the freedoms women enjoy today, including the right for them to vote and women have been marking their achievements.

Ashby surgeon Jyoti Shah dedicates her time to getting men to undergo life-saving cancer checks.

It has been a tough journey for Jyoti, who overcame cultural pressures and an arranged marriage to achieve her dream to become a surgeon. She now spends her days at work and much of her free time, saving lives.

The Macmillan consultant urological surgeon who thinks of herself as an "ordinary woman doing extraordinary things" said she had a very normal upbringing. She now wants to inspire other women and show them that they too can accomplish great things.

She said: "I come from a normal working class background and I had a normal upbringing. My dad was a bus conductor in London and I lived with my parents and younger sister and brother."

"I knew I wanted to be a doctor from the age of eight, which was unusual because I didn't have any doctors in the family and I think people had already planned out what my future was going to look like."

"The school thought I was wasting forms applying to university and there were many cultural pressures with me being Indian. It wasn't deemed appropriate to do a long degree and my family wanted me to get married and tick all the boxes of what Indian women should be doing, but I just said, 'no'. I didn't want to."

"It is a culture about how women are expected to behave and all I knew was I wanted to be a doctor."

The 47-year-old, who is one of only two female surgeons

at Burton's Queen's Hospital, said she still believes the industry is male-dominated and wants to inspire change.

"After working to put myself through medical school I chose to be a surgeon, but I knew I would be going into a heavily male-dominated industry in which only 10 per cent of surgeons are female. It never put me off because I have always believed that if you work hard and have vision and a pipe-dream you can get there."

"It has not been easy and it has been very hard work at times but when people say to me that I cannot do it, I ask why not. It only spurs me on, which I suppose is how the suffragettes showed their spirit."

"I have been in positions where I have had to break free and show my fighting spirit. I have been in an arranged marriage, but I did what I had to and broke free. That empowered me and I talk openly about it now to help others."

"I am now happily remarried and exactly where I want to be in my career, except I would like to see more women becoming surgeons and breaking those barriers."

Along the way, Jyoti's passion for helping others has gained momentum, so much so that she spends her spare time saving lives too, after setting up the Inspire Health - Fighting Prostate Cancer campaign with advanced nurse practitioner Sarah Minns, which has seen hundreds of men in the community educated on and tested for prostate cancer.

She said: "Over the last few years I have become more involved with prostate cancer which is a big killer; the number of deaths from prostate cancer have now overtaken breast cancer."

"I felt that there was not enough awareness for men about the disease and they don't talk about it enough so my plan was to make it easier for them and take the information to them in the community. I see myself as a woman in a man's world and the prostate cancer campaign is about engaging with men and changing the way they think about health."

"It has been a great success so far and taking our plight onto to BBC's The One Show really shared our message on



Jyoti Shah, Urological surgeon at Burton's Queen's Hospital.

a national platform. It has changed the landscape of how people feel about prostate cancer.

"No-one else is doing what we are doing here and last year we set up a support group, which is a phenomenal success. Sarah and I do it all in our own time. We make sure every man who is tested gets a phone call with the results and that is the quality of care we want to provide."

"Throughout this process I have had to win over myself. For example, there was a lot of criticism and negativity around my prostate screening work initially, especially with the PSA blood test being so inaccurate, which means they have to then have a physical examination."

She also took her campaign to venues where men often go, including teaming up with Burton Albion Football Club to stage screening sessions.

She said: "I believed in this and in myself and persevered - the results speak for themselves. I had to believe in me to do this. This is about inner strength, peace and contentment."

"Now it is busier than ever, which is testament to the campaign, but it is a bit like a full time job. I have had to take a pay cut at the hospital to free up time and I also do on-call shifts so I am incredibly busy, but I do it because I believe in it and I want to make a difference to people."

Jyoti, who is married to Paresch Solanki, 55, said she feels very blessed to have achieved what she has in life as she always seeks to be the "best she can be".

She said: "I have worked

'I think it is important to know that not only as a woman, but as a person, I can be anything I want to be'

Jyoti Shah

hard all my life because I enjoy it. I want people to know that even if you are eight or nine years old you can do it. You can dream big. It is about inspiring the next generation and it is important to me to lead by example.

"When I am in theatre I mop the floor in the hope that others do the same. I talk in schools and present at career fairs in my own time and I want to inspire young girls. I am an ordinary woman from an ordinary working class background doing fairly extraordinary things and that is the reward I get."

"We are all working towards a fairer, more equal world and there needs to be more women in these roles. It is about empowering them and letting them know they can do these things. We can be on an equal path and while there has been inequalities on the way you have to earn respect."

"I think it is important to know that not only as a woman, but as a person, I can be anything I want to be and I want to be the best I can be."

■ Do you know a Burton or South Derbyshire woman who shows suffragette spirit? To nominate an amazing woman from your local area, please visit amnesty.org.uk/suffragettespirit

All women must have carried out work to help others in their local area within the last 10 years.

All successful nominees will be contacted to give consent prior to being placed on the Suffragette Spirit Map of Britain. This campaign has been funded by People's Postcode Lottery.