

**The Sunday Interview** Humphrey Carter talks to **former United Nations lawyer and now filmmaker Malini Goel** about her first documentary which had its **world premiere in Palma** yesterday.

**“If this film gives people hope, my father will be very happy...”**

**“I** F pain can be turned into art which can touch people’s hearts and in turn be a force for good in the world, this will really mean that yes, tomorrow should be, tomorrow

will be and tomorrow’s beauty is limitless.”

Looking back over the past eight years of her personal and professional life, that is one of the ways in which American lawyer, now filmmaker, Malini Goel sums it up.

Malini was born in Cleveland to parents of Indian descent who immigrated to the U.S. from Delhi in the late 60s to pursue their medical residencies.

She holds a degree in communications; a J.D.; and a Masters in Law and Diplomacy with a focus on international environment and resource policy.

Social and environmental justice issues are particularly important to her. She worked for several years with the United Nations and is founder of a line of eco-friendly, educational toys for children - but in 2006 her and her family’s life was turned upside down.

Her father, Dr. Arun Goel, a retired cardiologist aged 62, was at home watching a cricket match on the TV when he got up from the couch and blacked out. She



**“I actually describe myself as having a US passport, a Spanish spirit (she was an exchange student in Alicante for a month) and an Indian soul.** CARICATURE: BIBI

admits that the family still don’t know what really happened but they suspect it was from either hypertension or because he was taking blood thinners for the heart.

He fell from standing height onto a heater and broke his neck which caused his spinal cord to be injured and the blood thinners caused the hemorrhage in the spinal cord and subsequent paralysis from the neck down and dependency on a ventilator and life support.

His wife, Dr. Sarla Goel, a physician, performed CPR, saved his life and he was rushed to hospital and that is when a “tug of love” began.

“After passing through intensive care and three months in rehab, he was eventually discharged to come home some four months after he fell.

“I had been filming little bits and pieces, like he came home a day before my birthday, but for no particular reason, just for the memories I suppose.

“But, after about three weeks, he was back in the intensive care unit, things were getting difficult at home and he said that he was getting sick and that they couldn’t control his pain or his blood pressure.

“The situation of home care in the States is so crazy and if he had been in a nursing home he would not have made it - but at home it’s very difficult to find some one to provide that kind of high level care - even with doctors in the family and in the house.

“So, he got sick and he decided he didn’t want to be a burden on the family and he said that he thought it would be best just to disconnect his ventilator,” Malini explained.

“And, he had that choice, you have the right to withhold life-sustaining treatment in the States and this is not the same as euthanasia. My dad had not suffered any brain trauma, he lost

full mobility below the neck, so he could think for himself and could make decisions. He had the right to remove the mechanical ventilation which results in death.

“Everyone was depressed during that first year and I had read that when people are paralysed, it’s very common for people wanting to die in the first year, everybody wants to die in year one.

“But, I also read that after a year, people start to accept their new selves after such a trauma and after a year, literally on cue, my dad said that he was beginning to accept his new self.

“That was good because during that time I had completed a triathlon to raise money for spinal cord injuries and I remember in the build up to the triathlon my dad had been complaining about being in pain when he talked and I used to tell him that his pain was my gain and then, when I did the triathlon and raised money, it became my pain and his gain,” Malini said.

But, by the time that her father had begun to accept

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his condition and decided not to die, Malini and her close and extended family had fought a major battle.

"Like I said, it was a tug of love. Out of his love for us, he didn't want to be a burden, that's why he decided he wanted to die, but because we loved him so much, we didn't want him to die. He would say I don't want to be a log for you guys, but we'd all have been left as logs without him.

"Some of the extended family, accepted or respected his decision but my mother and my brother, a surgeon, Dr. Rajiv Goel were not going to give up on my father.

"Being a surgeon, my brother I guess took a more practical approach and I went down three paths. Research, negotiation and spiritual.

"Research, I read everything I could about his condition and tried to put all that in to practice, the negotiating part was when I had to use all my skills in trying to convince him to change his mind and then spiritually, to try and find some reasoning.

"I was playing a tug of war with God, I was saying 'even if he's paralysed, please save him because we can handle this, we can do this'.

"All this was happening in August 2006 and when he announced his decision, for some reason I picked up a video camera he had bought me for my birthday two years earlier, and began filming, maybe I was being selfish, but I wanted to film his last days so we could be able to remember him.

"It was an act of wanting to hold on to my dad and our last moments and the irony is that nobody remembers me filming - I don't even remember to be honest - I just wanted to capture everything he said, every expression he made, every joke he cracked,



Malini Goel first came to Majorca 14 years ago and speaks Spanish, in Palma this week. PHOTO: H.CARTER

every moral of wisdom, every moment...

"And it did provide me with time to say sorry and to tell him how much we all loved him.

"I remember as a kid, I was always very angry with him because he was always working and was never at home, I couldn't understand why. But, once I had been in the hospital, slept nights with him in intensive care, seen six people of all ages die, I realised just

how hard the medics worked. I would ask them if they had partners and children and they did, but they were working all hours for my father and other patients, so I finally understood why my father was never home, so I was able to say sorry for having been so angry.

"I think in that situation you would want all you family around you but, you also don't want people to suffer and that is what my

mum was dealing with. She stood by him, respected his autonomy, because he had that right to decide, but she was probably secretly breaking inside," she said.

Two of the things her father wanted to see before he died was his two children get engaged and amazingly, in such a short period of time, his son did get engaged and that was celebrated in the hospital, time was too short for Malini.

"I guess we were looking at disconnection about two weeks after he had made his decision, a Wednesday, but when it came to the day, he had been over medicated for some reason so we kept harassing him, trying to pursue him to change his mind and we managed to win another week," Malini recalls.

But, for the best part of three weeks, while Malini was filming as much as she could, she and her family were having to try and come to terms with the reality that her father was going to die.

"I had to put my negotiation skills into over drive while also having to try and accept the inevitability of what was going to happen.

"Because despite all the research I had done and was trying to use to influence the outcome, perhaps, on a spiritual level, this was all much bigger than me and that, if he wanted to go, perhaps I had no influence at all, so all I could do was film, capture it and love the moments and tell him how much I loved him because sometimes, we don't get that chance," she said.

And, in the end, it was love that made him change his mind.

"In the end, on the day it was due to happen, it was my mum. They had been married or at least together for nearly 40 years and she just said to him 'are you ready and willing to leave me forever? We'll never see

each other again in this life or in this form' and in the final hour he changed his mind, he just couldn't do it and next week they'll celebrate their 47th wedding anniversary..."

Once home, Malini kept filming special events but not the day to the day goings on, and until earlier this year, had never looked over the hours of footage at the hospital.

"One evening I was having dinner with a friend and a mutual friend of her had just finished making a short film about Armenia. I told her about the footage I had and she suggested I put it together as a film, then during the same meal, I received a text message from a friend advising me about a Gorilla crash course in film making at a discount price, it was like a sign.

"So, I went on the course with my footage and then kept on going.

"I then bought the necessary editing programmes etc. from Apple and spent days, months at Apple, until I completed the short documentary called *Should Tomorrow Be*.

"At first I didn't know what to do with it, keep it for the family. My dad knew what I had done, I had to interview him and film him as he is today and he was like 'what ever' at first.

"I first showed it to my mum then the rest of the family and dad was quite impressed. Then, my film teacher watched it as did a few other friends and they said I had to share it.

"I asked my dad and he said that if the film served to provide hope for people then put it out there, I think he felt pretty pleased with the way he had come out in the film

"But everybody has a story to tell and everyone should tell it, be it in a film, a book, a song, a painting or even a conversation over coffee.

"I make no comment

throughout the film. I want people to watch it and go on their own journey. But we all have a tendency to get wound up in our daily lives. We sweat the small stuff. This film is an immediate reminder to go out their and smell the coffee and tell people you love them, firmly and often.

"Love, family, strength, hope and feeling that the heart is full is what I want people to take from this film.

"What is also amazing to me is that everyone has a different reaction and takes away something different. Some immediately think to situations where they have had to care for a sick or injured loved one and this is why the film is dedicated to everyone who has been in that position.

"No one will leave feeling morbid, it's full of my father's dry humour. I told him once he was the best dad in the world. He replied by asking me how many dads I had had...those are the moments I wanted to capture and now I want to share it and if I can make a difference, so much the better," Malini said.

Yesterday, when her father would have been doing his five laps of the driveway in his special 'puff and blow' wheelchair with their cat, little tiger, always on his lap, little would he have known all those years ago when he wanted to die that on 8 November, 2014, he would have become an inspirational film star.

Meanwhile, while Malini plans to take the film to other festivals after its Palma premiere, she hopes at some point to be able to do more work in raising money for spinal cord injury and wheelchair foundations and maybe make a feature film out of her experience.

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