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Over the past few months, Yavi Madurai has proved that combining inspirational living with a formidable approach to business delivers results – both personally and professionally.

The General Manager: Marketing at the Southern African Music Rights Organisation (SAMRO) is a breast cancer survivor who is also busy with the way SAMRO is positioned in business; Madurai is a motivational speaker who is also one of the few women making her presence felt at the music industry's executive level.

"I have no hesitation saying that I am very focused on goals and on making a difference in the field of music rights – but never to the detriment of my family's happiness and health," she says.

That she has been able to so skillfully take charge of SAMRO's marketing portfolio whilst retaining a strong sense of what's needed to stay healthy and happy has much to do with the journeys she and SAMRO have undertaken over the past few years.

"I have been through a personal journey and SAMRO has been going through its own journey – which means I identify with the organisation that much more."

More than that, YAVI – who previously worked in the banking sector - feels passionate about her work. "The fact that we exist because of composers and creators, who create momentous occasions in our lives through music, gives me a spine-tingling feeling."

Since joining SAMRO at the beginning of 2007 she has played an integral role in overseeing the continent's foremost performance rights organisation – positioning it as a worldclass organisation that plays a vital role in ensuring the creators of music are rewarded for their efforts.

"The music industry is changing dramatically and we are increasingly aware of just how important various revenue streams are to those who create music," Madurai says of her work.

"SAMRO is an organisation that has not only internally transformed itself to create more opportunities for empowerment but that is vigilant about looking after the intellectual property of songwriters and composers.

"My biggest challenge is to ensure that businesses understand that music has more than just recreational value – it has financial value for the creator. This is the essence of what SAMRO does – to bridge the gap between those who use music and those who create it so that the songwriters and composers can continue writing more beautiful music for us to listen to."

Much of Madurai's passionate belief in what she does comes from a life-changing experience she underwent five years ago. The self-confessed workaholic was working as a customer satisfaction manager for a major banking group when she was diagnosed with breast cancer in November 2003,

At the young age of 28, with no family history of breast cancer that she was aware of, and living a healthy lifestyle that included regular exercise, not smoking and

watching what she ate, she hardly seemed at risk. However, discovering a lump in one of her breasts, as well as the months of trauma and grueling treatment that followed, gave Yavi a serious wake-up call.

The day that changed Madurai's life forever came in November 2003 when she discovered a lump in her right breast while taking a shower. New to Johannesburg and still tentatively finding her way around, she waited a few days before getting it addressed. When she received the results of the ultrasound, mammogram and biopsy, it confirmed her worst fears – a malignant tumour, the size of a butter bean, in the early stages but extremely aggressive.

"I was diagnosed at 3.02pm on 14 November 2003," recalls Madurai. "That's the control freak in me – I looked at my watch and thought that I must remember this for the rest of my life. I've never worn a watch since, because time means something totally different to me now."

This shocking revelation tossed this ambitious achiever a curve ball and introduced total uncertainty into her controlled, structured and perfectly planned life.

"I realised that achieving those goals means nothing in the broader scheme of things. My career was the only thing that really defined me, but I wanted to concentrate on being a wife, a mother, a friend and a daughter as well. Up until then I had always put a lot of pressure on myself, had been obsessive about meeting goals and had internalised my stress, but I decided then that my career is something I loved and wouldn't be what killed me."

In the two weeks between diagnosis and surgery, the cancer had spread from her breast tissue to the surrounding lymph nodes. Had she left it much longer, it would probably have migrated to her organs – and she may not be alive today to tell her remarkable story of survival.

Madurai underwent a partial mastectomy, having 38% of her right breast removed, and opted to have immediate reconstruction, using muscle tissue from her back as "body putty", as she puts it.

The operation was only the start of her long journey to recovery, which continues to this day. Madurai's chemotherapy started in January 2004, accompanied by a battery of tests to ensure that the cancer had not returned. The chemo took its toll – and from being violently ill from the chemo, she went on to endure eight weeks of radiation, which causes extreme fatigue.

In the midst of all this treatment, she went back to work, refusing to be defined by the cancer alone and determined to get on with her life – both physically and psychologically.

"From a physical perspective, you learn to live with the imperfections," says Madurai. "But once you've dealt with the outside, intrinsically you have to deal with other things. I would never have admitted before that I was a control freak. I probably tried to be as perfect as possible – who was I trying to impress? Through the cancer, I learned a lot about the world and humanity, and that image means nothing. Now, I have no problem admitting that I have flaws."

Madurai's remarkable approach to her cancer sees her appear in the 2009 Moments

in Time calendar, which features 13 patients who have displayed the will to conquer cancer. A celebration of the strength of the human spirit, the 2009 project revisits cancer survivors profiled in previous editions of the calendar. The proceeds from sales of the 2009 calendar will be channeled into the Moments in Time Trust, and will be distributed to needy cancer patients.

The previous time Madurai was featured in the calendar was in 2005, and the photos taken the year before show her bald thanks to the treatment, with only a fuzz of dark hair. Today, she once again sports luxurious raven locks, and her healthy appearance and personal and professional fulfillment is testament to the fact that it is possible to beat cancer, if it is detected and treated early enough.

The support of her husband Ashton has contributed to her recovery and when her one-year-old daughter, Tanith was born – against all odds - the couple's long-held desire for a family became a reality. Being pregnant did, however, put her back at a higher risk and she still needs to monitor her health closely. "You are forever a cancer patient in the way you live your life," she points out.

Still this remarkable woman has taken the challenge of living through breast cancer to the outside world: she has given motivational talks about conquering cancer and has been a spokesperson for Estee Lauder and today, at age 33, Madurai says that "Cancer will always be a part of who I am but it is not what defines me holistically."

Five years down the line, she still holds a high-powered job, to which she gives her full commitment, simply because she loves what she does so much, but, with a husband and a young daughter to consider, she ensures that quality time with family is a major part of the equation.

SAMRO recently moved to new offices in Johannesburg, and Madurai points to a few unpacked boxes in her office as proof of her new philosophy of not sweating the small things but concentrating on the bigger picture. "I come to work happier now," she declares. "I don't mind the hard work because I love it – I'm living my passion every day."

"I would never have been able to live the rest of my life without having had cancer," she says frankly. "I had to suffer to learn the lesson, but it was a lesson I had to learn."