

I stopped worrying about tomorrow

WHEN Rita Naidoo discovered a painless lump in her breast while in the shower nine years ago, she was concerned but not too alarmed.

"Just two months previously I had had a gynaecological check-up and there was no history of cancer in my family, so I was not too worried," she says.

At 43, Rita, unit manager at Life Westville Hospital's cardiac rehabilitation ward, was also in peak health, having just completed a qualifying 21km run for the Comrades marathon.

She knew she had to have the lump checked, however, and was referred to a surgeon who did a biopsy to test for cancerous cells. It was then that she was given the sobering news that she had breast cancer.

"I was terrified – I thought I was going to die," she says.

Rita's treatment was a lumpectomy, followed by a mastectomy, and aggressive chemotherapy.

"I could not believe that. I was a runner, lived such a healthy life and did everything by the book, and I still got cancer. I was angry, scared and depressed."

Family and friends were an enormous support and Rita says she could not have done it without her husband, Gregory, and children Garrett, 20, and twins Brenton and Sheree, 14.

"Chemotherapy was



SURVIVOR: Cardiac nursing sister Rita Naidoo says having cancer has made her a stronger person.

battering, but I urge others not to give up because this is one of the ways of beating the disease. I encourage other survivors to stop spreading dreaded stories of any treatment, because it's a valley experience and one that led me to becoming a survivor today."

The experience of cancer has made her a stronger person, she says.

"It has made me more positive, built up memories, made me stop worrying about tomorrow and focus instead on the fact that we still have today. Nurses are generally sympathetic towards their patients, but I now feel committed to

motivating and inspiring them wherever I can. My experience has changed me profoundly and left me feeling stronger in my faith."

Today, Rita is an ambassador for the International Cancer Association and last year became an International Hero of Hope for her work in promoting and organising the Durban Cansa Relays for Life.

She handles the publicity for the relays, gives talks and radio interviews on the importance of prevention and early detection of cancer – and she is determined to continue the work she believes is so important.