

# Eye on World & Local

## Experiencing Vijayadashami

By Christina Felizzi

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Rama, prince of Ayodhya, defeats Ravana, the ruler of Lanka, and saves his wife, Sita Devi, from Ravana. Food. Music. Dancing. What is all this?

Vijayadashami is a Hindu celebration symbolizing the victory of good over evil, the myth of Rama defeating Ravana. During this event a Hindu priest chants prayers beside a beautiful altar while a colorful display of food and dance enhance the celebration. My mother, sister and I had the privilege of being able to attend this unique festival at our dear friends, the Kesari's. Their daughter and friend of my sister's, Adhithi Kesari, says, "This ceremony represents the triumph of good over evil, specifically the victory of Rama over Ravana. In my family, we celebrate this every year by having a religious family function called a puja." Puja or pooja refers to the religious event, any religious event, not specific to Vijayadashami.

Over 50 people attended this event at the Kesari's house, family and friends alike. Although we were the only non-Indian people at the festivity, we were not made to feel different or out of place at all – instead we felt a part of the culture, and met some wonderfully warm people. Ratipriya Suresh, a junior, graphic design major at Villanova University, was one of the dancers at the event. She

explains that dancing "brings me closer to God and my heritage – makes me have a greater appreciation for the culture." Specifically, the first dance was called Bharathanatyam, a South Indian classical dance.

The Kesari's kindly lent us traditional Indian clothing called chudidars and salwars, which are beautifully embroidered and decorated dresses, including pants and scarves. Some of the older women at Vijayadashami wore saris or sarees, which drape over the shoulder and are usually made of fine silk. We were even privileged enough to wear bindis on our foreheads, which are small decorative dots placed on women's foreheads to represent their culture and beauty. Everyone removed their shoes upon entering and remained bare-footed.

An ornate altar was erected in the Kesari's family room, showered with flowers, offerings of fruit, and lit candles. We all observed the Hindu priest sit for many hours at the altar chanting and spreading the smoke of the incense around the altar; he would also ring a bell every so often. The priest then paused, and we all gathered around the altar chanting a prayer in Sanskrit, tossing flowers that were given to us towards the altar.

A physics major at New Jersey's Science and Technology University, Sreeya Sreevasta

says, "this nine day and nine night festival is the most colorful of all the South Indian festivals. Every day is a celebration of one of the mythological stories. To recollect those stories and hearing the priest chant them brings back memories from my childhood and of course, I can't wait for the food to be served." To close the prayer session, the priest poured a sweet coconut mixture into our right hand that we drank. Then, the entertainment began. Four girls danced, Adhithi played her violin, and a mother and daughter sang together.

The richness and beauty of Indian culture must be experienced first-hand. I could go on and on about the unique and tantalizing food that was there, the exquisite dancing, the friendly gathering of people and beautiful altar display. And this experience taught me something valuable – it taught me that despite a culture and language barrier, we as people are not that different from one another. The Kesari's and their family and friends made us feel included in something that was not familiar to my family. The entire ceremony and entertainment aspect of the celebration was so engaging and beautiful to watch, and the only way to truly appreciate Indian culture and the celebration of Vijayadashami would be to witness it yourself.



Dana Felizzi, Adhithi Kesari and Christina Felizzi in traditional Indian clothing - Photo courtesy of Adhithi Kesari



A traditional altar set-up for Vijayadashami - Photo courtesy of Adhithi Kesari

## A Look at Saint Joe's Art Gallery

Photos courtesy of Paul Dipietro

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