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Helping others satisfies former bean counter

Web site gives toys to sick children

Posted by the Asbury Park Press on 12/25/06

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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TRENTON — Shimmy Mehta discovered the satisfaction that comes from helping others as a toddler when he visited an elderly neighbor. He grew up volunteering at food banks and toy drives, and helped out at an HIV/AIDS care center when he was in college.

All that had to stop, though, when he graduated from Rutgers University-Newark in 1997 and began working as an accountant. The job was good, but the hours were long, and Mehta missed community service.

Searching to make the best use of what spare time he had after crunching numbers, Mehta in 1999 founded Angelwish.org, a Web site that allows people to send toys and games to children affected by HIV and AIDS.

"I didn't have enough time to give back," said Mehta, 31, who lives in Rutherford. "Just as people need to balance their work with going to the gym, to me, volunteering was an integral part of the work/life balance."

Seven years later, his nonprofit organization works with more than 112 HIV/AIDS Care Centers and programs around the world and Mehta has left the accounting field to "focus on what's important."

Mehta began running Angelwish.org full-time in October, just before the holiday rush, and took over some toy drives this year that other organizations had to discontinue. A few days before Christmas, Mehta said he had 25,000 items to distribute to different care centers and hospitals, mostly for the holidays.

Terrence Zealand, who founded the AIDS Resource Foundation for Children with his wife, Faye, in 1985, said if it weren't for organizations like Mehta's, many of the children he works with would not get any gifts at Christmas.

Mehta has been working with the AIDS Resource Foundation for Children since he was in college. He said visiting care centers and hospitals led him to want to work with children affected by HIV and AIDS, a group he thinks is underserved.

"A lot of the things that the care centers told me that they needed weren't real medical in nature, they were more for the benefit of children in the way of toys or games," Mehta said.

Angelwish.org allows donors to choose the children they want to help and what item a child will receive. The Web site links donors to a wish list on Amazon.com that lists children, their ages and their desired toys.

Once people select the toys they want to donate, the items are shipped to hospitals or care centers, where coordinators decide how they should be presented to the children.

Besides individual donors, Angelwish.org coordinates toy drives at companies. For example, employees at Fidelity Investment offices in Jersey City and New York City collected more than 600 toys this year and granted 235 online wishes, according to Maria Nieves, a director of public affairs for the company in the tri-state area.



(AP PHOTO)

Shimmy Mehta, of Angelwish.org, founded the Web site to have toys sent to children affected by HIV/AIDS. Behind him are some of the toys collected this holiday season.

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Mehta is excited about the future for Angelwish.org, which he runs with the help of a board of directors and volunteers.

"I'm thrilled with the success and the growth that we've had, but I definitely see the need to do more," he said. "At the end of the day, I think we're one step closer in getting people more involved in something that's so important for themselves, for the kids, for everybody. I can't wait to wake up the next morning and do it all over again."

STORYCHAT

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I have known Angelwish for many years now, and I think it is wonderful that the efforts of this former bean counter are being recognized. It is a great group helping children in need - they help year-round, and deserve continued support. Three cheers for Angelwish! I only wish I could give more! Thanks! 😊 - jason b.

Posted by: jrblack on Wed Dec 27, 2006 11:48 am

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