

The Leader

"Pulse of the Meadowlands"

Rutherford angel realizes wish to help AIDS victims

Date: Wednesday, February 21 @ 08:38:52 MST

Topic: Top Stories

By Chris Neidenberg
Reporter

RUTHERFORD — Thanks to the energy of a local man, one small spot here has become heaven for children worldwide despairing over the scourge of AIDS.



By Chris Neidenberg
Reporter

RUTHERFORD — Thanks to the energy of a local man, one small spot here has become heaven for children worldwide despairing over the scourge of AIDS.

In 1999, Shimmy Mehta had a dream — establish a base of operations for providing some joy, hope and goodwill to the youngest of those infected or affected by this affliction, whether around the globe or around the block.

Now, Mehta stands tall as Angelwish's guardian over this global response network. He serves as its president and chief executive officer (CEO). In this capacity, Mehta works closely with various organizations to see that donations are spent wisely — and strictly — on initiatives helping the children.

With the help of the Internet revolution and like-minded young people who shared Mehta's ideals, Angelwish.org's world mission has since brought "a better world" to these children. Some have the virus; others



are psychologically impacted by close loved ones infected, mainly parents or siblings.

Still a worldwide curiosity with no cure and now in the limelight for some 25 years, AIDS — acronym for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome — is suspected of being triggered by HIV (the human immunodeficiency virus). The disease, believed to be spread via factors including having unprotected sex with an infected partner and using tainted hypodermic needles in injecting narcotics, ultimately ravages the body through attacking one's immune system. (see

<http://www.niaid.nih.gov/factsheets/hivinf.htm> for a full definition and risk factors.)

Children can catch the disease from infected mothers during pregnancies. Yet AIDS is indeed an enigma, given that many testing “HIV positive” will never get the illness.

Since its humble beginnings from one house in Rutherford connected to the Internet, Angelwish has grown into a registered charity providing comforts to children in 112 “care centers” (80 in the U.S., 32 throughout the world), Mehta said. They are based in hospitals covering all six populated continents spanning 24 countries.

Mehta estimated that his group has granted over 10,000 “wishes.” In addition, he cited approximately 15 to 20 corporate sponsors. Last year, Angelwish launched Angelwish.org.uk in London to tap into another potentially vast contributor base. This past holiday season, it entered into what, Mehta feels, is an “exciting” new partnership with NBC’s “Today Show.”

Donations are registered on the Web site through Amazon.com. Donors can, with the click of a mouse, contribute money or gifts, such as toys, CDs, books and board games. These are requested from children impacted by HIV/AIDS throughout the United States. One can also opt to contribute to the medical, nutritional or social needs of children overseas. “All it takes is \$300 a year to provide the necessary medicines and proper care package for a child overseas suffering from this disease,” explained Mehta, 31, a 1993 Rutherford High School graduate. “That’s a small amount, yet it makes a very big difference in the quality of life for a child with the disease.”

Yet Mehta stressed that something simple as a toy can also work wonders in the AIDS response, bringing smiles to an anxious child, who might be waiting in a hospital, while the child or a loved one is treated.

Mehta, an accounting student at Rutgers-Newark at the time, explained that he first developed an interest in juvenile AIDS issues upon becoming aware that it was a problem in inner cities like the state’s largest. He launched the cyberspace initiative, shortly after graduating, while working for the accounting firm PriceWaterhouseCoopers.

Mehta counts himself as fortunate for recruiting like-minded young people who believed in

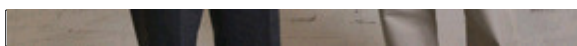


Photo by Christopher Barth / www.photobybarth.com

Richard Heyderman, CEO of Multi Dimensional Resources in Carlstadt, left, is shown with Rutherford High School alumnus Shimmy Mehta, founder and CEO of angelwish.org. Heyderman and his company stepped up to help Mehta receive 25,000 toys from the “Today” show toy drive after another organization dropped out at the last minute. For more information contact www.angelwish.org.

the cause and who have stuck with him since. He is assisted by a 12-person executive advisory board, with members similar in age and who share his ideals. This also describes Angelwish's vice president, Jim Brinksmas, a former Rutherford High School classmate.

"My idea developed during the 'Dot.com Era,' in that I wanted to come up with an activity which might appeal to people working in those businesses," said Mehta, who recently became Angelwish's full-time CEO. "They're the kinds of jobs where you can easily work six, seven days a week and until 11 or 12 o'clock at night," he continued. "In developing the Angelwish Web site, I felt that I provided a fun, hands-on activity to best accommodate the schedules of these people. That way, they could still give back something meaningful to society. Back then, everything was being done on line."

Citing his own professional experience, Mehta said, "It's so easy to get wrapped up in one's work," while employed in "Dot.com" businesses. He added that he hopes AngelWish's setup and outreach have reminded their busy professionals "not to lose sight of the fact that one can always find the time to give something back," even in a small way.

According to the CEO, Angelwish's mission has different emphases for addressing the problem in and outside the United States. Globally, it channels financial resources into areas such as treatment, medications and research, placing great emphasis on the situation in Africa. There, the disease has reached epidemic proportions in certain countries. In America, where government research and healthcare dollars are more readily available compared to smaller or undeveloped nations, funds are strictly used in non-medical areas. They address things like promoting the social and spiritual well-being of affected children and families.

"Actually, our ability to provide the child with something like a toy is a big help to the professionals involved in treatment," Mehta said. "We've found, in many instances, people like doctors and nurses serving almost as surrogate parents to these children. They would be the ones who went out and bought the toys and tended to their social and emotional needs. Yet, that really should not be their focus.

"We need the medical community to devote all of its energy and time into doing what it does best — treatment and research," Angelwish's founder insisted. "Doctors and nurses need to tend to the medical needs of their patients, in giving them the best care possible and in helping them maintain a good quality of life. It's the best hope that we have for helping these patients survive and have some comfort. That's one part of why Angelwish is so critical. We're more than happy to assist with these support functions."

Angelwish last year "spread its wings" beyond the realm of cyberspace — and its AIDS-only mission — by stepping in to assist the "Today Show's" annual nationwide Holiday Gift Drive.

The group hopes to continue the effort for many years. It came to the rescue when one of "Today's" traditional distributors dropped out. This marked Angelwish's launch as a physical distributor of charitable goods. Mehta found a willing local partner in Richard Heyderman, owner of Multi-Dimensional Resources of Carlstadt, which donated its services and huge warehouse space.

"We received roughly 25,000 toys from the "Today Show" and different companies and had

to sort everything out, figuring out what's what, before distributing the items," Mehta explained. "It was an incredible effort, everyone worked so hard. Distributing 25,000 toys would not have been an easy thing to do from my house."

Staying on the subject of toys, Mehta said he has also been pleased with Angelwish's initiative for working with Rutherford Boy and Girl Scout troops in shopping for toys. They do so from "wish lists" supplied by AIDS impacted children in care centers all over the United States. Throughout the year, it works in tandem with various Toys R Us stores in North Jersey and New York. The youths shop the stores every three months using Angelwish funds. Mehta cited the activity as part of Angelwish's strategy for developing a younger base of volunteers — for keeping the giving spirit alive.

"As a practical matter, these scouts are providing the biggest help since we must buy toys every quarter, and that's not an easy thing to do," Mehta said.

"But we are also instilling in a younger generation the importance of getting involved and donating, which is critical. As they become adults, we want them to take the concept of reaching out and helping others to a major level."

This article comes from Leader Newspapers

<http://leadernewspapers.net>

The URL for this story is:

<http://leadernewspapers.net/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=3721>