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Internet angel

A YOUNG MAN GRANTS WISHES TO KIDS AND FAMILIES LIVING WITH AIDS

You could say Shimul "Shimmy" Mehta is an angel. No, he doesn't have wings or wear a white gown, but as founder of Angelwish.org, the Rutherford resident helps grant wishes to children and families across the country affected by HIV/AIDS. And he does it all from his desktop.

by Lynne Rydell

With a few clicks, web surfers can become "digital angels" by granting a child's posted wish or making a cash donation. Since partnering with Amazon.com in 2001, the site has granted more than 5,000 wishes at 65 healthcare centers in 30 states. "We don't just treat the infected, we treat the affected," he says. "The gifts are given to the parents to give to the child. So the real joy isn't in the gift, but the memory it creates. In many cases, the parent won't be around much longer."

One little girl had lost her mother and brother to AIDS. Her father was in jail and she was living with an aunt, who was ambivalent about being a caregiver. But when Angelwish.org granted the child's wish for a doll, it formed a lasting bond between them. "The girl and her aunt became tearful because they realized they both loved dolls," says Sandi Gossart-Walker, program coordinator for HIV-affected children and families at Yale University.

Mehta, 29, traces his sense of good will to his mother Chitra, who always encouraged him and his brother Bijon to help their elderly neighbors. "They

were like surrogate grandparents," he recalls. "I don't know if I was helping or making more of a mess, but it made me feel good."

It wasn't until his college days at Rutgers that he became interested in AIDS-affected children. "I realized they were not getting the attention they needed," he says of the children at a treatment center near his fraternity house.

So in 1999, with \$5,000 of his own money, Mehta launched Angelwish.org, an all-volunteer, donation-driven web site. He worked 20 to 40 hours a week, calling care centers across the nation—many of which were skeptical—to explain the project.

Now a management consultant for PricewaterhouseCoopers, he knows many busy professionals don't have time to volunteer. "You work six days a week, and when you get a day off, you need a little 'me' time," he says. Convenient "digital philanthropy," however, makes giving quick and easy.

And it's appreciated. "Every Christmas, we get a deluge of gifts through Shimmy and Angelwish," says Terrence P. Zealand, executive director of the AIDS Resource Foundation for Children in Newark. "He has a real compassion for these kids."

Mehta feels it's the least he can do. "For us, \$50 is dinner and drinks," he says. "For these children, it creates priceless memories."

And that's more than they could ever wish for. *B*