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Young businessman founds cyber charity

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The infant lay in his crib, oxygen helping him breathe, legs kicking madly.

Shimmy Mehta, then a college student and a visitor to St. Clare's Home for Children with HIV/AIDS in Elizabeth, picked up the child and cradled him in his arms.

"Watching a little baby is an incredible experience on its own, but knowing this little guy was infected with AIDS was kind of hard for me to fathom," said Mehta, now a 28-year-old senior associate with PricewaterhouseCoopers in Florham Park. "Seeing how those little legs kicked and his will to live - that was heartwarming."

That baby inspired Mehta to lead his fraternity brothers at Rutgers University in Newark on a campaign to help children and families at local AIDS facilities.

The Tau Kappa Epsilon members donated birthday and Christmas gifts and held annual bike rides including the TKE Challenge for Pediatric AIDS, a 300-mile, three-day cycling event through the state.

An avid road cyclist, Mehta has pedaled numerous times for charity, including the seven-day, 400-mile Paradise Ride to Stop AIDS in Hawaii and the three-day, 275-mile Boston-to-New York AIDS ride.

Three years ago, the Rutherford resident still had the baby on his mind when he founded Angelwish.org. Mehta used \$5,000 of his own money to set up the non-profit organization, which offers an easy way to grant wishes to children and families living with HIV/AIDS. The site links to 56 health-care centers from 32 states across the country. To date 3,770 wishes have been granted.

In 2001, Angelwish received a Point of Light Award from President Bush and the Points of Light Foundation for its contribution to society.

Mehta organized the first annual Angelwish Corporate Challenge bike ride last year to help raise funds to keep the site up and running. This year's event, held as part of the North Jersey Cycling Classic in Park Ridge in July, raised \$4,000.

"After college, I was very frustrated that I didn't have the time to help the way I used to. Many of my fraternity brothers felt the same way," Mehta said. "So I went to some of the health clinics and asked if there was something we could do now on our limited time."

Social workers handed him a wish list from the children. It included items like a Winnie-the-Pooh watch and a basketball; one little girl asked for a phone so she could call her mom if she felt sick in school.

Mehta shot off e-mails to his busy friends, and like the wave of a magic wand, the wishes were granted. That's when it hit him. On the one hand, he had children in need; on the other, he had young entrepreneurs who were short on time but eager to help.

"After that it was a no-brainer," Mehta said. "The answer was digital philanthropy."

Mehta, a Hindu, credits his mother and brother for his philanthropic tendencies.

"One of the simplest lessons that I learned as a child was to be kind and helpful to others," he said. "As I got older and became more aware of the spiritual interpretations of these lessons, I was more aware of karma."

According to the Hindu law of karma, every ethically good act performed by someone results, sooner or later, in happiness and spiritual development.

"Angelwish provides donors with lots of opportunity to collect some good karma," Mehta said.

There are any number of ways to do good deeds on the site, including purchasing birthday or holiday gifts, corporate donations of seats to concerts or baseball games, and monetary contributions.

"What I found in doing research for this site is that in most cases the medical needs of the children are covered," Mehta said. "What they need are simple things to help make life a little better."

He saw this firsthand during a visit to one of the health-care facilities.

"Children waiting to see a therapist ... were playing basketball with paper rolled in duct tape," he said. "That upset me a little bit."

The kids who benefit from the foundation don't necessarily have the disease themselves. Sometimes they are living in foster homes because their parents are sick or using drugs and unable to care for them.

"In other cases one or both parents might have died," Mehta said.

Children aren't the only ones to benefit from the site.

"Many of the health-care workers spend their own time and money purchasing gifts for the children in their care," Mehta said. "They are very dedicated and our hope is that Angelwish gives them some relief, too."

Gift-giving is done through Amazon.com, with purchases mailed directly to the designated health-care center.

Last Christmas the AIDS Resource Foundation, which cares for 500 families living with AIDS/HIV, received \$2,500 worth of gifts from Angelwish.

"They are always very nice quality gifts and we give them to the mothers or fathers or grandparents of the children so they can play Santa," said Dr. Terrence Zealand, executive director of the foundation. "Without organizations like Angelwish, the children wouldn't get any gifts."

Mehta canvasses large companies to link to his site for holiday gift-giving campaigns. Goldman Sachs was one of the first corporate giants to come on board shortly after Angelwish was established.

"The first year we did it on a small scale and liked it so much we opened it up to all our employees nationwide," said Marilyn Duffy, vice president of charitable services for the company. "There wasn't another site like this and it made giving very easy."

Mehta is often touched by the generosity of the people visiting his site. One in particular blew him away.

"It was 6 p.m. on our first New Year's Eve. A woman made a credit card donation of \$5,000," he recalled. "I was out of my mind thinking she had put in too many zeros - so I e-mailed her."

It was no mistake.

"Angelwish tends not to be a hard sell because we're talking about children who have nothing to do with their lot in life," Mehta said. "They are innocent victims who don't deserve this at all."

For more information, visit angelwish.org.

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