



Charities let kids with HIV get their wish

Wednesday, December 1, 2004

By **HEATHER KAYS**
HERALD NEWS

Instead of collecting money for research, traditional patient outreach, or medication, Shimmy Mehta and Wayne Cesa have a simpler goal: to make HIV and AIDS patients smile.

Both are the founders of local AIDS charities and spend every free moment they have working to make the lives of children affected by the virus that causes AIDS a bit easier. Today is the 16th annual World AIDS Day.

What's different about what they do is that they don't focus on treating the illness. But rather, they focus on the child's emotional health.

"Our mission is basically to grant the wishes to children living with HIV or AIDS," said Mehta, a Rutherford resident. "And more specifically to make it easy for the public to grant wishes of children with HIV or AIDS."

Mehta, a 29-year-old senior associate at an accounting firm in Florham Park, founded Angelwish, a non-profit organization in 1999. He was inspired to start a charity for people like him - young professionals with the money and desire to make a difference, but who had little or no time to volunteer.

"I saw myself and others who didn't really have time to give back," he said. "So I matched the resources we did have with the needs of the children."

Through Angelwish people are able to directly buy toys that children have requested by using Amazon.com. Personalized wish lists are set up at the popular Web site. While visiting the Web site, donors can search by age, the child's name, by price range or by the type of toy.

Mehta has collected \$50,000 in cash donations in the past year. Another \$40,000 in contributions were made in direct purchases of toys on Amazon.com this year. More than 5,000 wishes have been granted through Angelwish.

"A lot of organizations raise money for treatment, medication and food - the necessities," Mehta said. "But most of them don't have funds to brighten a child's day."

Not only does Angelwish offer a quick and easy way for people to donate, but it also ensures that all of the money goes directly to the children.

"Other organizations will collect a few thousand dollars before they grant a child's wish," Mehta said. "The beauty of what we do is, you are in complete control of where your money is. One hundred percent of your contribution goes directly to the child. You don't have to worry about where the money is going because the toys are shipped right to the children."

Like Mehta, Cesa wanted to help children suffering with HIV and AIDS. Cesa, a 47-year-old Foodtown employee from Hawthorne, lost a cousin, Thomas Rege, to AIDS in 1992.

"Tommy was athletic, very intelligent, and would give you the shirt off his back," Cesa said. "He had gotten a lot of open sores on his body, lost his sight, was diabetic."

Cesa always had his cousin in the back of his mind and in 1998 decided to start Free Throws for AIDS, a charity that provides children with HIV and AIDS opportunities to meet celebrities, go to sporting events and visit the theater. Three times a year, around Christmas, Halloween and Easter, the group throws parties at Beth Israel Hospital in Newark.

"I think it's just about impossible not to get close," said Cesa, who spends his lunch hour every day and his nights and weekends working on fund-raising and organizing events. "I spend as much time with the children as I can. There are a couple kids I am real, real close to."

Each year the group, which holds free-throw basketball competitions to raise money, brings in about \$10,000. The money goes to purchase tickets and hold events.

Charities like Angelwish and Free Throws for Aids can make a huge difference to a child according to health professionals.

"For any child with a chronic illness, it is extremely important to foster quality-of-life issues," said Cheryl Sterling, a clinical psychologist. "Doing something that makes the child feel happy, makes them feel special, or helps them to enjoy their daily life, the value of that can not be underestimated."

Copyright © 2004 North Jersey Media Group Inc.
[Copyright Infringement Notice](#) [User Agreement & Privacy Policy](#)

[Print](#) | [Close](#)