

nPost.com Interview with Shimul Mehta

Company: Angelwish.org
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nPost: I have with me here today, Shimmy Mehta, Founder and Director of Angelwish. Mr. Mehta, thank you very much for being here today.

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Shimul: It is a pleasure to be here.

nPost: Could you give us an overview of Angelwish.org?

Shimul: Sure. Angelwish is a place where people can go to grant wishes to children that are affected or infected with HIV and AIDS. When I finished with school I noticed that a lot of my friends were busy working, and didn't have enough time to do any community service quite like they had in college. Everyone was also using the Internet for a variety of things, from communicating amongst themselves to buying presents and gifts online. I reasoned that there was a population out there that would be interested in using an online medium to help children that were affected as well as infected by HIV and AIDS.

nPost: How did you initially become involved in HIV and AIDS related issues?

Shimul: I became involved while I was in college. I organized a number of three day, three hundred mile bike rides for the Care Center that was across the street from our Fraternity house. I did this for about three years.

nPost: What specifically do you mean by "Care Center"?

Shimul: Usually a medical facility that works with children, specializing in HIV and AIDS work.

nPost: Are these Care Centers for all ages?

Shimul: They are for all ages, but they tend to have a large pediatric population. They also look after the affected children through social care and psychological services. These children are living in situations in which either one or both of their parents are infected with HIV or AIDS, and they may or may not be infected as well. Because of this, these children are not able to celebrate life's wonderful moments. They may even be too poor to receive birthday and holiday gifts.

These children are innocent victims, and these Care Centers try and provide for these children in whatever way they can. When we were in college we would get the kids holiday presents whenever we could and when I got out of school I realized that I didn't have enough time to do things the way I used to which at the time meant cutting class. I then started thinking about potentially just raising money for these Care Centers, and providing them the funds to help take care of the kids.

While in school we would set goals for our Fraternity to hit. We would then go to the Care Centers and ask about the types of gifts the children would like. We found out that the kids didn't want the big things in life. These kids were lacking such things as a simple watch, or a basketball to play with. It was the personal needs of individual children that I wanted to address with Angelwish.

nPost: Things that were extremely personal to each child, but that they didn't have access to.

Shimul: It turns out that it is really difficult to organize a large fundraiser to buy an item as simple as a basketball. It just doesn't work. I then came up with the idea for the Care Centers to provide me with a list of what the children wanted and then using that list to drive a fundraiser. That is where the idea for Angelwish originated. I could easily go out and buy the gifts for a few hundred dollars and I would feel good, but this is such a huge thing, with so many kids out there who need help, that I had to do something. These kids aren't suffering from cancer, or some other disease where they have a lot of publicity. There is another reason these kids aren't in the limelight, and that is because of privacy concerns. When a patient has cancer and survives, it is a testament to courage, but if a child is affected by HIV or AIDS then there is a social stigma associated there.

nPost: Cancer survivors are also much more adept at being vocal about their situation, whereas children who are affected by HIV and AIDS do not have the skills or know how to publicize their plight.

Shimul: There are no negative connotations about how they got cancer. With HIV and AIDS there are a number of scenarios, and most of the ones that people think about are the negative ones. So these children are shielded from the media, for privacy and for their own well-being. They may not even know if they are infected or not.

nPost: Are these children still in the care of their parents?

Shimul: Most of them are. With the new drugs available, the children are living much longer lives, but unfortunately the parents may not be last that long. Even if the parent has the disease, there really is no cure insight. Which means that in anywhere between tomorrow and 20 years, the parents could pass away. This means that a child that is affected by HIV or AIDS will be either orphaned or sent off to live with distant relatives. These children don't have the same support system in place as children who are infected with HIV and AIDS; they are often forced to live in circumstances that are less than viable for raising a child.

These children are living in circumstances in which they are financially deprived. They are not growing up in environments where the resources are not there to provide them a normal childhood.

nPost: So Angelwish targets children who are either HIV or AIDS affected, and living in a financially limited situation. What about medical coverage for this group?

Shimul: Actually, they are pretty well covered. Through Medicaid and Medicare, these children do have access to medical attention. When it comes to an overall quality of life, these children are not living the life you and I may have had. The Hospitals and Care Centers are not able to take care of the smaller things, such as Birthday's and Holiday presents. Although they try, they just don't have the manpower or the resources to help. Which is where Angelwish steps in. We provide them the things they are lacking, the small things that you and I would consider normal, such as athletic shoes, a simple basketball, or even baseball gloves.

The nurses do what they can, whenever they have a child's birthday that comes up. They start pooling together three and four bucks here and there to buy a gift for the child, but they can't do it for all of them.

They do everything in their power to help, because deep down, they feel like these are their children. We realized that we could begin to grant the children's wishes, by connecting donors with the people who work with the children.

nPost: Tell me about the functional flow of how the website works.

Shimul: Starting at the beginning we market the site to potential donors through postcard initiatives, which we have had three in New York City. These consist of placing the Angelwish postcards in restrooms across the city (free postcards distributed by [GoCard](#)), and driving brand recognition that way. These campaigns are usually run during the holidays, to really appeal to people's sense of giving.

nPost: What kind of response have you seen?

Shimul: Well, it is very hard to quantify, but the postcards are taken. It is very difficult to track back postcards that are taken with activity on the website.

Basically we have relied upon word of mouth marketing, simply because we can't afford to do much else. We have also started to market directly to companies, working with their community relations people and working with them to allow their employees to participate with Angelwish. This allows for their employees, who are working 24 hours a day to be active in community building.

One example is where we have been working with Goldman Sachs to allow their employees to go online and grant these wishes, this is in addition to a Letters for Santa campaign that they do every year. The Letters for Santa campaign is for all disadvantaged children, but would entail them going to the Mall, buying the gift, wrapping it, and returning it to work. This adds up to about three hours of work. This is extremely time consuming and takes away from normal activities during the height of the Holiday season.

Whereas, donating through Angelwish allows employees to go online, identify a child that needs help, purchase that gift through our partner Amazon.com, which then delivers the gift to the appropriate Care Center. The employee knows that they are helping a child, but is not overwhelmed with the responsibilities of taking care of the step-by-step process. It is also completely tax deductible.

nPost: Was marketing to Companies directly more effective than the postcards?

Shimul: It definitely was. It helped considerably that the company was pushing Angelwish to its employees as well. I didn't have to send out 15,000 email messages. I sent one email to my company contact, who would then forward it on directly to their 15,000 employees. Also, receiving an email message from an internal source is much more effective than my sending the email from my personal account. Receiving an email from an internal source automatically added validity to the message and the purpose.

This type of campaign has been very successful. With Goldman Sachs alone, we have been able to grant over \$4,500 worth of wishes in the last year. With their traditional Letters to Santa campaign, people were contributing around \$30. With the Angelwish initiative, the convenience was so great that individual contributions totaled around \$100.

nPost: How does a person choose a specific gift for the individual children?

Shimul: It is a very simple process. Anyone who wishes to donate can go the Angelwish.org website, and identify a Care Center in their area. We have individual pages for each Care Center, and these pages provide a background on each Care Center as well as a listing of the children that they care for. This link goes directly to the gift(s) that each child wishes to receive. By clicking on each link the "to" address is completely taken care of. The person who donates simply fills out the correct billing information, and the gift is off to the correct Care Center and the correct child.

These wishes are not limited to Holiday wishes. During the Holiday season, someone always steps up to help; it is during the year that these children are often neglected. We are trying to focus on these children's birthdays.

nPost: It also creates a lot more awareness for Angelwish.org and helps create a long term relationship between your donors and the Care Centers.

Shimul: Exactly, we are able to stay in the donor's mind year around. We are really trying to lower the barriers for giving. If we can make giving a 10-minute exercise a very personnel experience, then we have succeeded.

nPost: Do the Hospitals upload the information to the website?

Shimul: No, once a Care Center signs up, we send them a list for them to fill out their children's information. With HIV and AIDS there are serious privacy concerns, so we don't publish information that is publicly identifiable. The Care Centers are very protective of the kids under their care, and we all follow COPA laws. Therefore we are all very careful to ensure that no information gets online that could identify the kids.

nPost: What level of knowledge do the children have concerning where the gift are originating?

Shimul: Actually, they have no idea where they are coming from. It is very important to us that we contribute to a child's birthday. A lot of the time, the parents will not be able to afford a gift for their own child, and we do not want to step in with a gift proclaiming itself from James Smith care of Angelwish. As we see it, our job is to bring happiness to a child's day. It is not important that child personally thanks each donor.

We would prefer to remain the silent partner. The recognition that our donors receive must be limited to drawings by the Children sent in by the Care Centers, or specific thank you notes from the Care Centers. A lot of these children don't know that they are affected or infected by the HIV and AIDS viruses.

Another way that we are trying to give back to the community, is by creating programs where our donors can actually volunteer in Care Centers in their areas.

nPost: How do you know what type of success rate you are having in terms of number of children who are receiving gifts?

Shimul: We track success via a number of different ways. Once someone grants a wish, we receive an invoice for that order and are able to track it that way. The website also helps determine which wishes are being granted.

nPost: How often is the site updated with the kids birthdays and wishes?

Shimul: It has been dependent upon how soon the Care Centers can get us the information, but we are trying to go to a quarterly schedule. Going to a quarterly schedule allows us to focus the site on the birthdays that are coming up within the next 3 months.

nPost: How do you finance your activities?

Shimul: Actually, I am financing the site via Credit Cards. I am bearing all the expenses at this time. We have received some corporate support, which has been very helpful. That support though, has been more on the Marketing front.

nPost: So you do not have an Affiliate deal with Amazon.com (which handles all Angelwish orders)?

Shimul: No. It would be helpful, but due to the sheer magnitude of items that are listed by the Care Centers, we would not be able to manage it. We currently use the Amazon.com wish list feature, which saves us an extraordinary amount of money. If we had to do our own fulfillment, or even create a system to enable us to do what we do now.

nPost: You currently are working a day job, are financing the site on your own, what is it that drives you?

Shimul: Everyday, I ask myself why I am doing this. If I get tired or frustrated, I take a nap for an hour, when I wake up I realize that what I am doing helps children across the country on a daily basis. I get up with a renewed sense of "What can I do now?"

nPost: About how many children do you currently have listed?

Shimul: Right now we have about 34 Care Centers in about 18 states, with about 8,769 kids identified. We are never going to have 8,000 kids listed at any given time. We have three months of kids listed at a time.

There is a total population of about 75,000 kids nationally that we want to help, which equates to about 260 Care Centers. Actually, we are the only organization that I know of that is creating a database of this population. In time we expect to have a complete count

of the exact population.

nPost: What is the age range of the kids that you help?

Shimul: We help anyone from the age of zero to 20.

nPost: What is the long term prognosis for these kids?

Shimul: Actually, pretty good. The majority are not infected with either HIV or AIDS, they are simply living with the ramifications. The total number of infected children is somewhere around 10,000. With the advent of the new drug cocktails, the incidence of infection at childbirth has dropped significantly. But we have always targeted the entire population of affected and infected children.

nPost: About how many wishes have you been able to grant to date?

Shimul: About 500, which equate to about \$10,000 in donations. Although, it was never a priority to tally the amount collected. To us, it is about the number of children that we have brought a smile to.

Although, based upon my calculations, in about two years we could be doing about \$6,000,000 in annual donations.

nPost: That is based upon hitting the whole population.

Shimul: Correct, it is based upon the number of kids, each with a birthday wish of about \$35. If we were to have 75,000 people each donate \$35 twice a year, it adds up extremely quickly.

nPost: What type of response have you gotten back from the Care Centers?

Shimul: They love it. A lot of them are completely amazed with how easy it works. Historically they have worked with large organizations to provide gifts during the holidays, but that still requires the Care Centers to run around, pick up the gifts, and sometimes wrap them. With Angelwish, the gifts are delivered to their door, wrapped and ready to be given to the children. It saves them so much time and labor. It gives them the ability to focus on each child's needs.

The simplicity of the system also enables the Care Centers to provide something special for the children on their birthdays, something they may not be able to do on their own. Remember, these children are usually very poor, financially despondent, and not privy to the gifts and carefree moments that the rest of us are. For them, anything like what Angelwish does means a lot to them.

nPost: What are the major issues facing Angelwish.org?

Shimul: The major issues facing us today is funding. Originally, I was counting on the dotcoms, but we never truly were able to capitalize on them when they were going strong. Which, I believe is for the best, because we wouldn't be able to support ourselves today. We never counted on it, or became reliant upon it.

Therefore, our heads never got too big, or dreamt out of our means. With the economy turning, charitable giving goes down. It is quite sad, that the need increases while the capability to give decreases.

nPost: How do you propose to address this issue?

Shimul: Well, we really want to develop Corporate Sponsorships that will enable us to really drive the organization forward, while at the same time ensuring that we have a 100% through put. In which 100% of funds donated to the children go to the children.

nPost: Most charitable organizations have an administration rate of anywhere between 3-15% of donations.

Shimul: I would rather do things differently. It would be my goal, to keep our budget at least less than 5% of all donations.

nPost: Mr. Mehta, thank you for meeting with us today, and I wish you and Angelwish the best of luck.

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