

■ COMMUNITY ■



Nita Umashankar believes the most vulnerable position one can be in is being poor, uneducated and compelled or forced to use sex to earn a living. “These people, both men and women, grapple with the effects of neglect, abuse and endangerment,” says the PhD student at University of Texas-Austin’s McCombs School of Business.

Her nonprofit Achieving Sustainable Social Equality through Technology (or, simply, ASSET) was born of a desire to provide this vulnerable and stigmatized segment the same learning opportunity that others have access to.

“When I say learn, I am referring to current and relevant knowledge areas that can enhance their lives beyond the scope of vocational or labor skills,” says Nita.

ASSET, formed in June 2006, has found a great equalizer in computer literacy. By October 2006, in partnership with Prakriti — a non-government organization — it began computer classes for children of sex workers in Chennai, India. Nineteen children enrolled, two dropped out, and there are currently 17. The next batch of 20 has already been interviewed.

When they are children, says Nita, there is a chance of deterring them from entering the trade. “Once they are in, it is difficult to pull them out.”

Seeds for the project were sown when, after her undergraduate, Nita spent a year in India working with NGOs rehabilitating abused women and children.

ASSET management

Monika Joshi finds out how one Indian-American family is changing the lives of children halfway around the world

“Though born in the United States, she loves India and everything Indian,” says Nita’s father Ray Umashankar. He recalls how, last summer, Nita informed him that she would go to Chennai during the Christmas break to work with children of commercial sex workers.

“After lengthy discussions, I said she couldn’t do it alone and would have to find an established NGO there,” says Ray. Thus, the partnership with Prakriti was born.

Ray, assistant dean for industrial relations at the University of Arizona’s College of Engineering, also told his daughter that, once the groundwork was done, he would help form the organization, get Internal Revenue Service tax exempt status and garner resources.

“My responsibilities as executive director are long-term sustainability, measurable outcomes, and the sound financial health of ASSET,” he says. His daughter, he adds,

focuses on curriculum and content — what kind of information-technology jobs their students will be able to apply for, what level of proficiency they should obtain, how long they should be trained, what level of proficiency in written and spoken English is required, and what the income opportunities are.

It has been difficult running an organization long distance, admits Nita, adding that having a local partner addresses that problem somewhat. She travels to India every year, and manages some administrative work through e-mail and conference calls. Volunteers and employees conduct onsite work.

“Additional challenges include making sure our efforts are customized and replicable so we can offer the children what they need and, at the same time, create a model that is scalable,” Nita says.

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SREERAM SELVARAJ

She says some people in India are a bit skeptical of her ability to understand the needs of these women and children.

"Though I was raised by Indian immigrants [her mother Sushila, senior lecturer at the University of Arizona's Eller College of Management, is also on ASSET's executive board], I have visited India all my life and spent a year in Bangalore," she says. "ASSET is a life-long priority."

Nita recognizes she lacks knowledge of the subtle nuances that characterize this community. "That is why we have a group of employees and volunteers in Chennai who have the autonomy to create and enforce decisions to bet-

Nita's father Ray Umashankar recalls how, last summer, Nita informed him that she would go to Chennai during the Christmas break to work with children of commercial sex workers. It has been difficult running an organization long distance, Nita says, and having a local partner helped.

COURTESY: NITA UMASHANKAR

ter serve the children," she adds.

ASSET has gained support from many quarters. In August 2006, two months after its name was finalized and Tata Consultancy Services made a commitment to provide 20 computers, the first donation of \$10,000 came from the Sooch Foundation, a privately funded charity headquartered in Austin, Texas. At the same time, Abhishek Kumar, a management consultant, came on board as strategy consultant. Ray says it happened because an e-mail he had meant for Arun Kumar, managing partner of accounting firm KPMG in San Francisco, mistakenly went to Abhishek. "I was lucky," Ray says.

In October 2006, the Global Giving Foundation announced a fundraising Olympics with \$50,000 as prize money for the project raising the most donations October 9 through October 31.

"I put myself in overdrive and was determined to win," Ray says. By October 29, ASSET was in second place. "I made frantic phone calls. Many came through and put ASSET in the first place," Ray adds.

The project raised \$43,357 during the contest period, to win the \$50,000 first prize. Since India won the country prize of \$25,000, and ASSET raised the most money among the 55 Indian NGOs, it won an additional \$11,250. "ASSET will not compete in future Olympics, but will help other nonprofits as a fundraising coach," says Ray.

Meanwhile, the organization got its first employee, TCS delivered the computers, and classes began. In January, ASSET broadened its scope to include girls rescued from prostitution in Kolkata and Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh — the gateway for trafficking from Nepal.

Ray has applied to the California-based Draper Richards Foundation (that funds and mentors social entrepreneurs) for a three-year \$100,000 annual fellowship. The biggest challenge he faces, he says, is sustainability, keeping children interested, and not letting them quit.

He himself is no quitter. In September 2002, at age 60 and despite an artificial hip, he climbed Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania as a personal challenge and in memory of his son, Naren.

"People have two choices," a local newspaper quoted him as saying then. "Either they drown themselves in whatever they are up to, or they decide to fight with everything they have and seek all the help they can get."

"Thanks to Nita, I have found a new purpose in life — to help people less fortunate than I am," he told *India Abroad*. "Helping others takes away focus from your self." ■



Brave New World

Shobha Warriar visits ASSET's Chennai center

Naresh Kumar, a class XI student, had only seen well-to-do kids use computers at home. He had no idea he would ever be able to touch a keyboard or step into cyberspace.

"Until now, it was just a dream," he says. "Now, I know about the vast world out there. Initially, when taught how to operate a computer, I was scared. My poor English bothered me too, but now I enjoy it. I am comfortable with basic software. I want to be a chartered accountant. I am really excited."

Rohinisri, in class IX, is as excited. "I had only seen computers from a distance," she smiles. "Whenever I saw one, I wished I could touch it! I used to pester my mother to let me learn computers, but she always said they were not for us poor kids. I prayed to god for a chance and when I finally got it, I couldn't believe it. I can now use computers easily. My dream is to study computer science and start a big center like this one, so I can help other poor students like me."

ASSET has helped make the dreams of Naresh and Rohinisri — children of sex workers in Chennai — real.

The ASSET project is run in partnership with Prakriti, an NGO run by Lalitha Kumaramangalam, which works with sex workers.

"Dr Umashankar called me from the US and told me his daughter wanted to do some voluntary work with Prakriti," says Kumaramangalam. "It was later decided that she wanted to start a program for children of sex workers. Unlike many other places, most sex workers in Tamil Nadu want to educate their children and keep them away from the work they are doing. So, I decided to talk to some of them and find out what they wanted for their children."

The sex workers were unanimous — they wanted their children to learn computers.

"Some of the kids now tell me that even if they haven't managed to study further, they can find work. This is what Dr Umashankar wanted to do — provide an alternate livelihood," says Kumaramangalam.

The course may go on for three to six months, depending on the children. According to Kumaramangalam, a major problem was the children's poor language skills. So, Prakriti is now teaching them English too.

Abhishek Kumar, a management consultant currently working for KPMG Advisory Services in Chennai, is on ASSET's advisory board, and is responsible for providing strategic guidance related to fundraising and general management. On the first day of the center's opening, he saw that no child had turned up for the class. So, once again, the mothers and kids were called and told in strong words that there was no way classes could be missed. Once the children began using computers, there was no way they could be stopped from attending classes.

ASSET plans to launch branches in Kolkata and Gorakhpur, two major trafficking centers in India, followed by Hyderabad. Once the course ends, the organization will help students get jobs. Kumar is not worried about providing them placements.

"There is so much demand for trained hands in India now," he says. "For instance, business process outsourcing companies will have to reduce costs if they want to compete with Philippines and China. I don't think it is a big challenge to get people employed."

For now, the mission is to establish branches across India within 10 years.

"I am trying to build a team of people across the country and come up with a system of performance monitoring where every NGO records the presence of every child using a Web-based system," says Kumar.

As for the kids, their happiness is palpable. Suddenly, as if for the first time, the world really is their oyster. ■