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UA dean helps rescue kids in India sex trade

Ray Umashankar awarded national prize for his efforts

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Ray Umashankar doesn't scour The Wall Street Journal and Fortune magazine for business news. He reads them looking for Indian surnames among the lists of company CEOs.

Those names in hand, Umashankar creates a list of possible e-mail handles for each CEO and sends messages into the Internet ether until he gets what he's after: funding to break the cycle of poverty and desperation of the children of India's sex workers.

"I like to say I'm the spam king," joked Umashankar, an assistant dean of industry relations at the University of Arizona College of Engineering. His message to the CEOs describes India's child sex-trafficking problem and makes a simple request: some of their money and all of their business contacts.

So far, Umashankar's efforts have netted more than \$300,000 in donations and \$25,000 in computers for the nonprofit ASSET India Foundation, founded two years ago by his daughter, Nita.

On Wednesday, Umashankar, ASSET's executive director, will get \$10,000 more for the foundation when he is named one of the 15 winners of the annual Purpose Prize.

Created three years ago, the Purpose Prize recognizes "social innovators" over the age of 60 who find creative solutions to pressing societal problems. This is the first year that Americans doing work abroad were eligible to receive the award.

Umashankar, 66, helped Nita launch ASSET - Achieving Sustainable Social Equality through Technology - two years ago to help impoverished children in his native India learn information technology skills necessary to work at one of the country's IT firms.

"This project has dramatically changed my life," he said. "I tell my students (at UA) that life in America is like eating dessert three times a day. At some point you have to wonder: There has to be something more."

India's history as a caste society, as well as a fear of HIV/AIDS, has created a situation in which children of sex workers - as well as those rescued from sex trafficking across India's borders with Nepal and Bangladesh - are shunned and unable to find jobs or even enroll in school.

"The caste system is technically illegal, but you can't erase centuries of tradition from people's mind," said Umashankar, who was born in the southern India city of Pudkottah. "But if they have skills for which there is a huge demand nobody cares what their background is or who their parents are."

By learning conversational and business English and computer skills specific to an IT company's needs through ASSET's programs, these young people get a clean slate in a culture that rarely offers that.

What ASSET does, said Purpose Prize Director Jim Emerman, is nothing short of offering someone a completely new life.

Sex trafficking widespread

The problem of sex trafficking in India is enormous. Impoverished parents unknowingly sell their children into the sex trade convinced they are going to marry a wealthy man, be in the movies or have a job overseas. The United Nations estimates that anywhere from 20 million to 65 million Indians have become victims of forced labor in this manner, and Umashankar said between 700,000 and 1 million children are added to the sex traffic rolls annually.

But the size of the problem was just one reason Purpose Prize judges picked Umashankar for this year's pack of winners. Another one was the intergenerational aspect of ASSET.

"We were really intrigued by the fact that he works with his daughter," said Emerman. "That age group is the most social justice-minded since the baby boomers. A project connecting the two generations for whom social justice issues are so important was really powerful."

Nita, 26, graduated from UA in 2003 with two bachelor's degrees - one in molecular and cellular biology and one in marketing and entrepreneurship. She had an unusual graduation gift request for her parents: pay for a yearlong trip to India where she could work among the poor before she pursued her Ph.D. They agreed.

When she returned home, however, her next announcement wasn't met with such easy acquiescence.

"She said, 'I've found my cause. I'm going to go back to India every six months to work on this problem,'" Umashankar said, recalling Nita's stories of discovering children in the sex trade. "I said 'Wait a minute, let's think this through.'"

But Nita remained determined, and although she enrolled at the University of Texas-Austin to pursue her doctorate in marketing, her heart was in the slums of India.

"I questioned her at length, I wanted to make sure this wasn't just a passing phase," Umashankar said. "I gave her assignments. I asked her to find what NGOs worked with this population and what their involvement was."

What Nita discovered was that while a few nongovernmental organizations were working to rescue women and children from the sex trade, the skills offered to help them survive outside the trade were inadequate.

"It was vegetable vending or bag-making or sewing, but the pay for those trades (is) lower than the sex trade, so there was no incentive for them to get out of that," Umashankar said.

It was then Umashankar realized that if these women and children were to have a sustainable option and true hope for a better future, the approach would have to be new, and they would need lots of money.

Nita, who is still at UT-Austin, realized it, too.

"You can have a dream, but if that dream isn't backed by resources, it goes nowhere," she said on a recent visit to Tucson for the holidays. "ASSET is a testament to my father's vision and how skilled he is at pulling resources together. He's not doing this for himself. I'm so proud to be his daughter because at no age would he stop helping people with such vigor, such energy, such total commitment. It is an honor to work with him."

Trolling Web for donors

As assistant dean of industry relations, Umashankar is used to creating company-university partnerships to help nurture promising students. He decided to take a similar approach in getting partners for ASSET.

He gave up Sunday morning football and spent it trolling for donors, contacting American companies with branches in India, asking what those companies needed in a skilled workforce.

Umashankar's wife, Sue, the academic director of UA's Global Business Program at the Eller College of Management, worked with Nita to create a curriculum based on companies' needs while Umashankar contacted NGOs to help him locate teachers and a program coordinator in India.

ASSET partnered with the Smile Foundation, an Indian NGO focused on providing universal education to underprivileged children.

Smile offered space in buildings the organization owned and found two teachers for each of the seven IT training centers ASSET opened over the next two years. ASSET's yearly budget of \$130,000 pays the teachers' salaries and that of a program coordinator who oversees day-to-day operations in India between the biannual visits Umashankar or Nita make to the centers.

ASSET's mission is simple, Umashankar said: computer literacy specific to company needs, conversational and business English proficiency and guaranteed job placement. Depending on how proficient a student is in English, the course can take from six months to two years.

"We want a finished product that can be placed immediately in a job," he said. "We don't care how much time it takes."

The reason that is so important, Umashankar said, is "I have to be able to have measurable results to approach donors. I can't just say some of them found jobs."

The first classes were held in March 2007, and ASSET has already placed 120 of its graduates in jobs, while 90 more students have gained enough skills to go to college. Companies that have hired ASSET graduates in India include Microsoft, Dell, Intel, Aptech, Firstsource and Tata Consultancy Services.

Funding is provided strictly through donors, and when Umashankar talks about persuading a CEO to support the cause it seems as if raising funds is an Olympic sport to him.

Nav Sookh, founder and chairman of the board of Silicon Laboratories, was one of Umashankar's targets.

Sookh, who calls Umashankar a "tenacious dynamo," was reached after Umashankar - denied access to Sookh by his secretary - tried 10 different e-mail combinations for Sookh before one went through.

"Based on his drive and bulldog-like gumption, I agreed to meet with him," Sookh wrote in a reference letter for the Purpose Prize.

"When we met," Umashankar said, "he grilled me on why I thought this idea would even work and when we were done talking, he took out his checkbook and gave me \$10,000."

Sookh has since given an additional \$70,000 to ASSET.

Umashankar said he thanks Nita frequently for her persistence upon returning from India that something needed to be done for the children of their home country, "and for letting me be involved."

"A lot of young people wouldn't want their parents involved with their projects, but she's given me this gift," he said. "It has invigorated me as a person. It has given me a purpose. I'll be busy for the next 20 years."**WHAT IS THE PURPOSE PRIZE?**

The Purpose Prize is part of the Encore Careers campaign run by Civic Ventures, a national think tank on baby boomers, work and social purpose.

Civic Ventures created the idea of an "encore career," which is the career path taken as one shifts out of his or her primary career, said Jim Emerman, director of the Purpose Prize.

This is the third year of awards. There are more than 1,000 nominations annually. Winners have to be older than 60 and have begun a new creative effort in the past 15 years "that is taking on a big social challenge and applying their experience to it in a creative way," Emerman said.

Six of the winners get \$100,000 and nine get \$10,000.

FUNDRAISING OLYMPICS

ASSET is participating in the Global Giving Foundation Fundraising Olympics. The contest awards \$2,500 to nonprofits raising at least \$5,000 from 50 donors in donations by Dec. 14.

Online donations can be given at www.globalgiving.com/pr/1600/proj1564a.html. There is a \$10 minimum donation required.

Donors can also write a check to Global Giving Foundation and write ASSET India #1564 in the memo column and mail (to arrive by Dec. 14) to:

GlobalGiving Foundation

1816 12th Street NW

3rd Floor

Washington, DC 20009

ANOTHER TUCSON WINNER

Last year, Gene Jones, a 92-year-old decorated World War II bomber pilot, was awarded a Purpose Prize for spearheading the Opening Minds through the Arts (OMA) program at Tucson Unified School District. He was awarded one of five \$100,000 awards given in 2007.

OMA, said director Joan Ashcraft, has local professional artists teaching elementary and middle school students opera, dance, costume design and music. The program has been linked to improved academic achievement and has been studied as a model by groups across the nation, including the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Ashcraft said OMA connects dance to math, opera to language arts and instrumental music to science.

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Caption: Nita Umashankar (middle, in yellow blouse) sits in a computer lab in Delhi, India, with children of sex workers and girls rescued from trafficking. Umashankar, a University of Arizona graduate, founded ASSET India Foundation, which funds seven educational centers in five cities in India.

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