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Friends of Asha,

Our newsletter Asha Jyoti is coming out of a long hibernation. This ‘Jyoti’ will shed light on Asha CNJ’s proceedings, sponsored projects and upcoming fund-raising events. Please take a few moments to get re-acquainted with our newsletter.

Asha Central New Jersey Team.

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Harbingers of Hope: Team Asha Marathon 2005

The Team Asha Marathon Program is one of the most innovative and successful attempts at fundraising. It offers comprehensive training to run a marathon, and in return each runner pledges to raise a certain fixed amount for every mile run in the marathon.

Central NJ’s Team Asha Marathon program offers the choice of training for the full (26.2 miles) or half-marathon (13.1 miles). The 2005 program completed recently was a grand success at various levels. Foremost, our participation levels broke all expectations and went from 12 runners in 2004 to 31 this year! Our runner group for 2005 was very diverse and included people from various age groups and professions. About 25% of our runners were women, and we had runners in their early 20's to those in mid 40's! More than 90% of Asha CNJ runners completed their goals of full/half marathons and together they helped Asha CNJ raise more than $28,000 till February 2006!

The training started in June 2005 and went on till November 2005. The group met on Sunday mornings at Johnson Park, Piscataway, for the practice runs. Coach Tom prepared individual training schedules for runners after careful evaluation of their physical ability and based on personal targets. Throughout the training, Asha volunteers cheered and provided water/Gatorade supplies for runners.

Looking ahead: Marathon ’06

- Training sessions through June-Nov, provided for the New York City, Philadelphia Full Marathon and Jersey Shore Half Marathon.
- Comprehensive and professional coaching given to both beginners and experienced runners.
- Regular track workouts stretch training & massage therapy.
- Fundraising discounts available for early registrants, for repeat runners, new runner referrals and spouse referrals.

Watch out for the kick-off event on 13th May, Physics Lecture Hall, Rutgers University Busch Campus

For more details, visit us at:
http://www.ashanet.org/centralnj/events/marathon/

Team Asha participated in the Jersey Shore Half marathon on Oct 2, 2005, which 8 runners of the group had as their final target. For the rest, the Philadelphia marathon on Nov 20, 2005 would be the day their athletic dreams were fulfilled! As one of our runners, Vaishnavi Rajagopal, testifies: completing a full-marathon is an experience like no other in the world. At that moment, all the pain and frustration of the past 6 months becomes worthwhile. There are no losers in the race, only successful completers. It offers unlimited bragging rights and you would be surprised at the number of people whose mouths gape open when you tell them that a person as un-athletic as yourself ran the marathon. It is surely a life-changing event for the runners who discover a new attitude to fitness, health, and very often to life.

An unique feature of Asha CNJ’s Marathon 2005 program was collaboration with organizations like Asha-Princeton and AID-Princeton. Tom, a 23-time marathoner and seasoned coach, who was coaching our team for the first time, was truly inspirational! His commitment, dedication and motivation were instrumental factors in helping the runners realize their goals, and celebrating their success today reminds us of Mahatma Gandhi’s words: “Strength does not come from physical capacity; it comes from indomitable will”
Meet Manjunath (right), a fourteen-year old chess prodigy. Here you can see him in action - against my friend, Ranjeet.

What may not be evident from the photo is that Manjunath is blind! Yes, he cannot see. But in case you thought that would limit his chess-playing abilities, brace yourselves to be astounded. If you were to play chess with him, you may not even notice the blindness. You do not have to tell him the move you make. He simply touches all the pieces in the board, and can figure out the entire board situation in seconds.

Ten minutes later Ranjeet was checkmate.

Manjunath was not a chess prodigy from birth. Four years ago, he was found begging on the street - blind, parentless, and with a bleak and dismal future. Not any more. He’s now studying in fifth grade at Mathru - School for the Blind. Apart from chess, he also plays cricket. I’m told he is a hard-hitting batsman. Now if you thought playing chess without vision was tough, what would you say about cricket!

Meet Munindra (left).

Twelve-year old Manjula hails from a remote slum in Karnataka. Education was an alien word to her parents, and being blind, she was considered a liability. Munindra is eleven. He comes from a village - his father a porter in a field. Before they were spotted by a field-worker from Mathru, they were left to their fates, and their talents lay undiscovered. Gifted with a knack for music, and a mellifluous voice, Manjula started playing the violin, and in just six months, she already shows great prowess over the instrument. She can also play the keyboards. Munindra discovered his talent in playing the percussion. An amazing tabla player, he is deft with the keyboards as well.

Mathru is home to about fifty such blind children from underprivileged families (even orphans). The school is affiliated to the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE). Apart from regular education, the children are groomed in art, music, games and vocational activities, trainings that empower them to shape their own lives.

- Primary aim: Provide quality formal and vocational training to the visually impaired, seek and provide job opportunities.
- Secondary aim: Create public awareness about cause, remedies and prevention of blindness, offering community health services (health-care camps), assisting the adult-blind to join mainstream society.
- Current strength: 42 students, 6 teachers, 1 field-worker. Children aged between four and sixteen.
- Classes – 1st to 5th grade. Every year a grade is added. Aim is to reach 10th grade.
- Books are transcribed in Braille. Kids trained to use the Abacus.
- Children are comfortable using word-processing software. They have computerized exams, where the question paper is in Braille, and answers are typed into the computer.
- In 2005, Asha CNJ disbursed $17,650 to Mathru. Funds for 2004 were $17,000.
- Funds used/to be used in construction of school-complex with 10 classrooms, dorms for 100 children, computer center, dining hall, kitchen and a meeting room. Last site-visit was done in January 2006.
The Abode that is ASHRAYA

Says Praveen Gopalakrishnan, after his visit to Ashraya (Kerala) last Fall: “The site visit was truly humbling and touching indeed! Seeing the kids in full smiles is when we finally realize the worth and responsibility of what we do!”

Ashraya provides residential rehabilitation to mentally and physically challenged girl children stricken with Polio, Cerebral Palsy or Mental Retardation, and assists them through the years to attain a level of independence and maturity by which they could lead a life of a normal child.

Ashraya, by policy, provides employment only to physically handicapped female graduates and post-graduates as teachers, and thus creates role models for its own students to become self-sustained.

The curriculum is a medley of formal and vocational training, with special emphasis on physical fitness (aerobics and physiotherapy) and behavior modification programs.

Asha CNJ disbursed $7000 to Ashraya in August 2005, followed by $4500 in January 2006.

The funds are being used to build a classroom cum retiring room, 3 bathrooms and 4 toilets for the twenty four inmates of Ashraya. The last inspection was done in August 2005.

Events: Quiztime!
By Chandrasekharan Raman

Asha Quiz is a regular event to publicize Asha among the school kids and youth in the university. The Third Annual Asha Quiz was conducted on Saturday, October 15, 2005 at the Fiber Optics Auditorium, Busch Campus, Rutgers University. There were two categories: one for young adults (6th grade to 12th grade) and the other for adults. Both the contests were conducted by the quiz master Mr. Abraham Thomas.

The adults’ quiz was well-attended with about 70 participants. Finalists were selected after an elimination round. (For sample Q&As, see http://coffeeshack.blogspot.com/). The finals had an exciting range of audio-visual questions. After a tough contest, a team of students from the business school at Columbia and Harvard (Ravikant Avva, C. S. Vijay and Ryan Michigan) won the first prize. Refreshments were served and Asha merchandise sold as part of the fundraising program. There was a brief presentation on Asha for Education and some sample projects of Asha CNJ chapter during the break.

The Fourth Annual Asha Quiz 2006 is scheduled to be held on April 1, 2006. "The young adults section will have more exciting parts and will be a fun-filled event", says quiz master Abraham Thomas. The registration fees are $5 for the young adults’ category and $10 for the adults category. More details can be obtained from http://www.ashanet.org/centralnj/events/quiz/

Asha CNJ’s ‘Surbahaar’

Coming up next on our events calender, is the musical night ‘Surbahaar’. Scheduled for 15th April 2006, 6:00pm, at the Livingston College Hall, Livingston Campus, Rutgers University, the event features the karaoke band Hidden Gems.

Hidden Gems was incepted in 2005, when a group of talented individuals came together to showcase their musical caliber to raise funds to assist the victims of the Tsunami that hit South Asia in December 2004. Since then, the group has grown and currently does shows for both public and private showing and donates the proceeds to charity. With their Tsunami and Katrina fund-raisers, they were able to raise funds in excess of $10,000 to help the respective causes. The mainstay of their performances centers around old and new Bollywood music; but they have done some specialised events featuring devotional songs as well.

The upcoming event definitely promises to be a very enjoyable and fun-filled evening with a lot of singing and dancing in store for us. Snacks will be served. To buy your tickets, please visit us at http://www.ashanet.org/centralnj/surbahaar

For more information on Hidden Gems see www.hidden-gems.com/hidden-gems
If you are reading this article, you probably have some idea about Asha Central NJ. Maybe you have heard the mission statement – ‘to catalyze socio-economic change in India through education of underprivileged children’. Maybe you know that Asha CNJ funds educational projects in India. Today I will give a broad functional overview of Asha CNJ, citing example of one of its successful projects - Mathru, a school for blind children in Yelahanka, Karnataka. (See page 2 for a report) http://www.ashanet.org/projects/project-view.php?p=490

A. Project Selection

It all started in 2004, when Asha CNJ received the proposal for funding this project. After couple of rounds of scrutiny and discussions where the members rank projects based on education component, sustainability, level of financial transparency, perceived impact on society etc, it was decided to fund the project. Initial funding of $17,000 was allotted for construction of a 10-room school building.

B. Project Monitoring

For every project that Asha CNJ funds, a volunteer within the chapter is chosen as the project steward, who maintains regular contact with the project person(s) back in India and updates the chapter about the progress. For Mathru it was Rana Nanjappa, a veteran Asha volunteer. When other chapter members went to India for vacations they also visited Mathru and thus a fairly regular interaction was facilitated.

C. Fundraising Events and Promotion

In its fundraising events Asha CNJ promoted Mathru. Events like the ‘Harbingers of Hope’ Marathon campaign, when over twenty runners ran the Philadelphia Marathon after being trained for five months by Asha CNJ. Every runner pledged and successfully raised funds from their friends and co-workers, funds which went into supporting various projects of Asha CNJ including Mathru. The donations were vital but more importantly Mathru received a lot of publicity. Since then Mathru has received a lot of local support and individual donors who donate to Mathru directly and not through Asha.

D. Involving the whole of Asha Family

Asha has several innovative ways to fundraise at the ‘Asha wide’ (as opposed to individual chapter) level. For example, the program called Work an Hour encourages people to donate an hour’s worth of their salary to fund Asha projects. http://www.workanhour.com/ Intense publicity and outreach goes behind this program which typically raises around $100,000 annually. Mathru was selected to be one of Asha CNJ’s projects for Work an Hour (WAH) 2005.

E. Beyond Money – Towards new Technology

The ultimate aim of Asha is to address the fundamental problems facing basic educational ventures in India and work together for long-term solutions. For Mathru, Asha CNJ achieved an important milestone in this regard. One of the volunteers, currently in Carnegie Mellon, got some researchers of this university involved in Mathru and they designed an improved and low cost braille calculator for the children. http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~nidhi/brailletutor.html

The project has started and hopefully would be a grand success.

F. In Conclusion

This article was a very broad overview about Asha CNJ’s objectives and activities. Much has remained unsaid. We welcome you to join Asha CNJ and learn how you can contribute towards building a more literate and socio-economically empowered India of tomorrow.

Dear Reader,

By now, you must have got a fair idea of Asha CNJ. We are an active young chapter. We here believe that, with willpower, effort and commitment, no goal is too distant! In our continued walk towards social justice and equity, we would like to have you on our side.

How often do we wish we could change the world? Here’s welcoming you to take a small step. Please spread the word around.

You could help in various ways. By becoming a volunteer, a donor, a sponsor for one or more of our projects, participating in our ‘Work an Hour’ or ‘Penny Drive’ programs, participating in our fundraiser events like ‘Asha Quiz’ or upcoming concerts (Asha ‘Surbahar’), or running a fundraiser Marathon with our team, for the year 2006. We need you.

Please get in touch with us (centralnj@ashanet.org). We welcome your comments, ideas and benevolence. We would like to take this opportunity to extend our heartfelt gratitude to continuing donors and supporters of our cause. Thank you!

Newsletter Team, Asha CNJ.

Donate to Asha for Education (CNJ Chapter)


For an online donation, please visit our secure website: https://www.ashanet.org/centralnj/donate-form-cnj.php

All contributions are tax-deductible to the full extent permitted by law under Section 501(c)3 of the IRS code. Asha’s Federal Employee Identification Number is 77-0459884.