

Keep Kids Out of Trouble

By RAKEEB HOSSAIN

“Hey, how are you doing?” was the question, from out of a crowd, in a strange land. I had just reached Washington, D.C., and was emerging from Immigration, looking for my luggage. This was my first visit to the United States and there was little chance that someone could know me here.

Surprised, I turned toward the voice. A middle-aged man, with a smile on his face, was standing in front of me. I was at my wits’ end to figure how this man could know me. He turned out to be a member of the airport staff and helped me find the baggage section.

Little did I realize then that this was just a way of life in America, an example of how ordinary people try to solve their own little problems, collectively, with smiles on their faces.

This is the most important thing I learned during my one-month visit to the United States as part of the State Department’s Youth Leadership Program. I came to realize that America as we know it from glossy magazines, television channels and Hollywood movies doesn’t really exist. America has its own share of little problems. They range from school dropouts to underdeveloped neighborhoods, from drug addiction to religious differences, from lack of involvement by youths in political happenings in the country to students having nothing to do after they come home from school and often choosing the wrong

way of life. But amid all these problems, the zeal to go on and strive for a better tomorrow comes out vehemently through some exemplary work of certain individuals and groups—what I call the American way of life—showing care and concern for every individual.

A visit to Harlem and the Bronx, among the poorest sections of New York City, takes you to an altogether different world—so close to the world’s financial capital, yet so far from the fruits of Wall Street. In the Bronx, I came to know how even a small group of people can make a big difference to the place where they live. And I met a group of joyful youths who are changing the Bronx River from a dirty and shallow canal to a healthy part of the neighborhood. They showed us how a change in the local environment can actually lift the spirit of the entire neighborhood, so much so that a patch of bad road could be repaired by the residents themselves with their hard-earned money.

It was not a very big job, nor would it have made too much of a difference for the local administration in terms of revenue expenditure. But it would certainly make a difference in the lives of those handfuls of people who live there.

I also saw the work being carried out by the Police Athletic League, the largest nonprofit independent youth organization in New York, changing the lives of 70,000 boys and girls in the city





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Students at Pacific High School in Pacific, Missouri, near St. Louis, sing for their international visitors. Arts programs give students alternatives for their time outside of the classroom.

every year through 20 full-time youth centers with free recreational, educational, cultural and social programs. The whole idea behind the setting up of the organization 90 years ago was to keep the kids out of trouble on the streets by channeling their energies into recreational and athletic programs, explained Bobby Dunn, associate executive director of the Police Athletic League's Harlem Center.

Such organizations not only offer empowerment to the kids, but are solving a burning problem of America. For, unlike India and other developing countries, American school students have little to do once school hours are over. In many American families, both father and mother work. In others, there may be only one parent in the picture, who must work two jobs to make ends meet. In other cases, the parents may be on drugs, ill or otherwise incapable of providing care and monitoring for their children.

These institutions give students a place to go after school, rather than to an empty or dangerous home, where they can engage in constructive activities such as studies, games, painting or music. And I believe, with rapid urbanization, nuclear families and working parents, it's time Indian teenagers get this kind of after-school care, sooner rather than later.

A little compassion, a little personalized effort, not waiting for the help to come from somewhere else but coming forward with it—that's what is making things work in U.S. society. And some simple words, as simple as, "How are you doing?" from a common man to a stranger, speaks for the society itself—a society that truly cares, even for strangers. □

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Celebrating the U.S.-India Connection

Text by DEEPANJALI KAKATI Photographs by HEMANT BHATNAGAR

At first glance they look like a group of regular young men—trousers dangling from their hips, loose T-shirts and a passion for music. But once they step on stage with their gravity-defying moves they get audiences dancing along to their hip hop tunes.

American crew HaviKoro, comprising Rick Camargo, DJ "Comp One" Jose Hernandez, Joel Martinez, Amando "Lil

John" Ramirez and Kirk Beecher, was in India in June with its distinctive brand of Texas hip hop. With their don't-try-it-at-home display of leaps, twists, seemingly impossible headstands and 360 degree pirouettes the band of boys wowed the crowd of around 1,500 at the Centrestage Mall in



Left: Hip-hoppers Rick Camargo and Joel Martinez learn an Indian dance step at the Centrestage Mall in Noida, Uttar Pradesh. Right: SPAN Editor-in-Chief Corina Sanders with HaviKoro.

Noida, Uttar Pradesh, and got them rocking to their funky beats. "It is too good and it should thrive in India and they can see it is good for youngsters," says Tina Rai, 24, who works with the Northern India Trading Company.

HaviKoro also held a workshop with the Danceworx Performing Arts Company for students of contemporary dance at the Bluebells School in New Delhi. HaviKoro's India programs were co-sponsored by SPAN magazine, Centrestage Mall and 93.5 Red FM.

HaviKoro is a group of young men who channeled their energy into dance rather than neighborhood gangs and drugs. They made a positive choice in life and have taken this message to young people throughout the



HaviKoro's Joel Martinez wows the crowd with his trademark "helicopter" spin during the performance at the Centrestage Mall in Noida, Uttar Pradesh, sponsored by SPAN, the mall and 93.5 Red FM. (Left) Jose Hernandez does DJ duty.

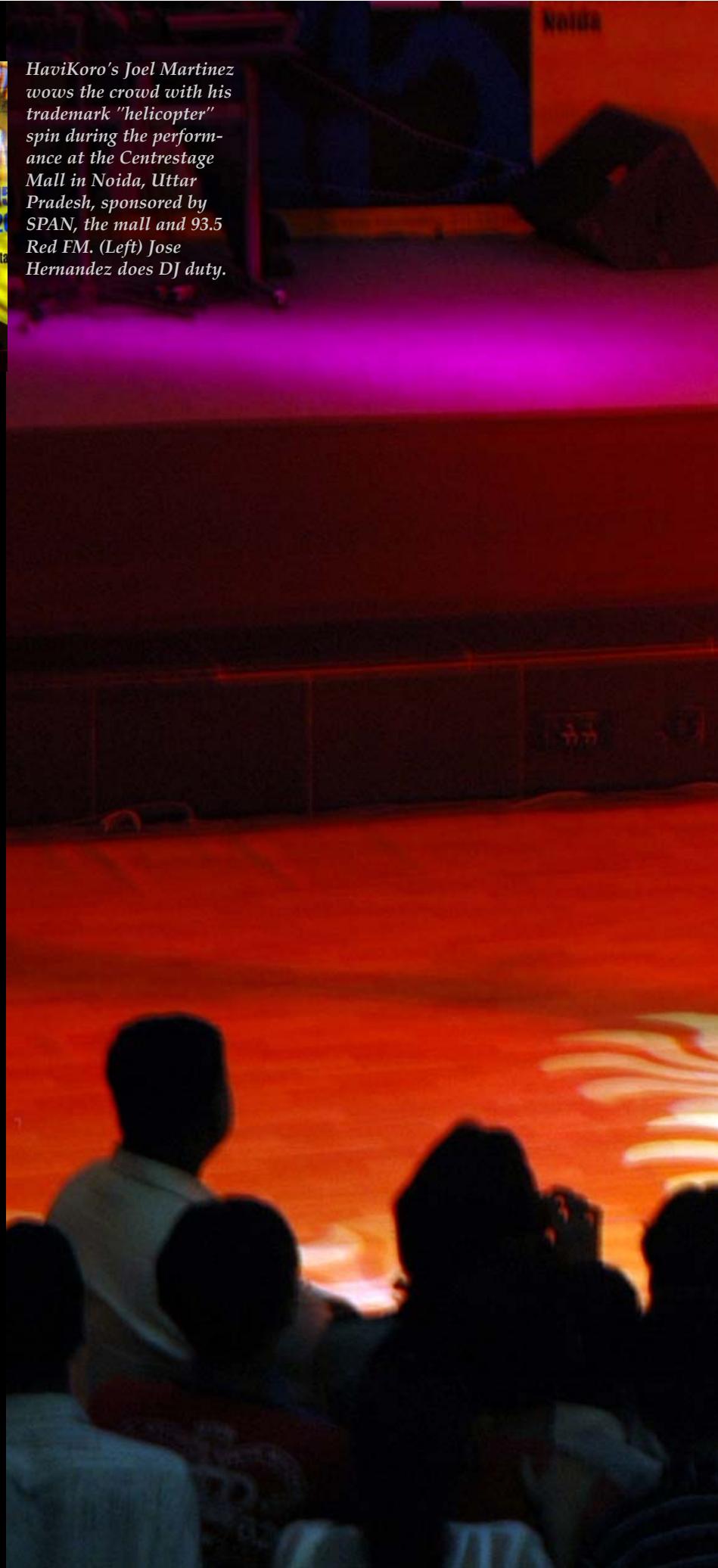
world through their pulsating dance routines. "They are spreading an excellent message to the youth. HaviKoro performed very well and we also got a chance to see the hidden talent of the Indian people who performed pretty well for their first time on stage," says 21-year-old Emaduddin, an architecture student at the Institute of Engineers in New Delhi. Several young people were invited to perform on stage at the mall. "It was a dream come true for me, getting an opportunity to dance with these really rocking hip hoppers," says Surbhi Dawar, 18, a student at Delhi Public School. In turn, HaviKoro got a crash course in *bhangra* from members of the audience.

HaviKoro's journey started about 10 years ago when Blas Pereyra started KORO (Knights of the Rhythm Odyssey), a house/freestyle dance crew. Members came and went but its versatility ensured that it remained one of the most respected crews in Texas. In the late 1990s another group called Havik BBoys emerged as its top competitor at almost every jam in the state. Even though Havik and KORO were friends, battles became heated at times.

In 2000, KORO won the Out of Fame contest in Dallas and got a chance to fly to Chicago for the semi-finals. When one of their members dropped out because of school a Havik member ended up going with them. It was at that time that HaviKoro was born. For the past five years, the members of HaviKoro have been hip hop instructors with the Houston Independent School District, the largest public school system in Texas.

The cultural movement hip hop was started in the early 1970s by African American communities in the Bronx, Queens and Brooklyn neighborhoods of New York City. Comprising four main elements—MCing (rapping), DJing, graffiti and break dancing—hip hop began when DJs started separating the percussion break from funk and disco songs. It became part of the mainstream in the 1980s and by the '90s had spread to other countries. □

With reporting by Shalini Verma and Qasim Raza.





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