

Making a Difference

By GIRIRAJ AGARWAL

An Indian American teenager, **Anjali Bhatia**, shows students they don't need to wait until they grow up to change their world for the better.

Can a teenager really do something to change the world? Yes, if she is highly motivated, not bogged down by stereotypes and can convince her peers to channel their energies for a just cause. And Anjali Bhatia, 19, is showing how it can be done.

She is the founder of Discover Worlds, a student-run nonprofit which encourages young people to raise awareness and take action on global issues such as poverty. Bhatia, who grew up in Kinnelon, New Jersey, started the organization three years ago and since then has established 57 chapters across the United States.

With bases in North Carolina and New Jersey, these chapters focus on inspiring students to take the lead in bringing about change in their communities. "The chapter leaders get initial training from the experienced team members and then work independently on any issue of their choice. These chapters are helping in spreading awareness about issues like HIV/AIDS, eradication of poverty, human trafficking," says Bhatia.

Currently in India, Bhatia is setting up chapters of Discover Worlds in Kolkata. She is visiting high schools and making presentations about the difference students can make.

"I am also contacting various NGOs in Kolkata and finding out what volunteer positions they need and then encouraging high school students to get involved with local hospitals...and more," she says.

In the future, she hopes to set up chapters in New Delhi, Mumbai, Pune and Surat. Bhatia believes that young Indians have the "potential to be the strongest advocates and leaders in ending poverty. I am simply trying to encourage and motivate them."

In February, Bhatia's efforts were recognized by the Iowa-based U.S. Center for Citizen Diplomacy, which gave her its first National Award for Citizen Diplomacy. She was the youngest of the six awardees.

Bhatia is a student of neuro-economics at Duke University in North Carolina. Neuro-economics applies brain science and psychology to concepts like game theory and altruism to better understand human behavior in the marketplace.

As part of the university's Robertson Scholars Program, Bhatia is working with the Bengal Rural Welfare Service during



Photographs courtesy Anjali Bhatia

Anjali Bhatia with students of Delhi Public School in Pune, Maharashtra, in 2004.

her India trip to "strengthen their programs of microlending to women in the villages by working on implementing various programs that will better train the leaders of their self-help groups."

This September, Bhatia will be studying in Bangalore through the International Honors Program: Cities in the 21st Century. "I will be studying rapidly developing cities and looking at the political, environmental and other effects," she says.

Her father, Moti Bhatia, from Surat, Gujarat, immigrated to the United States in 1982. Her mother, Radha, joined him in 1985. During her childhood visits to her grandparents in Surat and Agra, Bhatia remembers seeing children of her own age

begging on the streets and poor patients waiting for long hours in overcrowded clinics. At that time she resolved to do something to help the underprivileged. Bhatia organized a fundraiser in her school when she was just 9 and also collected clothes and computer games to bring to India.

Bhatia accepts that she is not unique in her desire to help others but says that she might be better informed than many of her peers. "Oftentimes, students are characterized as being apathetic," she told Voice of America in an interview in March. "But in actuality, students just don't know much

For more information:

Discover Worlds

<http://www.discoverworlds.org/>

U.S. Center for Citizen Diplomacy

<http://www.uscenterforcitizendiplomacy.org/>

International Honors Program

<http://www.ihp.edu/programs/c21c/>

Bengal Rural Welfare Service

<http://www.brws.org/home.html>



Left: Anjali Bhatia (left) receiving the National Award for Citizen Diplomacy from Harriet Mayor Fulbright, board member of the U.S. Center for Citizen Diplomacy and president of the J. William & Harriet Fulbright Center.

Below left: Bhatia learns basket-weaving during a 2007 trip to Rwanda.



about these issues and they don't have a way to get involved."

Last summer, Bhatia went to Rwanda to help children orphaned by the 1994 genocide or by HIV/AIDS. "Our programs in Rwanda are working to end poverty through relationships...instead of just donations." Through its University Scholarship Program, Discover Worlds helps selected Rwandan students find U.S. sponsors who will fund their education in Rwanda and thus help them rise out of poverty. The group's Sponsor an Orphan program helps find people or organizations who will provide money for children's education and health care.

A sister school program emphasizes cultural exchange and

building friendships between American and Rwandan students through letters. Students in the United States can raise funds for their sister school and have Discover Worlds buy resources such as desks, chalk, pens. One pen is often shared by two or three students in some Rwandan schools.

Bhatia feels that it is becoming more common for Indian students to get involved in community service. "Since this is so widespread in the U.S., I want to be able to show students in India that they can truly change the problems they see all around them using their...intelligence," she says.

The Discover Worlds executive board serves as an umbrella for all the chapters and coordinates and monitors their efforts. "Any student can start a chapter if they have an interest in making a difference. All they need to do is contact someone in Discover Worlds to start the process," she says.

How does Discover Worlds remain viable? "As we are all students, we do not have any specific worker who gets a specific salary, unlike the vast majority of NGOs. However, we have been operating on donations from those who believe in our mission," she says.

Bhatia says her biggest strength has been her parents' belief that children can be leaders. "Most people believe that children must wait to be adults to make a huge change in the world. I never grew up with this concept."

Her advice to Indians of her age: "Go beyond the daily life of academics and the occasional community service. Create the solution instead of waiting until you are adults."



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