

As someone who has seen the ease with which many affluent Indian-Americans write out checks ranging from \$500 to \$10,000 simply to pose for yet another photograph with the President or Senator — or for that matter a Congressional or gubernatorial candidate — to adorn their living room walls, the annual Upakar Foundation's annual fundraising banquet August 24 was almost a catharsis.

I have nothing against political fundraisers. I am cognizant that money talks, is the fuel that drives political campaigns and buys that all-important access. But having missed out on several Upakar events, I was intent on not missing this one, which also signaled its sixth birthday. Months ago I promised its founder Sreedhar Potarazu that I would be there.

Around 7 pm on Sunday, after excusing myself from dinner at Dr Suresh Gupta's home in Potomac, Maryland, where Bobby Jindal had finished his remarks at a fundraiser to help swell his gubernatorial campaign coffers, I found myself exceeding the posted speed limits on River Road and then on the Beltway to make it on time to the Bombay Tandoor in Vienna, Virginia, for the presentation of the 2003 Upakar scholars.

Listening to their testimony was an intensely moving experience that left many of the nearly 100 Upakar supporters and donors teary-eyed.

In a culture where the Indian-American community is regarded as a rich, model minority community of elite professionals and successful businessmen and women, it is not easy to admit that a mere \$2,000 a year scholarship can go as far as these scholars said it would for their working class families.

Their families constitute a growing segment of the community, most of them working 24/7 to make ends meet and put their children through school and college. As some scholars pointed out, a \$2,000 Upakar scholarship does go a long way.

A donor sitting next to me told me the heart-wrenching story of one scholar whose family had fallen on hard times. But she (the scholar) had implored that her story not be made public and went to school while staying in a shelter. She then got admission to a university in California where the \$2,000 scholarship was truly invaluable.

Upakar — which means to do a good deed to another — was launched in 1997, after Sreedhar visited an Indian grocery store and discovered how hard these extended working class families work just to make life a little better for their children. On returning home he invited about 15 people to a meeting at Shekar Narasimhan's office to discuss the concept of starting an organization focused 'on the sole purpose of giving scholarships to deserving Indian-Americans who have a financial need and academic merit.'

Sreedhar and Shekar, the unsung heroes and protagonists behind Upakar — a 100 percent volunteer-run organization — had hectic lives of their own, but along with other Upakar pioneers they believed such a labor of love was

imperative. Through the support of the community they assist not-so-fortunate Indian-American children with financial assistance to pursue educational, artistic or athletic goals at a post-secondary institution, as well as recognize and promote excellence.

Shekar spoke of how "we started by focusing exclusively on need-based scholarships to further higher education. Education for us is almost a basic right but we worried whether given our culture, people would be afraid to admit they have a need and divulge their financial situation."

"So we enlisted The College Board [*who administer SAT, among other things*] to mail directly to high school counselors in states that intuitively had a relatively high proportion of Indo-American kids. The counselors and kids, we reasoned, would not have such inhibitions."

Aziz
Haniffa



INSIDE THE
BELTWAY

True labor of love

Upakar is the first organization dedicated to giving scholarships to deserving Indian-American students

Sreedhar, born and raised in the Washington, DC area, attended George Washington University's medical school and did his residency in ophthalmology at GW and fellowships at the Bascom Palmer Eye Institute in Miami. He subsequently served on the faculty at Johns Hopkins University Hospital. In 2000, after completing an MBA at Hopkins, he launched VitalSpring Technologies which provides a solution to Fortune 500 companies to help them better manage healthcare costs.

Shekar, an alumnus of IIT, Delhi, till recently was managing director of Prudential Mortgage Capital Company — one of the nation's leading providers of commercial mortgage financing. He is now getting ready to launch a start-up even as he takes over Upakar's helm from Sreedhar after being by the latter's side for six years.

"We have grown from infancy to adolescence because of your support and because of the support and a constituency which always remains with us and continues to grow. And it is our hope that over the next few years we reach maturity, which means we grow our constituency," an emotional Sreedhar said at the banquet.

"I am not leaving Upakar, and my support will always be there for Upakar for eternity." He spoke of how overcome with emotion he is "every time when we call the scholar's parents or we see the letters that continue to pour in."

Letters like those from Yasmin Bholat of the University of California, Los Angeles, a former Upakar scholar who said, 'It is organizations like Upakar that gives hope to a better and brighter future... It gives people a chance to advance, to become better, and fulfill their dreams. Upakar gives this chance to the youth of today... You've touched my life with your gift... The gift that you honored me with is a gift that I shall always cherish because you have helped me on my path to higher education. You've touched my life with your gift and in return I want to help you touch the lives of many other people. Anything that I can do to help would be an honor, so just ask.'

Or Presha Patel of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill: 'I am able to attend college without significant finan-

cial trouble due to your generosity and the Upakar donors generosity. My parents have worked hard to put me through college and it makes me feel happy that they had \$2,000 less to worry about this year. I feel indebted to the donors who make this organization and the dreams of the future of Indian-American students like me possible. I cannot thank you enough with words, but I hope you understand that your gift is amazing.'

Thanking Upakar, Nikhil Nagendran, a senior at the University of Maryland, who was selected in 2000 and received a grant through 2003, pledged at the banquet that as soon as he graduates and gets a job he would immediately lend his support to "such a growing and excellent organization that has encouraged students like me to do their best and help them grow professionally as well as educationally."

Over the past six years, Upakar has received over 350 applications from across the country and has awarded 60 scholarships in 16 states for students to attend a variety of private and public colleges and universities. Scholarships of \$2,000 are extended for each qualifying year spent in a college or university and are dependent on meeting the GPA requirements established by the board.

Even though scholarships are awarded to students across the US, the majority of the fundraising and volunteering is done in the Washington, DC area.

Sreedhar told me the epiphany that ignited his desire to launch Upakar was when it became apparent that every ethnic group in the US has supported its younger generation to rise through the ranks — especially those gifted and talented youth held back by financial need — but the Indian-American community.

He said it was his dream to create a national program similar to the United Negro College Fund or the National Hispanics Scholar Program and "my vision is the National Indo-American Scholars Program."

Upakar has been successful in its first step of creating the first organization in the US dedicated wholly and exclusively to providing scholarships to deserving Indian-American students.

Sreedhar and Shekar said fundraising efforts are focused at the grassroots level in encouraging individuals to commit \$100 each year.

But Upakar has been fortunate to have the support of other donors who have sponsored a scholarship every year for \$2,000.

They said Upakar has also been fortunate to partner with The College Board that has helped it build awareness of the program at the high school and college level and have also offered to help administer a national program whenever one is established.

Toward that goal, and to help provide a substantial base for future scholarships, Upakar has created an endowment fund with a target of \$1 million, with the interest generated from the trust to help fund and expand the number of scholarships in coming years.

A generous donation by Sanju Bansal, Executive Vice President and COO of MicroStrategy, has helped seed the trust, but Sreedhar and Shekar say more is needed to reach the target.

It is conceivable that in the past couple of years, many more Upakars may have sprung up around the country. More power to such clones and here's to many more and to behind-the-scenes unsung heroes like Sreedhar, Shekar and the rest of those volunteers in such organizations who give real meaning and life to the phrase, 'a labor of love.'

**Those who wish to help
can visit www.upakar.org
or e-mail**

upakarfoundation@hotmail.com

*National Affairs Editor
Aziz Haniffa's column appears
fortnightly on these pages*