



COUNTLESS COMMUNITIES: One Spirit

We all wish we had started young(er). Done something. Made a difference. We keep wondering, how? But then there are people who started a long time ago. It could be a few days, a week, month or years. The important thing being: some people do not let circumstances or doubt stop them from reaching out to those who need their help. Recently, at **Pramerica Spirit of Community Awards**, we met different youngsters with a zest to bring a change in our society. The issues they worked on were as varied from one another. But there was a common thread binding them all: the community.

Pramerica Spirit of Community Awards (SOCA) is an annual search to recognize and award the school students who have made a positive difference in their communities through their work. Introduced in India in 2010, this programme is an extension of the 'Prudential Spirit of Community Awards', the largest youth recognition programme in the United States, conducted by Prudential Financial, Inc. (PFI), a U.S. based financial services company, for the last 22 years. The national recognition events for Spirit winners from all participating countries are held in Washington, D.C.

We all are a part of some community, but we mostly get so wound up in our day to day affairs, we forget all about the people who might need our help more than ourselves. We collected some of the stories of the young people working hard on their projects.





Adhya Menda, Mally Aditi International School, Bengaluru

My journey towards WeRise began at a very early age with Lakshmi, who takes care of our house, and continues to be an integral part of my life. As a child, I would often listen to her stories about her family spending their days in a makeshift shelter, without even the most basic security and protection from the elements. Her narratives helped me understand the deplorable conditions that they had to endure, even

though they owned land in the village, only because they lacked the financial capability to build a home.

Unfortunately Lakshmi's story is far from unique, with many parts of the country suffering from housing shortages that affect most of the marginalized sections of society. After looking at the problem from all possible perspectives, the answer was clear – sustainable social housing. This is where WeRise came in, my social enterprise that was initiated in 2016.

The aim of WeRise is to impact large number of rural homeless with sustainable housing program. We

have adopted two villages in Chikballapur district and we wish to scale this model up to other districts of Karnataka state and also across the States to create positive social change.

I am an avid photographer. As a class 10 student, living in Bengaluru, I have had opportunities to develop my passion for photography. These photographs capture a crucial stage in the creation of iconic urban structures that is often overlooked, showcasing moments in the lives of Bangalore's blue-collar workers

In July 2017, through a 14, fund-raising event in Bengaluru, I was successful in raising ₹ 22.29 lakhs through sale of "Photo Stories". The amount raised will support the building of ~18 homes in the remote villages of Chikballapur district, Karnataka.

Aadhya Bharati, Loreto House, Kolkata

I go to Loreto House in Kolkata, and on the top floor we have the roof school, which is a school for underprivileged, where they also sleep at night. I was sitting in class one day, and there was a girl who waved to me, and she refused to go till I waved back. And when I waved back at her, she smiled and ran away. That got me thinking, if one wave can give her so much joy, what can time give her.

'Lehar for Change' started with me teaching art to 14 children. Over the next two months, I had 42 children. It started with art, but now we teach dance, drama, creative writing, basically any form of creativity to encourage them. I realized more than giving them an item, it is the love that draws them towards us. Lehar grew slowly, we have 10 NGOs under Lehar now. 8 of them are schools, 2 are welfare centres which have ladies. We are working with children as well as ladies. We are spreading joy and happiness through art. In

October last year, I organised an exhibition where we put up their work, paintings as well as hand-craft products that they made, like envelopes, paper bags, diyas (it was Diwali time). We sold all of that and managed to collect about 5 lacs. So if a painting from one child was sold, the money went straight to their bank accounts. We did all of this through an NGO. What happens is that NGOs support the child's education only to a certain extent, after that they are on their own. From a sheltered life in the NGO, and class 12 education they have nowhere to go. So the money from the sales of products from their hobbies is used to continue their education. We have put education and art together. And now along with this, what we have started to do is to paint the walls at NGO schools and hospitals

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— Aryan Mishra

to brighten up their environment.

I will be out of school soon, but I have a team of 15 volunteers and they are from different batches, and the movement can be passed down as such. I do plan on going to the US, and I plan to take the movement there with me, but I cannot sustain it from there. So I already have somebody who is going to look after it next and take it forward.

Since I did something with my passion, art, I managed to succeed at it. If it is something I am not passionate about, I wouldn't know how will that go. Like in schools, there are certain subjects that students



like, and some they don't. It is the teacher who teaches a subject in a particular way, and bridges the gap. So if you are passionate about something, you give it your love, you can succeed in it.

Aryan Mishra, Chinmaya Vidyalaya, New Delhi

I was always fascinated by what lies beyond our solar system. When I was in the 6th class I discovered the astronomy club in my school.

In the beginning I found it very boring, but the day I saw Saturn in the sky through a telescope, that mo-

ment changed my life. I started looking at the night sky everyday. Since the field is not popular in India, it was difficult to gain the support of my parents. For one and half years, I would walk to school or tuition rather than take the bus, or cut down on my canteen expenses, so that I could save Rs 5000 to be able to buy a telescope of my own. My parents were angry because they felt the field is very vague. My father went to school till the 9th grade, my mother never went to school. My father is a newspaper seller, for him taking a leap in a subject which he hasn't even heard of was a pretty big deal. So, I started

taking my telescope to nearby places to show people celestial bodies through it.

In 2014, I discovered an asteroid with my friend Keerti Vardhan. I didn't tell my parents because I thought my father would get really angry. But someone called my father and told him that your son is on the front page of Dainik Jagran. For one week my face was on the front page of all the newspapers, from Times of India to Hindustan Times. When a newspaper seller's son is in the newspaper it's a very big deal for him. My father's boss, the Editor-in-Chief of Hindustan Times met my father personally. After that, my life changed a lot and my parents started believing in my dreams. They told me that they would help in whatever capacity they can.

When I started sharing my story with a few people, I realised so many people have potential, they just don't have the right platform. I started going to schools and colleges and started giving talks. After covering around 200 colleges/schools around India, I started taking Skype sessions from around the world.

I met Sunita Williams 2 years back, I was also invited to meet Rakesh Sharma. I did not get any additional support from the school or the government or the authorities. But when I reached out to Dr. Jitendra Singh, Minister of State for the Prime Minister Office, he sent



me to ISRO for a week. I met the Chairman, and had the opportunity to witness a rocket launch.

One of the things lacking in India is fascination. If we open the website



for NASA, for every age they have something interesting. Our social medias become active only when a launch is coming up. So my focus is to push people towards their passions and potentials.

I come from humble backgrounds, where at one point my father couldn't afford a day's meal to my mother having to sell her jewellery so that I could go to a private school. We used to live in a slum, the private schools would never admit a child from there. My father had to request his boss to be able to use his address for my admission. Such conditions should not hold back a person. Before I discovered an asteroid, people used to consider me mad, for I slept only 4 hours a day, and kept looking at the sky in the night. That was a tough time for a child, but I was very committed to my passion. It is my dream to not only become an astronaut and take our country's flag in the space, but also to inspire people to dream more and more.

Astronomy is a science which is fascinating and inspiring, we have looked to the sky through history to guide us through vast oceans, and we are made of stardust! The date today is 28th March 2018, but the night of 28th March would be after 18000 years. The light of a star takes thousand years to reach us, but when it does, the star might already be dead.



OUT of 16 individual silver medalists, chosen from all over the country, two won the gold medal: Banupriya S and Ishita Mangla. One from the South of our country, the other from the North. One who lives in a village so interior, the very school facility was started just a few years ago, and the other living in the very heart of the nation. One with very limited means at her disposal, and the other with the latest technology at her use if the need be. But one thing transcends all the differences, the passion, resilience and willingness to achieve their goals. In their humble approach to their tasks, they stood out with the strength of their work. This is their story.

**Ishita Mangla, Delhi
Public School, RK Puram**

An estimated 1.2 crore children suffer from Amblyopia, globally. Amblyopia is a vision development disorder that obstructs the eye from achieving normal visual acuity, despite prescription eyeglasses. I was inspired to develop the fully automated software after a personal experience made me realise the lack of accessibility of healthcare in India. After intensive background research, I visited an ophthalmologist who informed me about the barriers to testing for visual acuity in children. After studying the situation, I built a software that does not need a hands-on medical expert, computer science expert, special hardware, or an internet connection to be functional. My community service initiative, Sunain, aims to diagnose and treat visual impairment in preverbal children at an early stage to minimise long-term damage. I wanted to use it as a community outreach effort so I visited slums to identify underprivileged children suffering from amblyopia. So far, we have diagnosed more than 300 children in and around Delhi, and have also launched a fundraising campaign which has raised more than 2 lakhs to sponsor their treatment. I have been using multiple platforms to create awareness about this cause.

The ophthalmologist-patient ratio in our country is abysmal at just one ophthalmologist to every 10,000 patients, and only 25% of medical pro-



professionals in our country work in rural areas. I am working on an automated solution to the lack of ophthalmologists in rural areas. By building a software that can diagnose infants and toddlers with visual problems without a medical professional required to perform the test, could be a forward-thinking solution to India's healthcare problems. With this software, I won the Grand Gold Medal in the Indian National Science and Engineering Fair and will be representing India at the International Science and Engineering Fair next month. In April, I

will be leading a panel at the Women's Economic Forum alongside esteemed speakers like Nobel Laureate Ouided Bouchamaoui. I maybe only 17 years old, but I am dedicated in creating technologies to uplift the least privileged in our country.

**Banupriya S, P.U.M.S
(SSA) Kalachery West,
Tiruvarur, Tamil Nadu**

I am **Banupriya**. I am thirteen years old. I live in a hamlet in an interior village in Thiruvavur district, Tamil Nadu.



I started menstruating just 8 months ago. There are some rituals and ceremonies in our village when a girl reaches puberty. My parents and relatives also arranged for the same functions. After a month, when I got my period, I was treated very badly by them. My parents and grandparents didn't allow me to enter the house. Because it is believed in our village that if a girl is menstruating she is impure. My parents also treated me as such. For five days, I wasn't even allowed to touch others. I simply sat in a corner of the outside veranda and they covered me with a broom and plunger. I was so afraid to sleep alone at night. My parents gave me food in separate plates and vessels. While I am menstruating, I already have pain in my body, and to add to it this mental pain. I was disturbed and pained through those days. After a few days, I met my friends and asked them how they are treated in their homes when they get their period.

They were also treated like me in their houses. I decided to stop this irrational behaviour in our village.

Every woman should be treated like a goddess in their homes. I enacted parts as religious goddesses and read specific lines about women from Bhagavath Geetha, Bible and Quran to create awareness for the



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people of our village. Then I met a doctor who was working in the Primary Health Centre, Rayapuram and asked her to take an awareness program in our village.

She also took counselling session for the girls of our school. I conducted street plays in every street of my village with the help of my friends to create awareness. I also conducted an awareness rally with the girls from my school. I met the President of Lotus Women Organisation and asked her to conduct awareness programs in our village. They also gave our school an incinerator.

All those awareness programs made the people finally change their beliefs and superstitions. Now nobody treats me as they did before. Now they care and help us well during our days of menstruation. ■