



T een riumph!

What started off as a feel-good pastime for a bunch of 18 year olds later became a movement named 'Shanessa'. A movement that brought about a positive change in the society, a movement that made a difference

SheShe began helping the unfortunate with no vested agenda! For Pooja Ganeriwala, a resident of Santa Cruz (W), life was all about spreading love and happiness to everyone around her.

Pooja harboured the passion to help the unfortunate since she was 18. A 1st year BMS student from Jaihind College, Pooja took time off to visit orphanages, organize drives to collect clothes, utensils etc to distribute amongst the poor. She even interacted with children selling books or flowers at signals. But this wasn't enough to make her feel that she was creating a major impact. She saw a lot of her friends individually volunteering at separate instances to help the needy. It was in this way that she met Richa Gupta, Prachi Dhanuka, Sheetal Vora and Juhu Maheshwari who later joined hands and gave birth to 'Shanessa' in December 2005. At the time when the spirit of Christmas was in the air, this group of students got together to collect some money, food, gifts and more importantly the much valued time of several students and organise a small party for the children of 'Asha Kiran Trust', an NGO that runs several street classes in Andheri. "Not only did our Santa manage to bring smiles, we had enough people contributing hundreds of food boxes and gifts," said Pooja.

"The name Shanessa is Irish in origin and literally means 'God is Gracious', says Pooja. She continued, "The idea was to bring together a large population of youngsters together, to join forces and help create a change movement and do their clichéd bit towards empowering the lesser privileged." Pooja and her team's primary mode of attracting members for Shanessa was the Internet. "We created eye-catching e-mails that were sent out to all our contacts which in turn were forwarded to their contacts. Thus, we managed to reach out to enough people and have a new member added to our group every 2-3 months," said Pooja with a smile.

This informal group formed by a group of five girls has now become a full-blown voluntary organisation of 200 student members from all over Mumbai. Shanessa meetings are held 2-3 times a month that comprises of active youngsters between 16 and 25 mainly coming from areas near Santa Cruz and Juhu. "There was no specified number of hours for members. Students volunteered as and when they got the time. On an average I'd say we put in 6-7 hours a week," said Pooja.

Members of Shanessa mainly aim at empowering underprivileged children. "At Shanessa, it is our firm belief that every child has the right to education. Given an account of India's poor child literacy rate, we only hope to help bridge this gap," says Pooja. To this effect, members

commenced Project 'Shiksha' by inviting 25 children between the age of 6 and 16 from the slums of Milan Subway in Santa Cruz (W). With no fees charged and study material provided by the group, children learnt the basics of reading and writing. Young student members conducted several street classes at a park opposite Santa Cruz Police Station. Besides this, they also conducted several educational visits and workshops for these children.

Having mentioned that, Pooja and members of Shanessa did not believe in all work and no play. According to them, education was not limited to merely learning from books. Moreover, they found a bundle of talent growing amongst children attending classes, which made them feel the need to start a series of extracurricular activities and workshops. These workshops taught them a variety of things like Bangle-making, Card-making, Martial Arts and meditation.

Members of Shanessa not only helped their own children but also extended a helping hand to other NGOs supporting various causes. This was evident when Shanessa invited children from Asha Kiran Trust to join them as they attended the popular TV show - Sa Re Ga Ma Pa Little Champs on Zee TV last year. Shanessa also held a fund-raising exhibition for Advitya, an NGO working for the mentally challenged adults in Santa Cruz. The exhibition showcased hand-made products by these adults.

In due course of time, the group also garnered support from a lot of known faces of tinsel town like Mandira Bedi, Shreyas Talpade, Delnaz Paul, Rajeshwari Sachdeva and Varun Badola. "We have been fortunate to attract a lot of celebrity and media support for most of our projects. A celebrity or media getting associated with a student body generates further interest in students and that is how a lot of our members/volunteers initially came in," added Pooja.

Activities of Shanessa may have been on a halt for the last couple of months but the members have not stopped working. Not only do they plan on getting their body registered by mid 2009, they also plan to secure a formal education for children who study with them. "We're planning to get back on track from the hiatus, associating with other non profit entities, initiating several new projects to generate interest from the student community the way we did when we began!" promises Pooja.



Children from the slums of Milan Subway, Santa Cruz who attend street classes conducted by 'Shanessa'.



A young member of Shanessa reads to the children.

SHANESSA
Contact: Pooja Ganeriwala - 09819944059
Email: ganeriwala.pooja@gmail.com;
pooja_shanessa@yahoo.co.in

DISHA GADHIYA
disha.gadhiya@gmail.com