Teen's efforts help the poor of rural India to see

NCSU student to get international award

By Ruth Sheehan
Staff Writer

Next time your parental chest swells at Junior's occasional stints in the soup kitchen, his 5K walk for cancer, his bold donation of Christmas money to charity, imagine how the parents of Sindhu Ravishankar of Cary must feel.

A year ago, Ravishankar, a 19-year-old N.C. State University sophomore, raised the money and organized two day-long "eye camps" in rural villages in India, providing 945 eye screenings, 130 same-day prescription eyeglasses and 257 cataract surgeries. All free, for the poorest of the poor, who queued up in long lines.

"These are people who make perhaps 50 cents or $1 per day for an entire family," said Sashi Kumar, translating for Shivaprasad, who goes by a single name and represents the Lions Club International in India. "The eye camps were the difference between these people having spectacles or not, between them having surgery or not. What is astonishing is that it was such a young woman who made all of this happen."

Today, Ravishankar will be one of three teenagers honored with a Global Action Award from the Mercy Corps, an international humanitarian group. One of the judges who helped pick Ravishankar's work from among 3,000 nominations was Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel.

A synopsis of her efforts: She raised $1,700 for the camps by giving recitals, playing both the Indian and "western" flute; she asked for donations to the eye camps in lieu of graduation gifts. She led the collection of hundreds of used eyeglass frames — enough to fill a suitcase. And she persuaded doctors and nurses from hospitals in bigger cities in India to donate their time and ser-

SEE INDIA, PAGE 10A

Sindhu Ravishankar raised money and persuaded caregivers to donate time. Staff photo by Jason Arturs.
vices.

In the days before each camp, she and an army of volunteers, many of them relatives from her parents' hometown in India, not only hung signs and banners advertising the free services, they went door to door to spread the word among the largely illiterate villagers.

"We also had speakers on the rickshaws announcing that the eye camps were coming," Ravishankar said.

When the registration tables opened at 8 a.m., lines snaked down the street. Ravishankar, dressed in traditional Indian garb for the events, provided food and drink to all of the attendees. The people who needed cataract surgery were whisked straight from the camps to a hospital five hours away.

"To have paid for that kind of surgery would be 10,000 rupees or $200, which would be unthinkable for these people," said Kumar. "Especially for the elderly. They have no income. Most of them do not see a doctor even when they are very sick."

**Remembering her roots**

Ravishankar was born in India, but moved to the United States with her parents at 8 months. She and her sister, Seema, a 16-year-old student at Raleigh's Enloe High School, are typical American teens in many ways.

But their parents were determined to maintain an appreciation for Indian culture. Their father, Ravi Ravishankar, made certain his daughters learned the native language flawlessly. On annual trips back to India's Karnataka state, where he and his wife grew up, he also stressed the family's responsibility to the homeland.

"We have a comfortable life here," said their mother, Savitha Ravishankar, gesturing to the vaulted ceilings and gleaming hardwood floors in the family's elegantly appointed home. "We wanted our daughters to understand what kind of situation people in other parts of the world experience."

Ravishankar's charity work began in grade school, when she and Seema raised money, then bought, wrapped and delivered birthday presents to children being helped by the Raleigh Rescue Mission.

"It was the perfect thing for that age," said Ravishankar. "We got to go to the mall every month and we got to play with a bunch of nice kids. It didn't seem like work. It was fun."

When Sindhu was in eighth grade, she and Seema used one of their trips to India to launch a "Flutey Tootie" program in the government schools serving poor children. They would play a mix of traditional songs on the Indian flute and recognizable American songs—think Disney—on the "western" flute to begin the students comparing and contrasting Indian and American culture.

But it was when an international director of Pratham, a charitable group focused on improving education and health care in India, came to Wake County that Ravishankar found herself in charge of an eye camp. She'd always planned to be a doctor. In a meeting of Indian emigres, Ravishankar mentioned a Lions Club video she'd seen of the need for better eye care in countries like India.

The Pratham director challenged her to do something about it.

Next week, Ravishankar and her parents will travel to New York City to collect her award and a $5,000 check.

Meanwhile, Ravishankar maintains an A average at N.C. State in her double majors of biological sciences and international studies. She minors in music performance.

Ravishankar is also a member of the Thomas Jefferson Scholars program, for students majoring in both the sciences and the humanities, and the Caldwell Fellows, for student leaders.

Ravishankar said she hopes to recruit other fellows for an expanded version of the eye camps next summer, providing dental and medical care as well.

Pay attention Junior. Put down the Wii and start saving the world.

ruth.sheehan@newsobserver.com
or 919-829-4628
Postpartum help is coming

UNC center expands services for women suffering depression after childbirth

BY SARAH LINDENFELD HALL
STAFF WRITER

Within hours of giving birth, Kerri Hall’s mood quickly turned from the elation of a new mom to the worry of a woman troubled by severe anxiety.

Hall was still in her room at Rex Hospital when the first pangs of nervousness and insomnia struck. Soon, she’d harbor obsessive thoughts she might hurt her newborn daughter. Within three months, Hall attempted suicide.

Hall suffered from one of the worst forms of postpartum depression, the condition that at least 10 percent to 15 percent of new moms experience, although experts say these estimates are likely too low.

Women suffer from a range of symptoms, though overwhelming anxiety and worry are hallmarks of the condition. Others include sadness, insomnia, fear of hurting their baby or themselves and the feeling of being completely overwhelmed.

Hall is getting better now. But her three-month journey searching for adequate treatment in the Triangle is, in part, why the UNC Center for Women’s Mood Disorders is expanding its services to women with postpartum depression.

On Wednesday, the mood disorders center will open a weekly outpatient clinic for women with postpartum depression at Rex. Rex is part of the UNC Health Care System.

And, on Nov. 3, a six-bed inpatient unit for women with the illness will open at UNC Hospitals in Chapel Hill. The rooms will come equipped with gliders for rocking babies and breast pumps for nursing mothers. There will be space for extended visits with their children, therapy for the patient and her family, and help from lactation consultants and doctors.

Hall played a role in this. She ignored the stigma felt by some women with postpartum depression, writing letters to hospital officials that detailed her...
POSTPARTUM
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 18

difficulties at Rex and UNC.
"I don't have the shame as much as other people do because I don't want anyone else to go through this," she said.

UNC's inpatient program will be modeled after similar programs in Britain. A couple of hospitals in the United States offer day programs for women with the illness. But UNC's unit, where women will stay overnight, likely is the only one of its kind in the United States.

Research has found that babies as young as six months respond to stress differently if their mother is depressed. That makes helping women and their families recover a public health imperative, said David R. Rubinow, chairman of UNC's Department of Psychiatry.

"In my mind, there can be no greater public health priority than properly treating mothers of newborn children," said Rubinow, who has studied women's mood disorders for the past 30 years. "Given the ubiquitous nature of this problem, it's really just an opportunity to give people what they deserve, which is expert care of a debilitating and extraordinarily injurious illness."

Fear of stigma

Records of women with postpartum depression go back centuries, but, even now, it's difficult for women to find adequate treatment. Women often suffer in silence. The stigma of mental illness keeps them from seeking help, said Samantha Meltzer-Brody, director of the Pernatal Psychiatry Program at the women's mood disorders center.

Also, the diagnosis and treatment of postpartum depression falls outside the traditional focus of doctors who treat newborns and their mothers, she said. That's changing. In 2004, Obstetricians and pediatricians have been more open to checking women for symptoms of the illness, but in Wake County there had been no place that offered specialized care to mothers diagnosed with postpartum depression.

"It's hard when women come to the group and there's not one good place [in Wake County] that just focuses on women with a perinatal mood disorder," said Anne Wimer, who suffered from postpartum depression after the birth of her two children and is a founder of Moms Supporting Moms, a decade-old support group at Rex.

Wimer is also executive director of Postpartum Education and Support, which works to educate the community about the illness.

In the Triangle, some women have found help at a handful of support groups such as Moms Supporting Moms and from private therapists. Women such as Hall, who had to be hospitalized, are typically mingled with general psychiatric patients. Hall spent time on an eating disorders wing and with drug and alcohol addiction at points during her hospital stays.

"You can save people an enormous amount of grief and suffering by getting it right the first time," Meltzer-Brody said. Women with mild symptoms can quickly recover, she said.

'The saving grace'

Hall is glad she helped spur change. She's since found help from Meltzer-Brody and is getting better with therapies and medication. "She's been incredibly effective," Meltzer-Brody said. "She has made a big difference in a really amazing way."

"My daughter is absolutely wonderful and has been her whole life," Hall said. "That's been the saving grace of all of this."

sarah.lindenfeld@newsobserver.com
or 919-829-8983
PCC bracing for rapid growth with less funds

BY BROCK LETCHWORTH
The Daily Reflector

Pitt Community College officials are bracing themselves for how to handle rapid growth with less than anticipated funds for the current year.

PCC President Dennis Massey told the Board of Trustees during its regular meeting Tuesday that the North Carolina State Budget Office has already required a 2 percent reversion of state funds from the college, and another 1 percent likely will be reverted by the end of the fall semester.

PCC received just more than $28 million in state funding this year, an increase of approximately 3.7 percent.

Massey said the reversions will make it hard for officials

PCC
Continued from A1

tain that those funds would be available this year. That money could be used to pay part-time employees next semester, he said.

The college already has delayed its hiring to offset the loss in revenue.

In other news from Tuesday’s meeting:

Massey told the board that construction on the college's Goss Student Center is ahead of schedule and within budget. The center, which cost just more than $6 million, should be finished by the end of November and open in January. It will house offices for registration and financial aid, along with the cashier's office, conference rooms and a dining area.

PCC Vice President Susan Nobles provided the board with an update on the efforts of the PCC Foundation Board. Nobles said the foundation's Futures First Capital Campaign has now secured $6.5 million in contributions, grants and pledges from individuals, organizations and businesses. The total is 81 percent of the committee's $8 million goal.

Jeff Robinson, director of PCC Basic Law Enforcement Training Academy, updated the board about his program. Robinson said the program since January has experienced some of the highest enrollment numbers in the state with more than 100 students entering the program. According to Robinson, 98 percent of students who complete the program are hired by law enforcement, fire or emergency management agencies within two months.

The academy is accepting registration for the spring semester; for more information, call 493-7572 or 493-7304.

Contact Brock Letchworth at letchworth@coxnc.com or (252) 329-9574.
September represented a subpar financial month for Pitt County Memorial Hospital, breaking a string of eight consecutive months exceeding the income objectives and closing the fiscal year on a down note.

Speaking at a joint meeting for the University Health Systems of Eastern Carolina and PCMH boards, Finance Committee Chairman Horace Tripp said the hospital earned $2.4 million through income from operations last month, about $900,000 less than projected but $500,000 more than the prior year.

The boards met Tuesday at the Rock Springs Center outside Greenville, following their annual education retreat.

Even with September’s lower than expected financial performance, Tripp said, the hospital’s income from operations for the year ended at $35.8 million, more than $5 million higher than the planned budget, and about $10 million higher than last year’s earnings.

As a private, nonprofit organization, PCMH will reinvest all of its extra income back into the hospital to fund capital-related items, such as buildings and equipment.

“2008 was a good year,” said PCMH President Steve Lawler. “We had a lot of good things happen across the board.”

During his president’s report, Lawler referred to five pillars to measure success — people, quality, service, finance and growth. He touched on the success of bringing in...
new talent that will help make PCMH a destination hospital.

“It positions us well for the future, next year and beyond,” he said. “2009 is going to be a year of exciting changes and exciting challenges for this hospital and its leadership team. I can assure you that we are up to the task.”

Looking forward, Lawler said, the hospital staff will focus on quality in patient safety as the number one priority. Also, he said, PCMH should continue to work on the relationships with its employees, the community and the region, so that UHS becomes the health system of the region.

The hospital may be able to build upon its financial success into the 2009 fiscal year, as it plans to open the new East Carolina Heart Institute in January and eventually add another 100 inpatient beds.

“We still have some challenges as we prepare to add the additional bed capacity in our hospital,” said David Hughes, PCMH chief financial officer. “The primary challenges will be finding the amount of staff and providing care to growing number of uninsured patients in these difficult economic times.”

**N.C. LOTTERY**

*Pick 3: 5-8-3 (day), 3-2-6*

*Cash 5: 16-4-29-15-33*
Two arrested, charged in Sunday robbery of ECU basketball player

The Daily Reflector

Greenville police arrested two men Tuesday suspected in the assault and robbery of an East Carolina University basketball player and a team recruit, a police spokesman said.

Greenville Police Department Cpl. Kip Gaskins said Kevin Rafael Monroe, 22, 1508-48 Charles Blvd., was arrested after he turned himself in to police just before 2 a.m. and Michael Roger Clemons, 17, of Greenville was arrested Tuesday afternoon, the result of a tip received through CrimeStoppers.

Both men were charged with robbery with a dangerous weapon and assault inflicting serious injury, Gaskins said.

ECU sophomore basketball player Brock Young and 19-year-old Ledrick Eackles, a basketball player at Hargrave Military Academy, told officers they were approached in a parking lot just after 2 a.m. Sunday by two men, one carrying a shotgun, the other a handgun, a police spokesman said Monday.

Young and Eackles first began to run away, then stopped for fear of being shot, Gaskins said.

The man carrying the handgun struck Young in the head while the other took his watch, phone and clothing items. Police identified Monroe as the man with the shotgun and the one who took Young's belongings, Gaskins said.

Monroe is being held at the Pitt County Detention Center on $75,000 secured bond. Bond for Clemons is unknown at this time.