

Strive for a good education and pursue your dreams

In the interview of the month with seventeen-year-old student, **Ashwin Sinha**, we explore this young go-getter's journey in bringing about change, especially in rural India, as well as his initiatives, the challenges and solutions, and the way forward.



1. Tell us something about yourself. How did you learn about Sehgal Foundation?

I am a twelfth grade student at Valley High School in West Des Moines, Iowa, USA. My parents are both educators, and I have an elder sister who lives in Washington DC who is pursuing a career in political science. I plan to attend Drake University in the fall of 2018 to pursue an Accounting/Finance major. Outside school, I am the associate director of Kumon Math and Reading Centers in West Des Moines and Johnston, where I have worked for several years. I also enjoy watching and participating in soccer, travel, working out, and spending time with friends and family. I found out about the Sehgal Foundation from my father who is a good friend of Jay Sehgal, a trustee of the foundation.

2. What inspired you to contribute to development in India?

As a third grader, I experienced firsthand the poverty-stricken schools in rural India that lacked basic amenities like water, proper toilets, desks, chairs, and other features that we take for granted in US schools. This left an indelible impression on me to want to help students who I thought should not be deprived of a good education due to poverty.

3. You have been a torchbearer for the Iowa Youth initiative, among other projects. Describe your experience working for people at the grassroots level and persuading others in the US to come forward and help too.

Persuading others to help has been challenging because youth in the US, in general, lack the information about the needs of schoolchildren in poor communities in India. I try to educate them by making them aware of ways in which they can help financially and by lending their support to help reach underprivileged school kids in India.

4. You started working for social causes at a very young age (in third grade) by raising money through your school, Jordan Creek Elementary. What was behind this calling to help?

When I returned home from that trip to India, aware that students in rural India lacked even basic facilities such as water and toilets, I felt a strong urge to do something. I talked with my homeroom teacher at Jordan Creek Elementary school, and she enthusiastically supported my plan to raise funds in my school.



5. Why did you choose to raise funds for Sehgal Foundation?

Sehgal Foundation is a nonprofit organization with offices in Des Moines and India, and my parents have known Jay Sehgal for quite some time. I was very happy to learn that Sehgal Foundation also matches donations, which doubles their value. Over the years, my respect for Sehgal Foundation has increased manifold as I learned more about how they have transformed the lives of Indians living in rural areas.

6. What has been your strategy for fundraising? Who have been your biggest supporters so far?

I have used several strategies for fundraising, which include making presentations to students, groups, and organizations; promoting my project on Facebook with a goal to collect \$3,000; and at the Kumon Math & Reading Center, where I work. At Kumon, I created the "Worksheets for Water" project, to which Kumon donates a certain amount of money when students complete their assignments. I have also knocked on doors in my neighborhood and asked for donations. My future strategy, when I join Drake University in the next few months, is to hopefully start a National Youth Chapter, targeting all university students to support the foundation work.

7. How much money have you raised? What challenges have you faced in the process, and how have you overcome these?

I have raised around \$1,750 within the past month since I started my project, and I am well on my way to reaching the \$3,000 mark by the end of May. Besides my own project, I was recently a guest speaker in Florida at an event hosted by Sehgal Foundation's Ft. Myers chapter. Many of the donors were impressed with the role of the youth in Sehgal Foundation

and how we are able to make a difference as students. We raised a substantial amount of money that night, and the generosity encouraged and empowered me to want to continue my endeavor.

Within the last year or so, at the conclusion of presentations I have made at fundraising events in Iowa and Florida for Sehgal Foundation, the reaction I have received overall is one of surprise, especially because so many young people are actively involved in supporting great initiatives at the foundation. This further motivates them to donate and actively participate with the foundation projects. Everyone is inspired to act, and this is the response I try to create with every presentation.

The only challenge I have faced is the lack of awareness in the US of conditions in certain rural Indian schools. Many people in the US do not realize how fortunate we all are, and assume that a good quality of life is somewhat comparable across the globe. Education is the key to overcoming this lack of awareness. The use of pictures and videos has been integral in this process.

8. How has the entire experience affected you personally?

As a student in the US, I consider myself extremely fortunate to be blessed with immense opportunities. I am thankful for my supportive family and friends who encourage me to give my best and make an impact. At the same time, due to my frequent travels to India and other less-developed countries, I am aware of the huge gaps and needs and what I can personally do to help bridge those gaps. I believe in Mahatma Gandhi's adage: "Be the change you wish to see in the world." I hope I can personally make a significant difference in the lives of others who are not as fortunate.

9. What will be your message for youth?

My message to the youth everywhere would be to strive for an excellent education; stay connected and engaged with other people from diverse backgrounds, and pursue your dreams.

(Interview compiled by Pooja O. Murada, director, Communications and Sarah Berry, communications and media consultant, S M Sehgal Foundation)