By Shivani Shendye

The U and I Fund: Ujjaini and Interact

My action plan addresses rural impoverishment in Ujjaini Village near Mumbai, India in a remote area of the Thane District. The villagers live without electricity, a stable water supply, and many other basic necessities. Although the children of the village receive a good education by local standards, they do not have a stimulating learning environment, and students spend the school day following the same daily curriculum. The women of the village are solely responsible for their families. Men often gamble away earnings or spend their wages on alcohol. The Rotary Club of Thane has adopted this village and has offered supplies such as medicine and utensils for cooking. While these necessities are of utmost importance, the children in the village need an outlet for their creativity.

I am working directly with the Rotary Club of Thane (Mumbai, India) to help the villagers by raising funds that will go towards toys and school supplies for the children. I have involved my school’s Interact Club in the project and have educated club members about the problems that exist in the village. Together we developed several fundraising initiatives. Money raised from these fundraisers will go directly towards helping the villagers. I have also presented the project to the Nashua, NH rotary club and offered Interact club services in return for donations.

I traveled to India during the summer of 2011 after my experience at Brown University. While I was in India, I met with the president of the Rotary Club of Thane and explained my action plan to him and other members of the club. He invited me to visit the village so I could better understand its needs. We traveled to Ujjaini, located about three hours from Thane. In Ujjaini, I visited two schools and distributed packages of food we had taken with us. I also met with a group of about 30 women who had assembled to talk to the rotary club about their immediate needs.
These needs included, among other things, clean water and toys for the children in day care. After departing from the village, we visited a local food distribution company that supplies school lunches to Ujjaini and other villages. I learned that $20 could feed one child one nutritious school lunch for an entire school year. I returned to school in September and presented what I had seen and experienced during the summer to the Interact club. I was pleased to find that everyone was on board to support and raise funds for the village. As a team, we have conducted various fundraisers including fall and spring yard cleanup, donations at church and temple gatherings, and donations from family and friends. I am proud to say that our Interact club team has raised over $800 dollars so far and we are continuing our efforts.

My school’s Interact club of 25 student members has been working with me to reach the goals of my action plan. They attend fundraisers and help organize events. Several Rotarians from my local Rotary club have also lent ideas and support. Mr. Bill Barry, a Rotarian from the city of Nashua, NH has offered to wire the money to the Rotary Club of Thane in India. Mr. Richard Manganello, past president of the Rotary Club of Nashua, has reached out to me as well with possible ideas for fundraising. I am also in contact with Mr. Rajiv Karnik, president of the Rotary Club of Thane, India.

These experiences have taught me a great deal about myself. I have built upon my leadership and communication skills by speaking in front of large groups. Undertaking a project like this involves a great deal of time and responsibility which has improved my work ethic. I have encountered numerous challenges along the way, and by working to overcome these challenges, I have a better understanding of how to effectively reach my goals. Through this process, I believe I have learned to empathize with others and be a more compassionate person. Most importantly, I learned that I have the ability to influence and inspire others to make changes in their own
communities. During my experience at Brown University this past summer I was unsure whether I would be able to successfully complete my action plan. Seeing my action plan turn into reality through my team’s efforts has taught me the value of perseverance.

This project has inspired several students to create their own action plans. One student approached me with her plan to reduce bullying in our district’s elementary schools. Another student followed my example and designed a book drive in which we collected over 500 books for the Boys and Girls Club of Nashua, NH. Not only has my action plan inspired others, it has also educated many about the dire situation in which many people continue to live.

My motivation has primarily come from my family and my visit to India last summer when I visited the Ujjaini village and saw the conditions first hand. By visiting the village I feel I have formed a personal connection with the people of the village. I have also continued to pursue my project because I have set goals for myself. For example, my goal for this school year is to raise $1,000 and I am confident that I will exceed my goal.

I attended the leadership symposium on social action this past November. I had the opportunity to hear from other students who had similar action plans and to exchange ideas. Listening to others’ stories motivated me to continue to pursue my action plan. Through the various workshops which I attended I learned about effective communication and public speaking techniques that proved to be very useful throughout the year.

This summer I plan to visit the village of Ujjaini to observe how our funds have benefitted the community.
The village of Ujjaini
In one of the schools
The President of the Rotary of Thane and me
A meeting held by the women of the village