

Leadership program gets a second chance

By ELA DUTT

Two events were held in New York and New Jersey, Dec. 4 and 5 respectively, to raise funds for the relaunch of an internship program in Washington that sends Indian American youth to Capitol Hill. Sponsored by Parikh Worldwide Media Inc., which publishes News India Times, Desi Talk, and The Indian American, the events brought some heavy hitters and some alumni of the old program, together to raise awareness about the need for such annual internships.

Young graduates selected after an intensive application and interview process, spend their summers in various Congressional offices and get exposed to lawmakers, policy-makers and politics in the mainstream. It is fashioned after the Washington Leadership Program (WLP) launched by former News India Times publisher Gopal Raju in 1995, which sent some 170 interns to the Hill, until his death in 2008.

Some alumni concerned about the demise of the annual congressional internship program have relaunched the project under the same name.

"When I met with the organizers, one thing they needed was community awareness and media exposure," Dr. Sudhir Parikh of Parikh Worldwide, said at the New Jersey meeting attended by nearly 40 community members as well as Ohio State Rep. Jay Goyal, a Democrat, New Jersey State Rep. Upendra Chivukula, and N.J. Schools Development Authority CEO Kris Kolluri. "We will use the 65,000 copies we circulate every week to push the cause of the WLP," Parikh asserted.

According to Harin Contractor, an alumni of the old program, who organized the two events along with other alumni, enough funds were raised for three internships in summer 2010. Those interested could apply starting next month, he said, by going to www.thewlp.com

"After our successful May 2008 fundraiser, our goal was to go back to the community and tell them our program was still alive and we still needed their support to revitalize it," Contractor told Desi Talk. "And we needed to tap the New York and New Jersey community. It was also Mr. Raju's hometown, so we thought we could reach people."

The New York City event which was held at the Honey Lounge in Chelsea, was attended by young professionals mostly under 35, Contractor said.

"It was great because they are not used to giving money to a leadership or political cause. So the fact that we could raise two scholarships is a big deal," he

contended. "In that sense I would call it a success." Money for one more scholarship was raised in New Jersey.

It was the "youth supporting the youth" at the NYC event and the first generation supporting the second generation at the New Jersey event, according to Contractor.

The NYC event was compered by John Albert, vice president of TASC, The After-School Corporation. Albert is also the former organizer of the Local Leadership Program that encouraged young South Asians to get involved with politics at a local level.

Community activist, Democratic fundraiser and WLP alumnus Reshma Saujani spoke about her experience as an intern in Washington, D.C., and how it opened many doors for her. She stressed the need to continue a program that feeds the pipeline of leadership.

Mayor Harry Anand of Laurel Hollow recounted his experience of getting involved in politics. "I connected neighbors in my community who lived across the street from each other," he said. It was this connection that built his reputation in the community and inspired him to run for mayor.

"The Washington leadership forum is a wonderful program that deserves the community's continued support," Councilman Ravi Bhalla of Hoboken said, "The Dec. 4 event was a great way to outreach and tell others about the wonderful opportunities the WLP has provided so many. I would encourage others to continue to support this program in the coming years."

The keynote speaker on both nights was Goyal, the 28-year-old majority whip of the Ohio State Legislature and a high achiever in the Indian political pantheon in this country.

"I had a lot of support from the South Asian community," he said as he spoke about his initial campaign in 2006. Goyal also keynoted the first D.C. fundraiser Contractor and other WLP alumni held in May. "I want to encourage you if you have already given a donation to give more and get others to support this endeavor," Goyal said.

At least 10 local alumni were among the audience at the two events, Contractor said. "Now, the younger generation of South Asian Americans are joining together to take action and foster a new set of leaders and activists in the political community," he said.

The alumni included some who had gone on to become doctors, lawyers, businesspersons, entrepreneurs and a professional comedian, he noted.

"The WLP fundraiser in NYC was a big step for the organization and the community. It demonstrated that young people



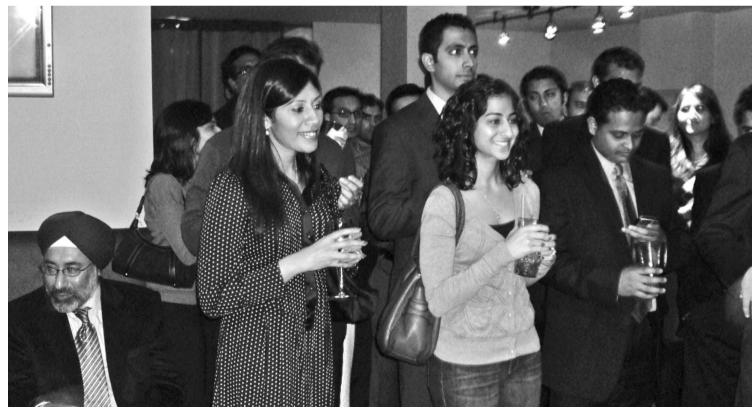
Above, from left, Dr. Sudhir Parikh, publisher of Desi Talk, Kris Kolluri, head of the New Jersey Schools Development Authority, Jay Goyal, Ohio State Representative, and Upendra Chivukula, New Jersey State Assemblyman, at a fundraiser for the Washington Leadership Program (WLP) sponsored by the Parikh Worldwide Media Inc., among others, at the Holiday Inn, Edison, N.J. Dec. 5.



Above, from left, Harin Contractor, Vice Chairman of WLP, members of Federation of Indian Associations (FIA) Nimish Dave, Ramesh Patel, Niraj Mehta, Ohio Representative Goyal and Harish Shah, also of the FIA at the Dec. 5 fundraiser in New Jersey for the Washington internship program.



Above, Mayor Harry Anand of Laurel Hollow, right with Jay Goyal, second from right, and attendees at the New York event of the Washington Leadership Program, Dec. 4. Below, attendees at the event.



outside of D.C. care about supporting the future leaders of our community," Contractor said. "We raised funds, awareness, and this will be bigger and better when we come back to the City in a year."

Parikh Worldwide Media was

joined by the Federation of Indian Associations, Mogul Caterers, Holiday Inn and Sign by Tomorrow to support the alumni efforts. A few dozen families and community leaders attended the event that was organized by WLP alumnus Sanchay Agarwal ('03), a

businessman.

Chivukula compared the internship program to a professional sports team's "farm system."

"As the Yankees have AA and AAA clubs to support a world-class professional team, so too is the WLP the farm system for our political future," he said at the New Jersey event.

Parikh, who recently joined the WLP as a media sponsor, said he wanted to partner with the alumni and give them the support they need.

Kolluri was introduced as the second Indian-American governor in the country, alluding to his one-day stint as governor of New Jersey (in the absence of Gov. Jon Corzine) in March 2007. Kolluri was a senior staffer in 1991 on the Hill. There were very few like him those days, he said, adding that today, you can see Indian faces every time you visit the Hill, and the WLP program had helped facilitate that change he said.

"There are hundreds of Jay Goyals out there and we need to support them," Kolluri said. "The quantity of the group does not matter, but it is the quantity we give to support the next generation (that matters)."

According to Agarwal, the meeting heralded the beginning of potential future partnerships of individuals who will sponsor students for the summer. He said he hoped to organize another event in the area soon and that youth in New Jersey would take advantage of the program.

Past participants have gone on to receive Fulbright and Rhodes scholarships, have gone on to graduate work at Harvard, Stanford, Michigan, and the London School of Economics.

Attendees at the events included Bhavini Doshi of Net-IP, Neha Dewan of SABANY, Jaita Shah, a graduate of the WLP program who started her own micro-finance company Frontier Markets in India, and Agarwal, and Rajen Desai, a graduate of Stanford Medical School.