

Teen's 'Planting Pencils' Zeroes In on Helping Underprivileged Kids

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Ishaan Patel, a 13-year-old Indian American boy from Southington, Conn., was inspired by a family member's story about kids struggling in India and Costa Rica, and decided to turn that inspiration into an organization to provide school supplies to those underprivileged kids.

Founding Planting Pencils, Ishaan, an eighth grader, also serves as the chief executive officer of the organization, which was incorporated Dec. 2 and is currently awaiting ruling on its 501c3 nonprofit application. Its mission is to spread awareness of the problem of providing basic supplies necessary to schools globally to aid in the advancement of education.

"Most have heard the saying, 'If you give a man a fish, you fed him for a day. But if you teach a man to fish, you feed him for a lifetime,'" a precocious Ishaan told **India-West**. "Yet only 2 percent of humanitarian aid is towards education. Evidence shows that 12 percent of people – or more than 170 million people – could be lifted out of poverty if all students in poor countries had basic reading skills," the youngster added.

Ishaan explained that his aunt traveled to Jaipur with some of her friends to teach basic English and math to kids in impoverished areas.



After hearing a story from his aunt about the disadvantages poor school children have, 13-year-old Ishaan Patel (left), seen here with his mother Dr. Alpa Patel, father Alkesh Patel and sister Aashiyana, started Planting Pencils to help provide basic school supplies to underprivileged kids globally. (Planting Pencils photo)

"The school was very rudimentary, with the kids sitting on the dirt floor and one blackboard on the wall," he said. "Sometimes the lessons were held outside because the space was too small for so many children."

Additionally, his aunt went

to Costa Rica to also teach kids there. Upon her return, she showed Ishaan pictures and told stories about the kids she taught.

He decided he wanted to make a difference.

"We collected school supplies such as pencils, notebooks, cray-

ons and books and sent them to the school," Ishaan told **India-West**. "When the children opened the package they were so excited by a simple pencil," he noted proudly.

"It really made me realize how privileged I am to have the education I have and all the advanced tools I get to use to advance my education," he added.

That feeling of joy overwhelmed Ishaan and "opened his eyes," he remembers, ultimately realizing he had a responsibility as a privileged student to help underprivileged kids – not down the road, but right now.

"I always thought I had to wait until I was older to do something about the problem," he said. "But with my mom's help and encouragement, I found that I can make a difference now."

Born to parents – Dr. Alpa Patel and Alkesh Patel – who immigrated from India, Ishaan used his parents' help to get Planting Pencils off the ground. While he continues schooling, or doing other activities he enjoys like golf, squash, lacrosse, or playing the drums and piano, his "super mom" handles most of the day-to-day operations.

"She juggles so many different things we can't keep up with her," he joked.

Planting Pencils is all hands-on deck to help the world become aware of why people should support education more than they

do. In addition to collecting basic school supplies and digital supplies to donate, Ishaan is speaking at schools, radio stations, TV news broadcasts and more to "inspire everyone to take a stand – students and adults alike."

This past Christmas, Ishaan truly was in the spirit of giving, creating a "Christmas Challenge" to his family members. He emailed them all, telling that he didn't need anything and that all he wanted was donations to Planting Pencils. The challenge succeeded, with Planting Pencils raising more than \$1,500.

Ishaan added that the organization, found at www.planting-pencils.org, is planning some fundraisers for this year.

The group is also collecting funds to support digital literacy in U.S. schools. Long term, Planting Pencils hopes to open a school in an area where students don't currently have access to school. But it's for more than just education, Ishaan added.

"Malnutrition, poor health and child labor also prevents students from attending school," the talented teen explained. "Through Planting Pencils, I hope to open a school that provides a healthy breakfast and lunch to students that attend our school. This will help maintain the health of these students and give the families incentive to send their children to school," he explained to **India-West**.

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