

SPECIAL REPORT

## Online donor drive continues

**After the success of 'Help Vinay,' organizers extend a Web-based effort to recruit more South Asians for the U.S. marrow registry.**

By Shazia Haq, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer  
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SAN FRANCISCO -- Priya Sachdeva drove to Fremont in Northern California recently to swab the inside of her cheek with a Q-tip to try to help someone she didn't know.

Sachdeva, a UC Irvine student of South Asian descent, responded to the call to help a stranger as part of what the National Marrow Donor Program has called a "supercharged" donor campaign: a massive online effort on behalf of Vinay Chakravarthy, a 28-year-old Fremont native suffering from leukemia.

Because of a dearth of donors, only 1 in 20,000 South Asian Americans like Chakravarthy are able to find bone marrow matches.

The "Help Vinay" campaign focused on improving those odds by using youth-oriented technology, including websites such as Facebook, MySpace, Friendster and YouTube.

"Want to check out Kiran's party on MySpace or get 'hizzle' at the bhangra club on Friday night?" one Facebook event asked. "Well, maybe you should donate some bone marrow first, because Vinay could be you."

In less than six months, the campaign achieved results: 24,000 South Asian Americans registered as new bone marrow donors, increasing the national pool by 20%. And among them, Chakravarthy found a match. In August, he underwent a bone marrow transplant in Boston, where he lives, and is currently showing signs of recovery.

"Vinay's campaign was the most supercharged, organized, energetic people we've worked with. They utilized all the people-marketing, public relations, and online guerrilla tactics possible," said Regan Hall Reinerth,

spokesman for the National Marrow Donor Program. Impressed with the campaign results, the registry is now creating a website to specifically recruit South Asian donors, Reinerth said.

Chakravarthy, a UC Berkeley graduate and orthopedics resident at Boston University, was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia in November 2006 after days of back pain. Chakravarthy and his wife, Rashmi, a medical student from Los Angeles, initially thought he had the flu. But when lab tests revealed dangerously low blood counts, doctors diagnosed leukemia and recommended a bone marrow transplant.

"We all were in definite shock for a day or two," Rashmi Chakravarthy said. "I mean, this is a very athletic, healthy guy who never complains or gets sick."

Beginning the process of finding a donor is simple: fill out a form and then wait for a match. Currently, 6,000 Americans are waiting for bone marrow matches -- not only for leukemia, but for more than 70 other ailments, including anemia, lymphoma and sickle-cell disease. Because marrow tissue types are genetically inherited, patients have a better chance of matching with someone of the same ethnicity or race.

South Asians make up less than 1% of the 6 million names listed in the National Bone Marrow Donor registry -- which means that matches for patients of that ethnic group are slimmer and the wait is longer. In 2006, about 92,000 South Asians were listed in the registry, compared with 480,000 African Americans, 580,000 Latinos and more than 3 million whites.

Chakravarthy's family ruled out returning to India for a prospective donor, saying the bone marrow donor system in this county was more effective.

"We asked ourselves, 'Why weren't more South Asians registered as donors?'" said Chakravarthy's brother, Bharath, a clinical instructor at the UC Irvine School of Medicine. "We felt we had . . . the opportunity to think beyond ourselves."

Vinay Lal, a professor of South Asian studies at UCLA, said that until recently, South Asian Americans might not have participated widely in broad philanthropic causes because the community's charitable traditions are usually more narrowly focused and tied to specific religious institutions.

South Asians have "only begun to have a larger sense of community," he said. To overcome such cultural tendencies, Chakravarthy's supporters decided to hop on the Internet.

On the "Help Vinay" website, video clips featuring legendary Indian actors as well as Chakravarthy's family tell of the merits of being a marrow donor. The site also provides information about how to launch donor drives, including how many tents and chairs would be needed to hold one on a college campus.

Chakravarthy posted progress updates on the website. "I developed sinusitis two days ago and it just doesn't want to quit," he wrote earlier this summer. "You wouldn't believe how much mucus a body can make."

In October, after coming home from the hospital, Vinay wrote to his supporters: "You don't realize [what] . . . sleeping in your own bed and home cooking can do for your soul."

Mike Wadhera, a UC Irvine senior, launched the "Help Vinay" site on Facebook with the help of friends. About 1,200 college students took up Chakravarthy's cause by placing the video clips on their Facebook profiles to educate their friends. Those students also sent 8,500 invitations to their classmates encouraging them to participate in the bone marrow drive.

In total, they viewed the video more than 25,000 times and visited [www.helpvinay.org](http://www.helpvinay.org), where they could sign up for local drives promoted on Facebook profiles. The number of donors began to climb and more than 400 drives took place on college campuses nationwide.

"We realized quickly that Vinay had become every Indian mother's son," Bharath Chakravarthy said.

Nehal Patel, a freshman at UC San Diego, first heard of the campaign through a video clip featuring the South Asian actor Kal Penn. "If someone gives you a compelling enough story, it motivates anyone, even if you don't know them," he said.

For Sachdeva of Northern California, the campaign succeeded beyond anyone's expectations. "The turnout was a monumental thing, it sort of reinforced how change is possible through the simple mode of social networking," she said.

The campaign's current goal is to increase the number of registered South Asian American donors to 50,000 this year. The National Bone Marrow Donor registry, Bharath Chakravarthy said, has become "an insurance policy for future patients" who won't have to endure the same wait as his brother.

Lal of UCLA predicted that the "Help Vinay" campaign would also motivate South Asian Americans to participate in social activism.

Chakravarthy's family couldn't agree more.

"Our parent's generation came to the country with nothing -- it was a fend-for-yourself survival mentality," Bharath Chakravarthy said. "There's a new paradigm . . . in the young generation here: the 30-year-olds, the 20-year-olds who feel a sense of belonging to a united cause. Vinay's campaign just happened to be the face and name."

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