GOPIO comes to Virginia in style

AZIZ HANIFFA

The Global Organization of People of Indian Origin's Virginia Chapter inaugurated its Virginia chapter in style last month — on a boat cruising the Potomac River in Washington, DC for over three-and-a-half hours with nearly 300 guests and a musical program with ghazal singer Munni Begum.

Dr Piyush C Agrawal, GOPIO national coordinator who traveled from Miami, Florida for the gala, conducted the swearing-in ceremony of GOPIO's first Virginia president, insurance professional Jay Singh Bhandari, and inaugurated the chapter as well. Agrawal, a longtime community activist and former national president, Association of Indians in America, who was the driving force behind organizing Diwali at the White House during the Bush administration, highlighted GOPIO's vision, mission, activities and expansion. He highlighted how GOPIO had taken the leadership and resolved the recent Indian passport surrender issue and emphasized the importance of community and Diaspora unity.

Bhandari outlined the plans for GOPIO-VA, and enumerated four projects the chapter has on tap for this year, out of which two projects had already kicked in. One was providing food for the homeless and the indigent. The first installment of this, food for 100 people, had already been provided to the Loudon County Inter-Faith Center.

Bhandari said the chapter, led by medical professionals like Dr Rajesh N Mehra, medical director of the Chantilly Family Practice Center, had held a free medical clinic to parents and students in the center and shelters in the area for those who either did not have medical insurance or could not afford it.

Bhandari said the third project, to provide financial assistance and scholarships to needy students, would start in September and toward the end of the year, GOPIO-VA would also honor people of India origin in the Washington metropolitan area who had excelled in the fields of education, business, industry and community service.

The chief guest at the inauguration event was Virginia Delegate Mark L Kean, who is of Asian origin and represents the 35th District in the Virginia House of Delegates, and serves on the House Finance and House Militia, Police and Public Safety Committee. Kean, who said he was always enthralled by Indian culture and its food, also reiterated the themes of unity and community support as integral to garner recognition and political empowerment "and to make it possible for your voice to be heard in the governance of the Commonwealth of Virginia."

Longtime community activist Dr Sambhu Banik and Dr Renuka Mishra, GOPIO Metro DC Chapter president, also spoke at the event.

Other office bearers elected were Dr Sunay Dhakar, vice president; Parag Matalia, second vice president; Manoj Gandhi, secretary; Chandan Jhunjhunwala, treasurer; Jitesh Singh, joint secretary; Nilima Mehra, cultural secretary; Dr Rajesh Mehra, medical chair; Manju Mehta, events coordinator; and Amar Sisodia, education chair. The members-at-large were Sanjay Mittal, Poonam Bansal, Suman Vardan, Rani Sisodia, and Sachin Rajgire.

Mumbai students take lessons on renewable energy from NY to India

P RAJENDRAN

Forty students from India came to the United States last month for a program as part of New York University’s India Leadership Exchange Program. The project involved NYU’s Stern School of Business and Mumbai’s H R College and St Xavier’s College.

The 11-day program, built around the theme of renewable energy strategies, consisted of a series of lectures by professors and industry stalwarts, corporate visits and the presentation of a final project, said Venkataramani Srivatsan, clinical associate professor of economics, Stern.

They were taken around NYU’s sustainability initiative to sensitize the group to the need for trash recycling and Verdant Power, a startup that is trying to generate electricity by using tidal power.

The participating students, many of whom were sponsored because of their excellence in academics and extracurricular activities, started preparations in mid-April, when Srivatsan went to India to introduce them to the course.

They wrote papers on the challenges and issues facing the renewable energy industry in India. The mandate, said Srivatsan, was to come up with a strategy proposal targeted at a particular decision-maker in the private sector, public sector, union minister, state minister and public-private partnerships.

For their final project in New York, the students worked on a micro-hydro project to supply water through small power plants in villages; providing solar-powered lighting in rural areas; combining solar power with biofuel to generate electricity; making jet fuel from ethanol; helping telecommunication firms cut fuel costs by supplementing their energy requirements with photovoltaic cells, among others.

“The consensus was something needs to be done to supplement our energy needs because India has a 12 percent gap between demand and supply,” said Sagar Pandit, a St Xavier’s student.

The winner was a proposal to use an incinerator to clean up Mumbai’s solid waste.

Pandit said students in India had learned to deal with a lot of theory. “What we’re not taught is how do we integrate our knowledge and make it [usable on] the global stage. This program educated us in that,” he added.

Ankit Shingola from H R College said the program used environmental responsibility well to promote leadership. He cited the case of another H R College student Jyotirmoy Chatterji, an alumnus of the program, who was inspired to set up Project Chirag to bring electricity to India’s villages.

“Professor Srivatsan could have probably taught us the same program in India,” said Pandit. “We’re here in New York to absorb all that they’ve said. If we’ve absorbed even 5 percent, the purpose of the program is achieved.”