

NEWSNOW PEOPLE

Big project, big man, big heart...

By Tj Hussain

When a Mauritian goes abroad to study at an alma mater of some of the presidents of the United States, it is truly a matter of pride for the family as well as the nation.

Yale University is where some of the greatest minds in the history of the planet developed their expertise in their professional lives. No less than 17 Nobel laureates, a long list of eminent scientists, academics and businessmen, professors and scholars and dozens of renowned heads-of-state proudly call it their defining academy.

This is where a small-town boy is fulfilling his dream today.

Vedant Seem is a Mauritian from Plaine des Roches (in the northeast) with a big heart for helping the underprivileged people of this country.

"Part of my ambition is to be able to serve my fellow countrymen better, without leaving out the women and children, especially the children," he says emphatically. He has served on the council in the North a few years ago before he decided that he needed more top-tier education to help him improve his abilities and better serve his cause.

This 22-year-old has a huge chest and looks like he's a page from the WWE book of superstars. However, he's neither a weightlifter nor a wrestler. He is active in American football though and I can only wonder how massive he would appear with all that protective gear on.

But his smiling face is a better reflection of the heart of gold (made of soft

metal) concealed in that large trunk.

His father works on a sugar estate and his mother at a local school. He has one younger brother who is presently working at a school.

"The one child who has really inspired me is my cousin. He had an artistic talent but didn't have the patience or academic brilliance of most people. While some people wrote him off, I always knew he was a goldmine in the wrong place at the wrong time.

"Today, he is a graphic designer and is one of the best at what he does. He's designed our website and his work speaks for itself." There's no doubt that the work is highly professional and does not reflect any shortcomings from the designing, photographic or creative angles.

Presently, Vedant is in Mauritius to jump-start a project called "Hope Global Initiative" which is his biggest passion and brainchild. His right-hand man, Kyle Hawari, who is a Texan, is with him, staying in Mauritius for a year conducting a needs-analysis for local students so as to innovate an education strategy that can co-exist with the existing academic session curriculum at local schools.

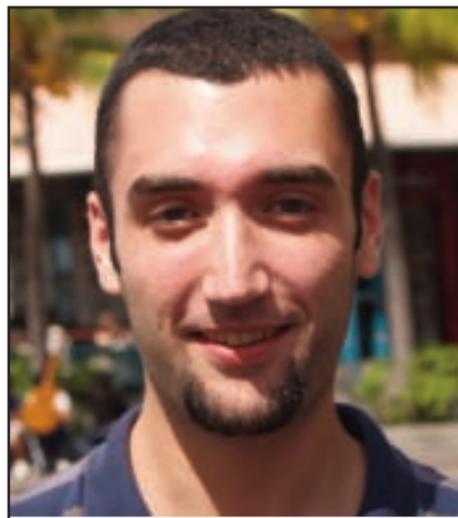
"As much as we would like to help these kids, we don't want to dictate anything to them," says Vedant.

"We want to learn about their aspirations and build a sustainable strategy of extra and co-curricular activities that will allow children to find alternative ambitions in addition to the traditional ones, which seem to be the only options conceivable in Mauritius on an everyday basis."

He talks about how the students at Ecole Fatima are brimming with talent but are sadly unable to finish their traditional schooling. Some of these children want to be chefs, artists, etc.

The group started by targeting only

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Mike and Kyle, enjoying the project.

orphans but have already expanded their interest to all children who are underprivileged. They intend to use their Mauritius experience to slingshot their efforts across Africa and work with and for children across the largest continent.

"We already have 15 members and it's inevitable that we will have more as time passes and our practical work becomes visible. We plan to send Yale students to Mauritius and other parts of Africa for two months every year to ensure that the seeds we sow today are groomed and sustained over many years and decades," Vedant promises.

"It's a tragedy that children who cannot attend regular schools and be like other 'normal' children are put through humiliation and called good-for-nothings. Every time I hear that from an adult, I feel the adult has given up.

"The blame is therefore on the adult for being unable to truly understand the innate qualities of the child and being incapable of dealing with above-average individuals," he says, adding that some of the people who have made the most impact on the world were drop-outs and hopeless students.

Yet, the group seems as spirited as ever on their mission to serve. The Americans sometimes find the red tape a little annoying but Vedant tells

them to cool down and get used to life on the island.

"That's the way things are around here. Sometimes you'll have things done in the blink of an eye. At other times, the smallest moves will take days and even weeks. It's nothing new and nothing that we can change."

The teamwork shows the significance and advantages of working with multi-cultural backgrounds where the strengths and weaknesses of one member serve the collective interest as long as there is harmony.

The third member of the group, Mike (Michael Haghkerdar), is from a little town in Vermont close to the Canadian border in North Eastern United States with a population of about 400. Although he is "white" you can tell there's more to it than meets the eye.

The shy, silent type reveals in time that his father is an Iranian who is also a dental surgeon. "It's extremely cold in Vermont with snow for many months every year. It's gloomy but can be beautiful when the sun shines. I still remember when I was younger and had to run out in my underwear to start the car. It usually took 30 minutes or more."

Mike is leaving Mauritius after a few weeks here since he's only getting a first-hand taste of the culture and the work being done here. He is their mainstay back in the U.S and will be doing what needs to be done there while Vedant and Kyle dig their heels



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into Mauritius.

He talks about some of the work he's been able to do since coming to Mauritius a few weeks ago: "We spent our first full day in an ANFEN (Adolescent Non-Formal Education Network) school the other day (Etoile de Mer, "Starfish"), and had a blast.

"We learned a lot, not only for our research, but about these kids, who are very talented and bright but who have unfortunately not had the opportunities they deserve. The children loved working with us. You should have seen their expression when Kyle got down on his knees to dig the earth and get his hands dirty!" he exclaims.

Since the group is working on limited funds that they wish to spend on their work, they have decided to crash at Vedant's place. Kyle says, "I want to thank Vedant and his family for accepting us and making us feel at home. His mother cooks for us and treats us as family. It's an indescribable feeling."

This is a perfect statement to describe Mauritian hospitality, which knows no limits once you are accepted into the traditional local home.

Vedant has a few years left at Yale after which he plans to return home and serve the community further. Hopefully HOPE Global Initiative will be more consolidated, mature and successful.

I've introduced them to the new rugby league starting in Mauritius shortly and that should have them back in extra-curricular action of their own soon. And for the single ladies reading this, let me inform you that these guys have been so devoted to their project that none of them has a girlfriend. Now that's a catch!