

# The Star-Ledger



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## When tragedy strikes, he gives immigrants a place to turn

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The purpose of the meeting at the campus-like Kessler Institute of Rehabilitation in West Orange was to display the benevolent utility of a new organization called "The New Americans."

**Jagdish Vasudev** of Princeton, who founded the "**New Americans**" program with the help of the **United Way of Central New Jersey**, is there. He's a banker who, at 60, decided to spend the rest of his work life helping others. Specifically, immigrants lacking the cushion of familiarity, family and friends to soften tragic events.

In this case, a young man named Tejas Parmar, who sits in a wheelchair at the picnic table on the patio at Kessler with Vasudev and others. He looks dazed, still, five months after a car wreck that cost him his ability to walk.

"I will get better, much better," says Parmar, 25, who certainly has improved. A few weeks ago, he could not breathe on his own nor leave his bed.

Next to him, her hands lightly touching his arms as he speaks, sits his mother,

Vasanti, who had never been outside India until the phone call from one of Tejas' friends explaining her son had been hurt in an accident.

Vasanti Parmar faced a 22-hour flight and so, she explains, her husband -- who took the call that evening in Mumbai, or Bombay -- decided it best not to tell her what he knew, what he had been told by Tejas' friend. That Tejas was a quadriplegic.

So she arrived in this strange country, with no relatives, no friends and no idea what she faced.

"I knew he was hurt," she says in English, although she prefers to speak Gujarati, which Vasudev translates. "I didn't know this."

Asked how she felt when she found out, Vasanti cries. Language immaterial.

"You can imagine the shock," says Vasudev.

He did much to ensure she had a place to stay and knew what resources were available to her and her son. She now lives with South Asians in Old Bridge who speak her language and who take her daily to West Orange.

Vasudev also used his skills and political contacts to solve a problem with insurance, one that left Tejas, already paralyzed and alone in a foreign land, in a medical limbo with no place to go.

After his hospital treatment, his doctors tried to find a rehab facility and selected Kessler. Kessler -- and other institutions -- didn't want Tejas because he only had 60 days of rehabilitation insurance and their officials believed he would need far more than that.

This put Kessler in the position of taking him in and having to keep him although he could not pay.

"There was not a lot of trust," says Vasudev, who took the case to state insurance officials and finally convinced Kessler he would be out by Sept. 13, 60 days after admission. He had to guarantee Tejas would be gone when his insurance was.

This is not discussed much at this meeting to which I have been invited to observe and herein describe the good works of Vasudev and the United Way of Central Jersey.

An effort not to embarrass Kessler which, after all, did take Tejas and is represented at the picnic table by Gail Solomon, Kessler's director of corporate communications. When the issue arises, she simply says, "Timing is everything," and that's where it is left.

So time is devoted to describing Tejas' aptitude for computers that led him to reject both his family's business and his mother's wishes for him to stay in India.

"I did not want him to come here," she says, and she is looking at her boy who no longer has sensation from his waist down and only limited use of his hands and arms -- looking, and crying.

Also discussed is Tejas' brilliant career at the University of Mumbai, his recruitment by American graduate schools, the scholarships offered to him, the promise of jobs, his admission to the University of Virginia, his success and graduation from there, his ability to find a position in New Jersey, and how hard he worked.

So hard that, on the night of March 24, he fell asleep driving his car home on Route 287 in South Plainfield. It flipped. He was crushed and paralyzed.

Tejas is optimistic. He believes he still has a career in the United States. He is not happy to return to India for rehabilitation but understands, under the circumstances, he must. After he speaks, his mother softly cries, but the sound of her sorrow is muffled by the scrape of the plastic legs of garden chairs against patio stones. Everyone is leaving.

Vasanti speaks in Gujarati to Vasudev. He asks for our attention and says Tejas' mother believes it is very important we all hear something she wants to say before we leave, likely never to see either of them again. This, says Vasudev, is what she says:

"I do not understand why this country wanted my son so much when his body was whole but now no longer wants him when his body is broken."

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