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When I began working with Project IMPACT, I did not know what to expect. I had never heard of them or anything about their work. I had been looking for summer internships and, giving way to chance, I typed "South Asian American" into a search engine to see what possibilities that would uncover. The first entry which came up was "Project IMPACT for South Asian Americans". After browsing information about their programs and members, I was impressed. The services and projects which they sponsored are focused on adapting to the changing needs of the South Asian American community. Project IMPACT is managed solely by volunteers and has no central office. The members are extremely dedicated individuals; all well-established in their careers, yet finding the time to contribute to their community. It was something that I too wanted to be a part of.

Project IMPACT is a non-profit, non-partisan organization of young professionals and community leaders dedicated to the Gandhian proposition that "*you must be the change you wish to see in the world*". Project IMPACT's mission is to increase the civic awareness, social responsibility and community leadership of South Asian-Americans. First created as the "Indian American Political Awareness Committee", the founders felt that the South Asian American population lacked political and civic engagement. While South Asian Americans are among one of the most successful immigrant groups, this fast-growing community had yet to truly realize meaningful local and national community leadership. Project IMPACT currently has five chapters in Boston, Dallas/Fort Worth, NY/NJ, Philadelphia and Washington, DC, which regularly sponsor events that seek to engage members through political and civic education, mentorship, community service and media awareness.

Project IMPACT aims to make members aware of three core beliefs of their mission. First, leadership can take many forms. Whether local or national involvement, leadership within all the communities to which we belong reflects positively on the South Asian American community as a whole. Secondly, dynamic, aware and motivated individuals can make a difference. Project IMPACT promotes the belief that by fostering the active exchange of ideas and information, we can facilitate the development of a new generation of leaders. Lastly, it is important for the South Asian American community to recognize that, as citizens and residents of America, we are able to contribute to the socio-political processes that affect our daily lives. By introducing South Asian-Americans to important information, innovative ideas, and exciting opportunities, Project IMPACT believes we can improve the civic, social and political engagement of South Asian-Americans.

Here are a few examples of the programs that Project IMPACT sponsors:
Political & Civic Engagement

- Voter Registration and Education Drives
- Film Screening and Panel Discussion: "Raising Our Voices: South Asian Americans Address Hate", co-hosted with NetSAP and SAALT
- Governor's Speaker Series
- Community Voices Speaker Series

Leadership & Service

- Annual Creating A Voice Awards Banquet
- Local Community Service Days
- National Gandhi Day of Service
- Emerging Leaders Speaker Series

Mentorship

- One-on-One Mentorship Program
- Internship Program
- Group Mentorship Program

Media Awareness

- Creation of the Media Resource Guide (*available online at www.project-impact.org*)
- Discussion forums: "Defying All Stereotypes?: The Cultural Portrayal of South Asian Americans in American Pop Culture" and "Rounding out the Picture: The Portrayal of South Asians in the Mainstream Media"

During the summer of 2003, I worked with Project IMPACT to produce their first summary report since the organization's creation in 1995. The task seemed daunting since I had never taken on such an assignment and had no experience with Project IMPACT's work. First, I worked with my mentor, Kalpana Bhandarkar, to formulate questions for the Executive and Advisory boards, as well as chapter leads and founders. The questionnaire asked the respondents to reflect on Project IMPACT's effect on the South Asian American community, what they saw as Project IMPACT's ultimate goal and how they envisioned the organization in five years. Next was the challenging mission of actually scheduling time to meet with the already over-committed members of Project IMPACT, as the survey was given either via email or phone. However, once I was able to discuss their experiences and commitment to Project IMPACT, I saw through their eyes what they believed about "civic awareness, social responsibility and community leadership". I learned of their personal contributions to this vision.

After I had gathered all this information on Project IMPACT's history, purpose and future, I had to distill it into a twelve page report. By the end of summer, I had produced a very rough draft of the report to my mentor. I spoke with Kalpana, who was prepared to complete the rest of the project on her own, as the term of my internship had come to an end. However, I felt that I too began to believe in Project IMPACT's work and decided to continue my project with Project IMPACT. Since the fall of 2003, I have collaborated with Kalpana to design, edit and lay out the report. Just recently, I happily sent the finished product to the printer. I am excited to see the report in its printed form and I am glad that I was able to see it through all stages of its development.

Additionally, I have worked to develop and execute Project IMPACT's college initiative. Currently, Project IMPACT is comprised of young professionals with connections to various local communities. However, Project IMPACT would like to foster stronger bonds between universities and local Project IMPACT chapters, as well as among South Asian American college groups. I worked with my mentor to design this initiative, which we named: "Project IMPACT's South Asian American Student Initiative" (PI-SAASI). The group is currently an online forum, of which I am the facilitator. I have used my experience as the former president of Bard's Asian American Student Organization to help enrich the group's purpose. We distribute information regarding scholarships, internships and political awareness/activism. PI-SAASI members also discuss best practices for student group leadership. We hope this group will expand and benefit more students as it grows.

The members of Project IMPACT truly live up to the Gandhian maxim: "you must be the change you wish to see in the world". By personally interviewing Project IMPACT members on their experiences, I was able to gain firsthand insight on what the organization meant to them and why they dedicated their time. I had countless conversations discussing, with these individuals, the future of the South Asian American community. Their visions were hopeful, perceptive and thoughtful. Each one truly believed that one person's contribution can make a difference and that people working together towards a goal can effect change. This sentiment is quite a contagious one!

Thank you very much to the Human Rights Project for recognizing Project IMPACT as an important social change agent in America and for allowing me to contribute to this powerful vision.