

Empowering the underprivileged

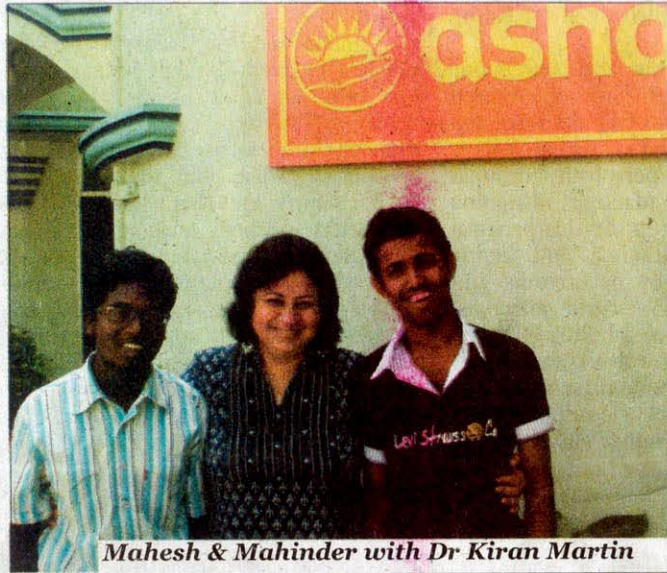
Two youths from the slums, helped by an NGO, have secured admission into prestigious engineering colleges

MAHESH Singh and Mahinder Singh had never given their futures a second thought as they were growing up in the slums near Ekta Vihar in Delhi. Like most underprivileged children they were expected to get employed as unskilled labourers and add to their family incomes. However, several years later with their passion for learning and help from the NGO, Asha, the duo have both been admitted to top Indian engineering schools and are on the path of a rosy future.

Mahesh, who lives in Dr Ambedkar Basti, gained admission to Delhi Technical University and Mahinder, who lives near Ekta Vihar, joined Galgotia's College of Engineering and Technology. With an admission rate of .1 per cent DTU is ranked as the 9th best engineering college in India and Galgotias, which has an admissions rate of .45 per cent ranks as the 42nd.

Dr Kiran Martin, founder of Asha, has been working to better the slums that Mahesh and Mahinder are from. She has known both students since they were eight years old. Asha works to improve slums and their dwellers, providing them with adequate healthcare, financial inclusion, education and empowerment.

Dr Martin realised that these boys were exceptionally bright when she saw their leadership qualities. "I thought that they were very intelligent and very sharp, and they did exceptionally well in their



Mahesh & Mahinder with Dr Kiran Martin

class ten exams," she said. "I was really excited when I saw their results because it's very rare for children who live in the slums to do well in sciences because they don't have tuitions or any of the resources other students have. So I moved them from their government school to a private school."

Dr Martin had them admitted to Ramjas School. Although the principal of the school, Rachna Pant was initially hesitant to allow Mahesh and Mahinder to be admitted, she was convinced once she saw that their performance was comparable to that of their peers.

After getting them admission, Dr Martin also gave and continues to give complete financial support to both students. The tuition for Ramjas, the fees for FITJEE, a special coaching institute for students who plan to take the engineering exam, books, school supplies, and even clothes were all provided for Mahesh and Mahinder by Dr Martin.

"Ma'am has completely supported us this whole time," said Mahesh. "She told us that we should never feel as though we are from the slums so she gave us all the facilities we needed, which is the reason why we were able to do so well at Ramjas and we're doing better than a lot of kids there."

But the road to college hasn't been easy for either of the boys. With the constant power shortages, poor drainage and sanitation systems, as well as small living quarters in the slums, just finding a place that is conducive to studying has been one of the many challenges.

"The subjects we were taking required us to focus very hard and study a lot, but it was hard because my brother and sister would make a noise, and when they would quieten down, I have neighbours who will never be quiet," said Mahesh. "I would have to wait till everyone went to sleep at night to study."

Though the duo are getting all their support from Dr Martin and Asha, their families are much less supportive of their decision to go to college rather than financially providing for their families.

"My family is completely uneducated, my mother doesn't even know that I am studying engineering," said Mahesh. Mahesh's mother is a widow who earns 50 rupees a day working in a flourmill.

He also lives with his brother and sister in a tiny home in Dr Ambedkar Basti. Mahinder lives near Ekta Vihar with his mother and father along with two younger sisters, and an older brother. With his mother as a domestic helper and his father a gardener, Mahinder's financial situation is not much better than Mahesh's.

"My father is not supportive about my education. He said that if I was planning on going to school I would study at a government school, or not go to school at all. My mother is a little more supportive and understanding," said Mahinder.

Now that both students have been admitted to top engineering schools, their families are beginning to understand the great feat they have achieved.

Mahesh and Mahinder are excited about their upcoming college years and their plans for the future. Both want to get an MBA after getting their bachelor's degree, and work to improve slums like Dr Martin.

They attribute all of their success to the support of Dr Martin, who has not only helped them financially but also provided them with counselling for the past two years to help them stay on the right track. "She's like a Godmother, our mothers never scolded us if we weren't getting good marks but ma'am always got mad if we didn't. We feel so good when she does because we know that there is someone who cares and picks us up when we fall. She makes us realise that we can do better," said Mahesh.

Mahesh and Mahinder serve as two of the many examples of slum children who are now on to pursuing a degree of education at colleges all around Delhi. "(Asha) sent 106 children to Delhi University in 2008,

and we sent 106 children last year and 167 children this year from slums who are studying in fantastic schools, so there's an Asha student at almost every Delhi University college which is fantastic," said Dr. Martin.

Mahesh and Mahinder as well as other slum kids who are going to college are an inspiration to other slum kids and their families who don't value education.

Both boys think that parents who live in slums should give their children a chance to go to school and college and see how much it makes a difference. Mahesh and Mahinder give these people an example of what its like to fight all the odds and achieve something so extraordinary.

If nothing else, these two inspire others to put aside their difficulties in order to follow their ambitions.

■ LEELA KHANNA

