Toybank: No child's play

Mamta Singh writes about the Andheri-based organisation that is run by members who find time from their full-time jobs to bring joy to kids who are less fortunate

All things big and small start with just an idea. Follow this up with lots of zest and willingness to give it your all and there is no looking back. That definitely seems to have been the mantra behind the success of Toybank.

Established in August 2004 this Andheri (E)-based organisation is fairly young as is the team that runs the show. Barely in their mid twenties all members have full-time jobs. Some are engineers, some advertising and marketing professionals. The one thing that brought them together was their desire to do something to bring joy to children who are less fortunate.

"Every child deserves to be happy," feels Shweta Gopalachari, the brain behind this venture. An electronics engineer, from D J Sanghvi College in Mumbai, this 24-year-old youngster, was always socially inclined. Even while in school she would take time out to be part of programmes that helped her help others.

After completing her engineering, instead of taking up a nine to five job, which would have been a lucrative option, she took a whole year off to introspect and find her true calling.

Now, with time on her hands, she started visiting NGOs and other institutes catering to underprivileged children. Being a music lover herself she would play the violin for the kids, distribute CDs and talk about different kinds of music from all around the world. She thought of volunteering to teach these kids but felt that they already had lots of subject teachers coming to them.

She wanted to do something different. In the course of her visits, she realised that the kids opened up to her more when she would play with them. They talked about themselves, their likes, dislikes and dreams.

The power of the medium of playing suddenly dawned upon her and the seed of Toybank got planted in her mind. Several colleagues and acquaintances liked the simple idea of collecting toys and distributing them to those kids who didn't have any.

They all joined hands, sent out emails to friends and families requesting everyone to give toys. Soon this e-mail chain became quite big. For something that happened without any planning it was quite encouraging to have distributed 1,000 toys in the first attempt itself. So far, Toybank has successfully carried out 20 distribution programmes, bringing a smile to kids all over the city.

What helped was that there was no negative response from anyone they approached. The Toybank team spared time to approach various educational institutes, churches, residential complexes and corporate firms. In schools they talk to the teachers and parents who in turn encourage students to contribute their toys.

This helps children to understand the need to be compassionate and be willing to share with others. Elsewhere too they talk to people, spread awareness, put up posters, distribute pamphlets inviting contributions and volunteers.

For collection, the Toybank has specific days when their vehicle goes around a particular area and brings back the goods. All expenses are borne by the members themselves. In fact, the storehouse in Dadar too is actually the flat of another member and one of the two working heads, Vikram Nerurkar. Weekends are kept for gift-wrapping sessions.

The Toybank team then heads out to various NGOs catering to children, municipal schools, government hospitals, orphanages and construction sites to distribute the toys.

They sometimes first go and visit the organisations and make sure that the toys reach those who need them most.

Shweta says, "The idea is not to give out toys just like that. The kids should know why they are getting the toys. Also that in return we want them to attend school regularly, study well and take care of their parents. We tell them to be neat and clean. So along with the toys they also get to learn basic values."

Toybank also comes up with innovative ways to ensure that their storehouse is never empty. This way there is no last minute rush to collect toys once they get a request. In this year's Mumbai Marathon, about 47 people ran for Toybank.

We all could do our bit by not only giving away toys but also encouraging kids to play. Through play they learn about concepts, relationships, colours, textures, feelings, emotions and lots more about the world they live in.

As Shweta puts it, "You don't have to wait till you are settled in life or have a big bank balance to contribute to society. People should get out and be part of something. Everyone talks about giving back to society one day. Why one day. Do it now. Do it right away."