

A REQUIEM TO AN INSPIRATIONAL LIFE

By Ravi Raghavan

First, dark clouds gathered in the sky and the heavens opened up in a downpour on this hot summer afternoon. It seemed as though the angels and celestial beings were shedding tears at the tragic death of someone so young, so gentle. Then, the mourners arrived in hundreds, filling the chapel of the funeral home, tears streaming down their faces. They were men, women and children of diverse backgrounds, faiths and races. They were Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, American, Indian, Pakistani, White, African-American and Hispanic.

Over 400 Houstonians attended the Memorial Service in Houston, many of them standing for two hours as the hall was overflowing with people. They came dressed in black or white, traditional American and Hindu colors of mourning, and clutched flowers and wreaths. Many mourners were his co-workers and others his friends, neighbors. Some were complete strangers who had heard and read about how this young man had touched the lives of so many by his kindness and his selfless philosophy of serving his fellow human beings. The news-media too arrived, standing poised to capture this massive out-pouring of grief for this young Houstonian, who was fatally shot on Thursday by a robber in a park near his office.

Akhil Chopra, the 28 year old Hindu man to whom they had come to pay homage, lay in state, in a casket adorned with flowers. His face remained calm and serene, and his eyes, closed. His relatives, who flew in from New Jersey and California, sat beside the casket, utterly devastated by their consanguine tragedy. As everyone ruefully looked at photographs of the smiling, self-effacing Chopra that adorned the casket and wondered, "Why did a man as noble and compassionate as him have to meet with such a gruesome end?", the memorial service began with melodious Vedic chanting from the Hindu scriptures. The Hindu priest, Pandit Parimal Joshi, offered a profuse eulogy of the young man that many had come to view as family. Spiritual teachers Acharya Premchand Sridhar and Acharya Sonerao of the Arya Samaj organization also lauded the selfless service that Chopra had rendered to the Houston community. Not a dry eye remained in the audience when his cousins, Gaurav and Pooja Malhotra spoke poignantly about their warm memories of kinship and the irreparable loss to their family.

Two dozen speakers gave their eulogies and spoke warmly about their past association with Akhil from various professional, personal and community service perspectives. All of them remembered him as a caring man who put others first and valued interfaith harmony. Several co-workers from Star Pipe Products, the company where he was employed as a computer professional, spoke touchingly of the impact Chopra made on their lives. Ramesh Bhutada, its President, recollected the dynamic personality and integrity of Chopra who lit up the office with his always-smiling countenance while spreading love and warmth in hundreds of people's lives. He led such a positive and spiritual lifestyle that nobody that knew him could recollect any negative act, habit or incident associated with Chopra's life. While reminiscing about the recent phone call he made to Chopra's family in India, Bhutada saluted Chopra's parents for raising such a wonderful son who imbibed all the noble qualities of his parents. He announced the creation of the "Akhil Chopra Memorial Fund" to preserve Chopra's memory and support

his favorite charities. Star Pipe Products has already donated \$20,000 to this Fund and its aim is to raise at least \$100,000 with the generous help of donors and organizations. In true Hindu tradition, Bhutada asked everyone to pray not just for Chopra and his family but also for the cold-blooded killer who took an innocent life just to steal a few dollars. He said that if these sincere prayers could have their desired effect on the robber, the latter would undergo a transformation and a true change of heart which would stop more innocent lives from being lost in such senseless violence.

Chopra's co-worker Alice Holley spoke eloquently about the good times she shared with Chopra who would always treat her with the true affection of a son. "He was a very compassionate person just in the way he treated his fellow workers," Holley said. "He called me Mama ... He'd come to my desk and say, 'Mama, let me show you something.' "Chopra, she said, was a noble, broadminded Hindu with such a strong belief in interfaith harmony, that he would respectfully share her Christian traditions on many occasions, linking hands with her in prayer and joyfully singing "Hallelujah" the Christian way.

Her thoughts were echoed by another co-worker, Bennette Davis, the daughter of a Baptist Christian pastor. Davis praised Chopra, who while taking pride in his own Hindu traditions, would always tell her daughter Lydia and other members of her Girl Scout troop, "While our traditions are diverse, we are all the same, you and me." Such was his lifelong commitment to spreading ecumenical dialogue and inter-religious goodwill.

His mentor Vijay Pallod gave a lucid speech on the spiritual motto that governed Chopra's life – "Service to Humanity is Service to God". He touchingly recollected Chopra's visit to the homeless shelter in downtown Houston where the latter would immediately plunge into his culinary duties, chopping vegetables for soup and making sandwiches for the poor and needy, irrespective of their race, religion or creed. He reminisced that Chopra donated blood regularly, even two days prior to his death while also participating twice in the MS150 Bike Tour from Houston to Austin, to raise money for multiple sclerosis research. He attested that when Akhil Chopra read the Hindi news every Sunday morning on a Houston radio program, thousands of people stopped in their tracks to listen to his marvelous diction and soft-spoken voice. When Pallod played a two-minute audio recording of a recent Hindi news bulletin, everyone was shaken and moved to tears when Akhil's cheerful, resonant voice resounded throughout the chapel. He indicated his resolve to preserve Chopra's legacy for many generations to come.

Pam Garey, a manager at his workplace, spoke movingly of Chopra's helpful nature and willingness to help others, with no consideration to his personal comforts. Another manager, Blake Harrison, was visibly distraught and spoke in a voice choked with emotion as he recalled Chopra's integrity and dedication to work. Another co-worker Dale Andrews recited a long elegy that recounted how deeply Chopra cared for her and how much she adored his compassionate temperament. His supervisor, Girish Naik and fellow computer professionals Suhash Patel and Pankaj Adlakha also shared their memories of personal interactions with Chopra over the years.

Kirthi Jain has been Chopra's co-worker and room-mate for over three years. As Jain emulated his room-mate's disciplined and spiritual lifestyle, he realized that his life had profoundly changed, for the better. He fondly remembered that Chopra began every day with over one hour of prayer, yoga and meditation at a small shrine in his apartment and ended his day with a similar routine. Chopra's cherished dream, he said, was to learn the ancient Sanskrit language and read the Upanishads (profound Hindu

scriptures), which he had began, in full earnest, by taking correspondence courses. He recalled the compassion of Chopra for all living beings, be it human or animal. Chopra, whose friend who was on vacation, had agreed to go over to the latter's apartment every evening to feed his pet fish. Jain stressed that Chopra refused to eat his dinner daily until he had first finished feeding his friend's pet fish, even on days when he returned late from work, hungry and famished. Such was his love and compassion for everyone.

His neighbor and policeman Ed Lopez remembered that Chopra, on his routine evening walks, was the picture of perennial happiness and inner calm. Lopez, who often came home extremely fatigued after a long day's work, said, "I felt very happy and rejuvenated after seeing this cheerful, smiling young man (Chopra) every evening. I shall miss him very much". Lopez promised to do his best to track down the culprit who was responsible for such a dastardly crime. Among other notable speakers who paid tribute to Chopra were Jay Aiyer, prominent candidate for the Houston City Council.

Several national and regional representatives of the Hindu Students Council (HSC), an international youth organization, offered their condolences and mourned the loss of their "Akhil bhai" (brother in Hindi). Rishi Bhutada and Hitesh Divecha recalled that Akhil bhai had been a dedicated HSC member since the Global Dharma Conference 2003, held in New Jersey. Chopra, they said, played a crucial role in this spectacular 3-day event organized by HSC which brought together 2000 youth delegates from across the world for promoting Dharma, global peace and universal harmony. He has been a dynamic media coordinator for HSC and has served in several community outreach programs in Houston. Divecha rued that they had lost a brother and role-model with the untimely demise of Chopra and vowed that HSC would keep his inspirational memory alive forever among Hindu-American youth. While other HSC members in the audience sobbed, Samhitha Murthy sang a soulful *Bhajan* (devotional hymn) praying for the peaceful journey of Chopra's soul and for God's benedictions.

P.C. Sharma spoke on behalf of the Houston Krishna Janmashtami Committee, in which Chopra was playing a leading role as organizer this year. Sharma declared the Committee will institute a service award every year, in the name of Akhil Chopra, to honor his legacy of selflessly serving humanity.

Many radio stations dedicated their entire programs on Sunday to Akhil Chopra's memory. Padmakant Khambati, on whose radio show Chopra read the weekly Hindi news, spoke highly of the latter's spotless character while dedicating the entire show in his memory. Meena Dutt, eminent radio personality of "Music of India", the most popular Indian radio program in Houston, dedicated her one hour program to honor Chopra even though she had met him only once. Such was the impact that the dynamic, effervescent Chopra had on people in only one meeting.

Several mourners, including Ishwari Murthy of the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh, sang songs dedicated to Akhil's memory. His co-worker, Radhika Suda got the audience singing to one of Chopra's favorites— "*Dharti Ki Shaan*", an inspirational Hindi song which speaks of the endless potential of humanity to rise against all odds and make the world a better place. Speaker after speaker, from several non-profit organizations, stressed how Chopra's achievements at such a young age would inspire hundreds of people to follow in his footsteps. They included Ramesh Shah (Ekal Vidyalaya Foundation of America), Kusum Vyas (Vatsalya Gram / Param Shakti Peeth Foundation) and were

followed by Meera and Rama Rao (sYVASA Yoga Foundation) who had tutored Chopra to become a certified yoga instructor.

At the conclusion of the memorial service, the priests chanted a funeral hymn (*Anthyaeshti Mantra*) in Sanskrit as all the mourners lined up in rows and walked past the casket, offering flowers and touching their palms together in the reverential Hindu way (*Namaskar*). Floral tributes were also offered by Chopra's Muslim co-workers, including fellow Indian Sami Firoz and Shafaat Syed, who is of Pakistani descent. The latter was seen consoling other mourners who sobbed uncontrollably after seeing the baby-faced Chopra's body.

Speaking at a mammoth prayer meeting organized the next day, Gordon Quan, Houston City Councilman at-large, announced that Crime Stoppers & Star Pipe have offered a \$10,000 reward, by equal contributions, for information leading to this heinous crime. Quan said that he would do his best to ensure that an "Akhil Chopra Memorial Day" is soon instituted in Houston to honor Chopra's legacy of service. With the soothing tunes of *Ram Dhun* and *Bhajans* in the background, Chopra's friends - Arun Kankani, Atul Moharir, Usha and Dr. P.V.Pathak - lovingly recounted Chopra's qualities as a *Sadhak* (who believed in a lifelong pursuit of knowledge), *Sevak* (who rendered selfless service to humanity), *Poojak* (who was fully dedicated to his work) and *Pathik* (who passed through this world, accumulating spiritual but not material wealth).

Akhil Chopra's mortal remains will be cremated in India, per Vedic rites, in accordance with the wishes of his bereaved parents, his brother and his extended family. Our prayers are with his family whose loss is irreparable. The world is a poorer place today without his angelic presence. Akhil *bhai's* absence will be deeply felt.

Hindu scriptures and history are full of young yogis like Markandeya Rishi, Dhruva, Shravan Kumar and Bhagat Singh who fulfilled their missions in life at a very young age. Akhil *bhai* is undoubtedly one among them. In such a short time, he selflessly contributed so much to society. His positive legacy will always be an inspiration to Hindu-American society for many generations to come.

Mrutyorma Amrutam Gamaya. Om Shantih Shantih Shantih (May the Almighty grant everlasting peace and immortality to his noble soul).