

Akhil- The Unsung Hero

By Vijay Pallod
(as told to Kavita Pallod, UT-Austin freshman)

When I walked into the office of Ramesh-ji, Star Pipe’s president that Thursday, I immediately knew something was terribly wrong. There were many other people in the room, but there was utter silence. The shock and grief on the other faces in the room gave me a chill. Yet, when Ramesh-ji informed me that Akhil Chopra had been murdered, I couldn’t believe him. I couldn’t accept it. It was only when I went down to the park with the police to identify his body that the realization that Akhil was no longer a part of my life swept over me.

A friend of mine had introduced me to Akhil about two years earlier, informing me that he was a very good person in need of a summer job. Akhil was only visiting Houston to cover a Kashmiri Pundit event, but he impressed me so much in a short conversation that I offered him a temporary job, and he came over to my Houston office by bus a few days later.

He impressed us all quickly and soon landed a permanent job in the accounting department. While working full-time, he finished his masters in MIS. Then he moved to the IT department. He shined as a star employee. His positive attitude and joy in helping others just radiated from him. We had an older employee who was not computer-savvy, but Akhil patiently taught her everything she needed to know about computers to do her job well.

Akhil and I grew close outside of work as well, attending several community events together, like the Vegetarian Association meetings. Akhil and I laughed at the fact that we were the only Indians there. We even watched the Bhagat Singh movie together, though Akhil didn’t usually watch movies. Akhil didn’t have a car, so I used to take him to different community events. Akhil always rode his bike to work and took the bus to college which showed his dedication for saving money and conserving energy. When he did finally buy a car, it was mainly to help a friend who needed to sell his car quickly before leaving for India.

I had a difficult time helping Akhil find a place to live within a walking distance of work. When I finally did, Akhil ended up with a chain-smoking roommate. After Akhil moved in, his roommate stopped smoking and drinking in the apartment. Such was Akhil’s charm. He never had any bad habits, but he never complained about anyone else’s either.

I was always in awe of Akhil and how he always went out of his way to help other people. He did everything with full energy and a smile on his face. He even kept this up on Saturdays, despite his strict fast. He only drank water, but managed to keep his energy level high. It was amazing. He managed to work full time, attend graduate school, and still make time for community work, all with a smile on his face. He even took on the weekly news segment on the Sanatan radio program.

Akhil had a great voice and good journalistic skills so he quickly attracted a lot of listeners.

He always exceeded everyone’s expectations. Starting by helping Ramarao-ji, a yoga instructor working with SVYASA with computer skills, Akhil ended up as one of SVYASA’s most dependable workers. He even took a teacher’s training course, and became an excellent certified yoga instructor. I asked Akhil to help the Janmashthami committee with media work, and he became media coordinator. He became an integral part of the committee; designing the web site and communicating with all the members. He reminded me of the true meaning of “Karmanye Wa dhikaraste”, performance of duty without regards to rewards.

Akhil was always ever ready to help everyone else, but the only chance I ever got to serve Akhil was in New Jersey, where the both of us had gone to attend Hindu Student Council’s Dharma conference. Akhil was the official photographer, but he fractured his leg trying to take a picture. I rushed him to the hospital and took care of him.

Akhil didn’t just serve his community though, he inspired us as well. Akhil motivated others to join the MS 150 bike ride from Houston to Austin. He asked me to join as well, assuring me that he would take care of me and my bum knee, but I couldn’t make it. I hope to join in year 2007 in his memory.

When I read the newspaper the morning after that fateful Thursday, there was only a small story stating that a dead body had been found in the Bishop Joseph A. Fiorenza Park. The injustice of death of a person like Akhil being covered like this swept over me. I called a Houston Chronicle writer that I had worked with and told her about this amazing person, and pleaded that they give Akhil the recognition he was due. The headline of the Houston Chronicle the next morning was “Hindu Slain was admired by friends for faith, service”. Hot tears rolled down to my face that morning when I realized that Akhil had front page coverage in the fourth largest paper in the USA. Overnight the news spread, and people learned about the unsung hero named Akhil Chopra.

I went to Ahmedabad to meet Akhil’s parents that winter. I could feel the love for Akhil and the deep grief at his passing emanating from the whole neighborhood. His parents had been waiting for the moment when he would come back and get married and settled down in India and now that moment was forever denied. If it’s any consolation to them though, I promise that Akhil didn’t die without passing on his legacy. Akhil’s life has touched everyone who has heard of him and they all carry him on in their hearts.