

Focus on South Asian mental health issues

BY JENNIFER KOHLHEPP Staff Writer

South Asians affected by mental illness now have a broader support system in Central Jersey.

South Asian Mental Health Awareness in Jersey (SAMHAJ) seeks to improve the lives of South Asian immigrants in the state who are affected by mental illness by providing support, education and advocacy for individuals and families. SAMHAJ is a program of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) of New Jersey, a nonprofit organization based in North Brunswick that has been operating for 24 years.

SAMHAJ Director Aruna Rao said, "We guide immigrants on how to access mental health services and provide an inclusive, culturally sensitive environment for families to get the community support they so desperately need."

Since its inception in 2001, SAMHAJ has served more than 3,000 people in need, Rao said.

In support of its mission, SAMHAJ is organizing "DISHA - A Journey of Hope," a concert by the Hidden Gems and a performance by classically trained dancers from 4-7 p.m. March 22 at North Brunswick Township High School. Proceeds from the event will be used to fund SAMHAJ activities.

Those who sponsor or purchase tickets to the event will be helping to fund the creation of support groups, where people affected by mental illness can get emotional support, education and resources about mental illness treatment options, referrals to appropriate treatment and support services, and advocacy for those denied their basic rights, according to Rao.

"SAMHAJ believes that each of us, as individuals and organizations, can make a difference and that every contribution is invaluable." Rao said. "We look forward to your support for 'DISHA — A Journey of Hope,' which will take us in the direction of providing a brighter future for South Asians affected by mental illness in New Jersey."

Millstone's Madhu Sehgal, who works in the mental health sector and helps advocate awareness of mental illness in the South Asian community, said her holistic healing business Palms Healing on Prodelin Way is one of the primary sponsors of "DISHA - A Journey of Hope."

"I would like to request you to join hands with me in support of this initiative to reach out to our South Asian communities here in New Jersey," Sehgal said. "I ask you to support this cause and please donate to the best of your comfort and ability. This is a great way to bring a smile to those individuals and families who feel left out and unsupported. Hence, every dollar counts, every smile counts."

Sehgal said her family believes that charity begins at home. She said her daughter, Neha, is also contributing to SAMHAJ by donating her time to perform an Indian classical dance called Kathak during the benefit concert.

For more information about the concert, contact Aruna Rao at arao@naminj.org or at 732-940-0991. Those who would like to make a donation may make checks out to SAMHAJ-NAMI and send them to SAMHAJ-NAMI, 1562 Route 130, North Brunswick, NJ 08902.