

Changing the *Script*



Vishal interacting with young people during a life skills program

VISHAL TALREJA, CO-FOUNDER OF DREAM A DREAM, HAS IMPACTED THE LIVES OF THOUSANDS OF UNDERPRIVILEGED CHILDREN. HERE, HE TAKES JANA COLACO THROUGH HIS LIFE'S WORK...

How often have you caught yourself unconsciously inflicting or wondering about the differential treatment given to our domestic help - our security guards - our drivers? Vishal Talreja is the co-founder of Dream a Dream - an organisation based in Bangalore, that has been tirelessly working towards a future where this very concept of 'dignity of labour,' however buried or glossed over, can be fully recognised. Lauded as an 'architect of the future' by Waldzell Leadership Institut Austria, and having co-authored a book published in an international journal,





Vishal interacting with young people in a life skills session

IT IS CRITICAL TO HAVE AN EDUCATION THAT INHERENTLY RECOGNISES AND RESPECTS EACH CHILD'S POTENTIAL

Vishal's dedication is apparent in over 15 years of passionate pursuit. Along with a growing backbone of 50 partners and 3000 volunteers, together they impact the lives of thousands of underprivileged youth from adverse backgrounds of abuse, abandonment, extreme poverty, and poor nutrition, by equipping them with the necessary 'life skills.' Vishal tells us about his personal journey and how it all integrates into one bigger journey

- Dream a Dream.

When life throws you introspection

The early years were when things first started gnawing at Vishal. It was on an exchange program to Finland post-graduation when he was struck by a number of university students he met who had volunteered and started their own organisations. One young woman helped out at a village school and was also a part-time bartender. He

couldn't mask his bafflement at her choice of work and that she could take pride in it! Cut to dinner at a friend's home; when he discovered that her boyfriend worked as a security guard, Vishal was yet again startled by the casual reflexiveness of his own innate prejudices. "As I kept thinking about these incidents, I realised I have grown up in a sheltered environment," he reflects. "I had deep-rooted prejudices which got challenged in this new country where every human being was respected irrespective of their backgrounds and choice of career. I made a note in my diary that when I go back to India, I want to do something around changing our understanding of dignity."

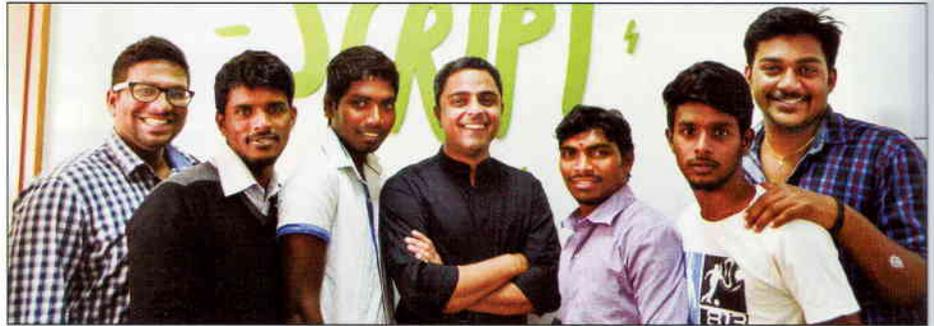
The regular, please...

Empathetic as he was growing up, it wasn't until a culmination of incidents that Vishal took the diversion that would change his life for good. His parents had the relatively tame version of his life pictured: an MBA, a career in investment banking and charity possibly on the weekends. His version started off placidly as well; he only took up Dream a Dream full-time in 2002. Before that, he worked as a research analyst with Xerox and then in 2000 as a portfolio manager with an investment start-up in Mumbai. "What shocked me in Mumbai was that the poverty is very in-your-face," he reminisces. "What struck me, even more, was that I had gotten used to it." His charity work in Mumbai would later shape his work at Dream a Dream.

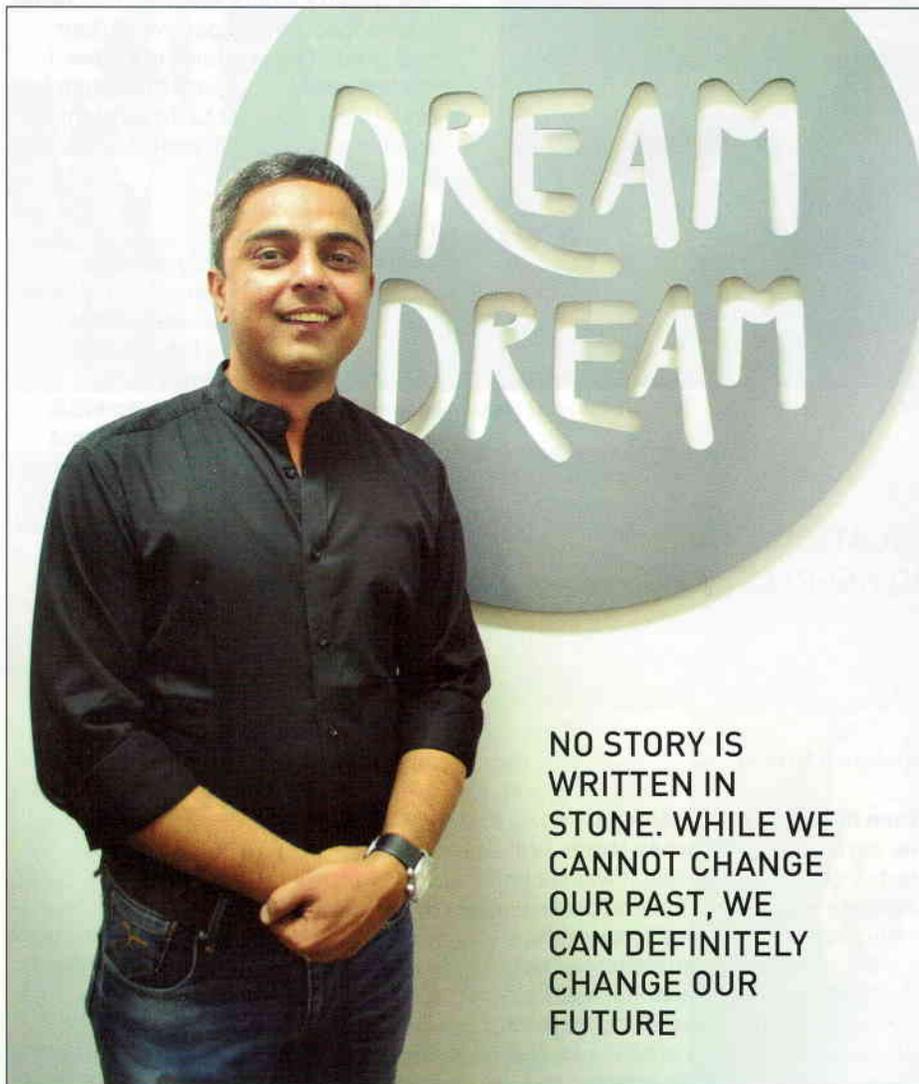
Dream a little dream for me

Vishal had had his life's epiphany. Now it was time to act. "The idea of Dream a Dream germinated with Brinda Jacob, one of the co-founders," he says. "She is a dance and movement therapy artist and was keen to bring

young people together to affect change in our communities." Soon, their conversations took a positive turn as many common friends gravitated to the idea. "There were marketing specialists, software engineers, dancer-choreographers, counselors, business owners and before we knew it, 12 of us came together to kick start the idea of Dream a Dream." With little in the bank, one assistant and a



Vishal with graduates of Dream a Dream



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basic office setup, the organisation began its journey. The first two years were spent working with HIV+ and cancer affected children, also those in residential schools and shelter homes.

On being a 'social entrepreneur'

"While it is tiring, it is also exhilarating!, says Vishal. "I go through my ups and downs, and yet, I cannot imagine doing anything else. Plus, I have met so many inspirational people on my journey who have inspired me with their ideas, innovations and never-give-up attitude." Incidentally, he met his wife Suchetha Bhat on the job - she was a volunteer with Dream a Dream. "I found in her a partner who is deeply sensitive, inspiring and ambitious to create change."

What makes it all worth it

A story that truly stands out is that of an eleven-year-old who came to the organisation from a violent family background, during a field-hockey programme. He showed aggressive tendencies from the get-go, beating another child the first time he picked up the hockey stick. Having pinpointed the issue, and with proper training, the boy went on to become the best player on the team. The same child would later tell Vishal that while growing up, he waited for



With Brad Wintersteen & Shiva Sharma

the day when he would stand up to his abusive father. But in time, instead of feeling angry, he felt sorry for him instead.

Need of the hour

"Today, Dream a Dream is about creating a mindset shift in society," explains Vishal. "Our education system is failing our young people and there is a critical need to develop a new vision of education." He also emphasises on some of the marked improvements the country has seen in terms of acceptance. "Not too many people took us seriously when we told them that we need to invest in life skills for young people from vulnerable backgrounds. Today, every intervention run by some of the best organisations and schools globally integrates life skills in their model."

The way forward

In order to start at the grassroots level, Vishal highlights the importance of planting the seeds of this vision in the minds of young people, parents,

teachers, school leaders, the government and the general public. "It is critical to have an education that inherently recognises and respects each child's potential; understands that each child is naturally a learner; treats each child with empathy; invests in creating powerful life experiences for the child helping them become a self-learner for life and is focused on helping each child chart their own unique path to life."

Lastly, Vishal is excited to talk about their new motto — 'Change the Script!' The story of one student named Anitha - who came from a family where girls were considered a burden, but improved her confidence and self-esteem greatly after she learned to play football - is exactly the example that encapsulates this thought. "No story is written in stone. While we cannot change our past, we can definitely change our future," finishes Vishal.



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