

Having had a difficult childhood, this youngster's dream is to make children's wards in hospitals bright, cheery and full of song

Bringing childhood back into hospital wards

RIYA KARTHA

ON A Sunday evening, Bombay Hospital's paediatrics ward provides a refreshing change from the dismal mood in other hospital wards in the city. Don't be surprised if you walk into the sunny, cheerful area to find the little patients marching around the room, singing and dancing.

The reason for all the hoopla is 20-year-old Sumeet Gade and his brainchild 'Pragati'. Sumeet and five of his friends make regular visits to Bombay Hospital every Sunday and for two whole hours, the children in the paediatrics ward can look forward to taking their minds off sickness and ill-health.

"We get them all together and start with a small prayer. Then we ask them to sing, or if they ask us to, we dance and do all kinds of things," says Sumeet, adding that the kids love to colour. "They express themselves well when they colour, and the best scene is when a parent comes and holds the child's hands to teach them to colour within the lines," he says.

Apart from bringing hope to what is usually one of the most bleak and desolate places in any hospital, Sumeet's too is a story of hope. A former student at the Akanksha Foundation for 13 years, Sumeet had an alcoholic

THE
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party

father who regularly beat his mother. He lived for a while with an uncle, who he says stood by him through his bad days, and passed away recently.

Despite going through phases where he ran away, and fell into depression, Sumeet beat the odds.

Today, he is completing his college at the T K Tope Night School, works as a staff member with Akanksha Foundation, and still finds the time to entertain children in paediatric wards. Last week, Sumeet was also part of a group of 25 youngsters who were felicitated by the Ashoka Foundation.

"We decided on the name



GANESH SHIRSEKAR

'Pragati' because it means so many things—success, going forward and progressing. We liked the thought of that," says Sumeet. He says that working with the children also helps them

understand and communicate with their parents better. "We get calls from parents about emergencies and then we help in whatever way we can," he says, adding that they have helped or-

ganise blood for some children, and have also helped shift kids from one hospital to another depending on their problems.

Sumeet says that the programme differs from time to

time. "On festivals, we ask the kids to make candles and paint *diyas*. Then we sell them and with that money we throw a party," He adds that their biggest party is in December, during Christmas. Apart from colouring and singing, they also approach professional puppeteers to entertain the children.

"We try and approach many hospitals. Some agree but never give us permission in writing. Others, like BMC schools, refuse outright, since they are worried we will cause problems for them," says Sumeet. His future plans include approaching and introducing 'Pragati' to other hospitals in the city, and tying up with hospitals to provide street kids with vaccinations. "We will try to rope hospitals into setting up booths in different areas, and conduct vaccinations for street children," says Sumeet, gearing up for another plan, another avenue of hope for kids in the city.