Manix Narayanan

Reaching out to two very different worlds

A couple of summers ago, biking along Fuller Road past Mitchell Field, I stopped to watch a group of Indian guys playing Ultimate Frisbee. After a minute, one of them called to me, “Come on, join us!” He introduced himself as “Manix” and briefly explained the rules of “Indian style” Ultimate—smaller end zones, and continuous action, with no stop in play after points are scored. They were fine athletes and played each point as a stop in play after points are scored. They end zones, and continuous action, with no rules of “Indian style” Ultimate—smaller end zones, and continuous action, with no stop in play after points are scored. They were fine athletes and played each point as a stop in play after points are scored.

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The game ended with the sun low in the sky, he’d clap his hands and say, “Okay, guys—water break, then quick game to ten.” And at the end of that game he’d say, “Okay, guys—one more quick game to ten.” Then, at the end of that game, he’d start a new one once more. Only full darkness, it seemed, was an appropriate reason to quit. When winter came, Manix and a few of the other NC Frisbee players joined a winter league team, playing at an indoor facility in Wixom.

In the months that followed, I saw Manix reach out in the same way to dozens of people with an ambassador’s kindness and charm. By fall, NC Frisbee had swollen so much in size, the team of fifteen became a winter league team, playing at an indoor facility in Wixom.

Manix, thirty-two, came to the United States for graduate school at the University of Florida and stayed on. He now works as an engineer at Toyota’s strength and durability lab. But his story is not limited to Ann Arbor. In his southern India hometown of Madras, he had started something bigger.

Five years ago, when Manix was visiting his parents in Madras, his car broke down. “I went to this repair shop,” Manix recalls, “and this little kid, maybe ten years old, scurried under the car with a welding torch. There was something striking about this kid—he talked like an adult; he had no playfulness, no innocence; he was full of strain. It was maybe ten at night. He should’ve been getting ready for school or playing with his friends or in bed.

“Really, you see kids like this all over India. I wouldn’t have even noticed him if I hadn’t been living in the States for a while. But I left feeling disturbed.”

Later, Manix talked to his dad, a retired literature professor, about the kid at the repair shop. “We had an idea,” Manix said. “We decided we’d reach out to a bunch of the poorest kids in Madras and treat them like they were our own children—give them some of the same opportunities I’d had growing up.” Manix and his parents raised enough money to buy the house next to theirs, and after fixing it up, they opened it as an afterschool center called Pudiyador—Tamil for “The New Beginning.” They recruited friends to volunteer as tutors, music teachers, and karate instructors. Within months, the center was filled with up to fifty kids every day—most came directly from school in the afternoon, stayed at Pudiyador for dinner, and went home just before bedtime. Manix’s dad led trips to the zoo and the planetarium, places none of the kids had ever been. Manix, on his yearly visits home, taught the kids how to play Ultimate.

Initially, a lot of parents resisted the idea of their kids spending time at the center when they could be working. Manix and his father did their best to convey to parents that education was important. “It’s the only way they were going to break out of their extreme shantytown poverty,” Manix says. “Sometimes we secretly bribed the parents to send their kids to our center. We paid them whatever the kids would’ve made working a rotten job.

Now, Pudiyador is thriving. Kids from the center just won a regional karate championship. A local newspaper lavished praise on the Pudiyador theater company. Some of the first kids to join the center have made it into college and are now returning to tutor and teach younger kids.

Manix’s enthusiasm was infectious. On the field, he had a regal grace; he roamed with long, lanky strides, and made no-look passes that were so deft they surprised not only his opponents but his teammates as well. If arguments ever broke out, Manix silenced them with one word, simply raising his hands and pleading, “Guys!” When a few of the other NC Frisbee players joined a winter league team, playing at an indoor facility in Wixom.

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Manix’s dad and a few longtime volunteers are attempting to open three new centers around Madras. Manix hopes to find folks in Michigan willing to help fund the new centers. “A little bit of money here in the States,” he says, “goes a long way for these kids.”

For now, though, the entire operation is funded nearly single-handedly by Manix himself. He sends most of his monthly income home to his dad to keep Pudiyador running.

“It’s meant some sacrifice,” Manix allows, “but Aarthi and I are very content. I’m a happy guy. I live in a really nice town, I’ve got a good job, I’ve got the center—and I’ve got Frisbee.”

—Davy Rothbart

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