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Fundraiser nets \$12,000 for toilets in Pune

PROVIDENCE, R.I. — Poor women in Pune may soon have up to 73 new toilets thanks to some benevolent Brown University students and their friends.

The university's South Asian Students Association recently collected \$12,000 in a fundraiser for Shelter Associates, a nongovernmental organization working to address sanitation and poverty conditions in India's slums.

The money will go towards a larger donation totaling about \$20,000 that will aid poor women in Pune who have little access to clean and private bathrooms.

Work for the February 23 fundraiser at Brown that attracted over 250 guests, began after Connecticut College associate professor Sunil Bhatia contacted the student association last spring.

Bhatia, who has worked with Shelter Associates since 2006 and is from Pune, said he wanted to seek help outside the Connecticut area, where he had already organized a similar event last year.

Many women in the slums of Pune must hold from going to the bathroom all day because of a lack of privacy, said Bhatia. At the end of the day, the women search for places to relieve themselves — such as fields or back alley garbage dumps — in the dark of night. Putting human waste in public places can lead to contamination and spread water-borne illnesses, said Bhatia. It can also leave the women vulnerable to harassment.

"It's a question of human dignity," he said. "The way we talk about it, it's a human rights issue."

The toilets that the donations will help build cost about \$200 each, according to Bhatia.

He said the fundraiser "beat our expectations" in terms of how much money was collected.

This is the first time that Brown's South Asian Student Association held an event of this kind, said Sumbul Siddiqui, a community outreach coordinator for the student group.

"We've had benefits, but nothing of this type, for the community," said Siddiqui, noting that most prior work involved holding lectures, cultural events and "great parties."

"This was a great way to put students and community together," she said.

Siddiqui, a 20-year-old sophomore who was born in Pakistan, said the collaboration with Bhatia has opened her eyes to the problems of poverty in South Asia.

"I do have family in India and I do keep up with these issues," she said. "[But] I wasn't aware of the degree of the slum situation. It was shocking [to find out that] it was this bad. It's such a shame that there are so many areas of the world that have this problem."

To learn more about Shelter Associates and local fundraising, visit www.shelter-associates.org or e-mail Sunil Bhatia at sunil.bhatia@conncoll.edu.