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UF students named among nation's top 20

By **JANINE YOUNG SIKES**

Sun staff writer

Straight-A averages and involvement in the philanthropic organizations they founded secured two University of Florida students a place among the nation's top 20 college students for 2004 as determined by USA Today.

Business Administration senior Steven Cohen and triple-major Anup Patel of Altamonte Springs - who's pursuing degrees in biochemistry, economics and political science - were named to the "All-USA College Academic Team" by the national newspaper on Thursday.

A third UF student, political science senior Joshua Pila, earned recognition on the Third Team of 20 selected by USA Today.

Some of the country's top schools are represented on the list, including Stanford, Duke and Northwestern, but only UF landed two students in the top 20.

A group of educational professionals selected USA Today's First Team based on grade-point average and community involvement from a pool of 604 nominees.

Besides the top-notch grades (the average was 3.89), the winners boast a plethora of accomplishments outside the academic realm, from spearheading national voter registration drives to translating and illustrating a tri-lingual book of folk stories for Mayan children in Mexico.

For UF's Cohen, the loss of a 6-year-old family friend in 1996 spurred him as a teenager to found Friends for Life of America, a national student-run non-profit organization providing educational, emotional and financial help to children with cancer. Cohen's friend, Daniel Heidenberg of South Carolina, died of leukemia.

"It inspired me to do something proactive," said Cohen, 21.

One of the organization's main projects - Hearts for the Holidays - sends get-well cards to hospitals around the world. More than 50,000 have been sent with some 20,000 coming from UF students and faculty, including UF football coach Ron Zook, Cohen said.

Raised in Pembroke Pines, Cohen also has honed his magical skills, presenting shows to children at several hospitals in South Florida.

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University of Florida student Steven Cohen, right, is the national chairman and CEO of Friends for Life of America. University of Florida student Anup Patel is co-founder of Cents of Relief, an organization that benefits HIV/AIDS patients in red-light districts of India.

"My grandfather showed me a card trick when I was younger and now he claims I'm better than him," Cohen said.

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Cohen graduates in May when he will move to Charlotte, N.C., for a job with Bank of America. He plans to work for a while in the business sector before pursuing his long-term goal of a master's degree in public policy at Harvard University.

He ultimately wants to be a health administrator. His research on extending Medicare coverage to include oral anti-cancer drugs has been distributed to several members of Congress and soon will be published in the Journal of Undergraduate Research.

A future in medicine appeals to Patel, as well. But Patel wants to be a physician.

Patel, 22, is eyeing a spot in Yale University's medical school when he graduates in May, although he's not yet been accepted and his genetic research on irregular outgrowth of blood vessels in the eye with UF Genetics Institute Director Ken Burns may spur him to stay in Gainesville.

As an intern researching health care policy for U.S. Sen. Bob Graham, Patel decided to volunteer in some prostitute-ridden areas of Bombay, India, to learn about the AIDS policy there.

But what he found on his trip was much worse than he had imagined. Girls as young as 12 - many of them kidnapped from Bangladesh and Nepal - freely worked as prostitutes in the red-light districts. Little children slept on pavement covered with feces. And many children were infected with AIDS.

"It was basically hell on earth," said Patel, who's grandfather is a former mayor of Bombay.

Patel formed Cents of Relief, a non-profit organization designed to provide education and health supplies to non-government organizations working in some of India's most deplorable areas. There are 10 chapters located at other institutions, including five in Florida at UF, Florida State University, Rollins College, University of North Florida and the University of Miami.

Some day Patel plans to practice in India and the United States.

He plans to continue his efforts to eradicate the trade of young children in India.

"If you can stop that, you can take a big step in slowing the spread of AIDS in India," he said.

For more information on Friends for Life go to www.friendsforlife.com or on Cents of Relief go to www.centsofrelief.org.

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