

## Rocco Fiorentino named one of the top volunteers in the country

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By ROBERT LINNEHAN

If his young life continues in the same fashion, Rocco Fiorentino's parents are going to have to buy a second house to hold all of the awards and accomplishments he has won in just 14-years on this planet.

Fiorentino, an eighth grade Voorhees Middle School student, was named one of the top 10 youth volunteers for 2011 in a ceremony yesterday at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, receiving a national Prudential Spirit of Community Award for his outstanding volunteer community service. Selected from a field of more than 29,000 participants across the country, he received a \$5,000 award, an engraved gold medallion, and a crystal trophy for his school. In addition, he will receive a \$5,000 grant from The Prudential Foundation for nonprofit charitable organizations of his choice.

Voorhees Middle School Principal Charles Ronkin nominated Fiorentino for the state award. After winning the state award, he was eligible for the national Prudential award ceremony in Washington, D.C.

Fiorentino is a dedicated advocate for children who are blind like him or visually impaired, striving over the past nine years to increase government funding for Braille services and to educate others about the abilities of people with visual challenges. Blind since birth, Rocco realized in kindergarten that he could not keep up with his classmates, who could practice reading many hours each week while he received Braille instruction from a state-provided teacher for only one hour.

"It's unbelievable. There are a bunch of honorees around me now. It really makes you proud to be an American. It amazes me how many young people want to volunteer, want to reach out to other people in their communities to make a united cause," he said after winning the award Monday. "I love it, it's great to meet other faces and meet people that feel the same way you do about volunteering and community services, and have a passion about what you do."

Fiorentino has continued to lobby on behalf of the visually challenged at both the state and national level. He also has petitioned governors in every state to recognize October as Blindness Awareness Month; 11 have done so and 24 more are pending. In addition, Rocco gives speeches across the country, visits more than 50 schools a year to increase understanding of blindness, and mentors other blind children.

Fiorentino also has a hand in the Little Rock Foundation, a nonprofit organization founded by his parents at his birth. The Little Rock Foundation is a 100 percent volunteer organization dedicated to improving the lives of children who are blind or visually impaired.

"The people of Prudential are amazing, it's just fabulous that a company wants to do this for kids and their parents, to honor and commemorate their efforts, it's fabulous," he said.

Fiorentino met with Academy Award winning actress Susan Sarandon after being named one of

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the top 10 national volunteers.

More than 29,000 young people participated in the 2011 awards program last fall through schools, Girl Scout councils, county 4-H organizations, American Red Cross chapters, YMCAs and affiliates of the Points of Light Institute's HandsOn Network. The top middle level and high school applicants in each state were selected in February, and were flown to Washington this past week with their parents for four days of special recognition events.

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