

Two New Jersey Youth Are Among America's Top Ten Youth Volunteers for 2011

Academy Award-Winning Actress Susan Sarandon Pays Tribute to Young Heroes as Part of Four-Day Recognition Events

WASHINGTON--(BUSINESS WIRE)-- Two New Jersey students, Rujul Zaparde, 16, of Plainsboro and Rocco Fiorentino, 14, of Voorhees, were named two of America's top ten youth volunteers for 2011 in a ceremony today at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, receiving national Prudential Spirit of Community Awards for their outstanding volunteer community service. Selected from a field of more than 29,000 participants across the country, they received \$5,000 awards, engraved gold medallions, and crystal trophies for their schools. In addition, they will receive \$5,000 grants from The Prudential Foundation for nonprofit charitable organizations of their choice.



Academy Award-winning actress Susan Sarandon congratulates Rujul Zaparde, 16, of Plainsboro (center) and Rocco Fiorentino, 14, of Voorhees (right) on being named the top two youth volunteers in New Jersey for 2011 by The Prudential Spirit of Community Awards. Rujul and Rocco were honored at a ceremony Sunday night, May 1, at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C., where they each received a \$1,000 award.

30 water wells in rural India. Rujul traveled to India with his family in 2007 and visited a village called Paras that didn't have fresh water. "The villagers had to walk a few kilometers each way to reach the nearest water source – and that water wasn't even clean," he explained. "I was astounded. I couldn't even begin to imagine what it would be like to live in such a village." When he returned home, Rujul enlisted the help of a friend to raise \$1,000 to build a well for Paras. They held bake sales at school, set up a car wash, solicited donations door-to-door, and eight months later, had enough money. Rujul went back to India and built the well. "I realized then that we could do even more," he said. "We could build more wells, and help more villagers."

Rujul and his friend started a club at their school to involve other students in their mission, and then founded a nonprofit organization called "Drinking Water for India." They then began to make presentations at other schools about the dire need for fresh water in India. So far, more than 450 students at 23 schools have joined their cause, by forming clubs that fund-raise regularly, or collecting money on their own. As a result, nearly three dozen poor villages in India have new wells. "Clean water is a basic right," said Rujul. "All deserve to have access to it."

Rocco, an eighth-grader at Voorhees Middle School, is a dedicated advocate for children who are blind like

Rujul and Rocco, who were named New Jersey's top two youth volunteers for 2011 in February, also were honored last night during an award ceremony at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, along with the top two youth volunteers of every other state and the District of Columbia. At that event, the Prudential Spirit of Community State Honorees for 2011 were presented with \$1,000 awards and congratulated by Academy Award-winning actress Susan Sarandon. The honorees also received engraved silver medallions and an all-expense-paid trip with their parents to Washington, D.C., for this week's recognition events.

"The Prudential Spirit of Community honorees have seen problems in their communities and around the world and have taken action," said Ms. Sarandon. "Their compassion to help others should give us all a lot of hope for the future."

Rujul, a junior at The Lawrenceville School, co-founded a nonprofit organization that has motivated more than 450 students at 23 schools to raise funds that have been used to dig over

him or visually impaired, striving over the past nine years to increase government funding for Braille services and educate others about the abilities of people with visual challenges. Sightless 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. "Frustrated that I could not read as fast as my classmates, I complained to my parents," he said. "I wanted to learn Braille, but the state would not provide the service."

Rocco spoke to a local legislator, and then testified before the New Jersey General Assembly. "The legislators had no idea I was receiving such little time for Braille instruction," he said, so instead of enacting a proposed cut in services, they voted a \$1.2 million increase to give every blind child an additional four hours of Braille instruction per week. Since then, Rocco 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; five have done so. 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 to, in Rocco's words, "be the best they can be."

"Rujul and Rocco represent young Americans who have a strong sense of community and who are dedicated to improving our neighborhoods, our nation and our world," said John R. Strangfeld, chairman and CEO of Prudential Financial, Inc. "With great anticipation, we look forward to their future achievements as they continue to spread the spirit of community."

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 week with their parents for four days of special recognition events.

In addition to Rujul and Rocco, the other National Honorees are:

Justin Churchman, 18, of El Paso, Texas, has raised more than \$48,000 and recruited more than 75 volunteers to build 18 houses in Juarez, Mexico, despite the rampant drug wars that have frightened away many other American volunteers.

Sarah Cronk, 18, of Bettendorf, Iowa, co-founded a cheerleading squad at her high school that includes students with disabilities, and then formed a nonprofit corporation that encourages teens across the country to start similar squads at their schools.

Jeffrey Hanson, 17, of Overland Park, Kan., has generated more than \$225,000 for various local and national charities over the past five years by selling and donating original paintings and other artistic creations, despite having a genetic condition that causes severe loss of vision.

Cassandra Lin, 13, of Westerly, R.I., launched a program that collects more than 36,000 gallons of waste cooking oil a year from 95 restaurants and thousands of households in nine towns in Rhode Island and Connecticut, and converts it into heating fuel for needy families.

Aimee Matheson, 18, of Clearfield, Utah, coordinated the building of a day-care and community center in Guatemala so that impoverished single mothers would have a safe and nurturing place for their children while they are at work.

Tyler Page, 14, of Brentwood, Calif., held a car wash hoping to rescue just one child from being sold into slavery in Ghana, but ended up sparking a kids' fund-raising enterprise that has involved hundreds of young people and has generated more than \$100,000 for a variety of children's causes.

Rachel Wheeler, 11, of Lighthouse Point, Fla., launched a fund-raising campaign that has raised more than \$162,000 to build a new 25-home village in Leogane, Haiti, near the epicenter of the earthquake that occurred in January 2010.

Glennita Williams, 14, of South Holland, Ill., has collected snacks and personal care items worth more than \$14,000, including more than 600 pounds of Hostess Twinkies, for shipment to American troops serving in Iraq and Afghanistan over the past four years.

The national selection committee that chose the ten National Honorees was chaired by Strangfeld of Prudential and included Jana Frieler, president of the National Association of Secondary School Principals; Michelle Nunn, president and CEO of the Points of Light & HandsOn Network; Marguerite Kondracke, president and CEO of the America's Promise Alliance; Donald T. Floyd Jr., president and CEO of National

4-H Council; Pamela Farr, the American Red Cross' national chair of volunteers; Jaclyn Libowitz, chief operating officer and chief of staff for Girl Scouts of the USA; Felix Rouse, vice president of resource development for the southeast region of the Boys & Girls Clubs of America; Elson Nash, associate director for project management at the Corporation for National and Community Service; Michael Cohen, president and CEO of Achieve, Inc.; and two 2010 Prudential Spirit of Community National Honorees: Shannon McNamara of Basking Ridge, N.J., and Benjamin Sater of Plano, Texas.

Conducted in partnership with the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), The Prudential Spirit of Community Awards were created 16 years ago by Prudential Financial to encourage youth volunteerism and to identify and reward young role models.

"The young women and men in America's schools are nothing short of amazing, and nowhere is this more evident than amongst this year's award recipients," said NASSP President Jana Frieler. "They possess a keen intellect, servant hearts, capable leadership skills, and are filled with energy and ambition. NASSP and Prudential are honored to recognize them."

More information about The Prudential Spirit of Community Awards and this year's honorees can be found at <http://spirit.prudential.com> or www.nassp.org/spirit.

NASSP is the leading organization of and national voice for middle level and high school principals, assistant principals, and all school leaders from across the United States and more than 45 countries around the world. NASSP provides research-based professional development and resources, networking, and advocacy to build the capacity of middle level and high school leaders to continually improve student performance. Reflecting its longstanding commitment to student leadership development as well, NASSP administers the National Honor Society™, National Junior Honor Society®, National Elementary Honor Society®, and National Association of Student Councils®. For more information about NASSP, located in Reston, VA, visit www.nassp.org.

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[Editors: full-color pictures of the Spirit of Community Awards program logo and medallions are available at spirit.prudential.com.]

Photos/Multimedia Gallery Available: <http://www.businesswire.com/cgi-bin/mmq.cgi?eid=6700116&lanq=en>

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