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2011 Governor's Jefferson Award recipient: Rocco Fiorentino

By [Melissa Chin/The Star-Ledger](#)

Rocco Fiorentino is a [New Jersey State Governor's Jefferson Awards](#) recipient. He was nominated by Tina Fiorentino for his dedication to create awareness for blind people.



Russ DeSantis/For The Star-Ledger Honoree Rocco Fiorentino with his nominator Tina Fiorentino

Rocco was born four months premature, weighing only one-and-a-half pounds. He had less than a 5% chance to survive, and lost his twin brother at birth. After six months and 10 surgeries, he was released from the hospital. His only lasting challenge is that he is totally blind. This is how his life began, but if you ask Rocco if he would have a surgery to fix his vision, he would reply "No – this is who I am, and I like the person I have become." To him, having sight blinds people. He thinks we should take more time listening and feel what's in our hearts.

Rocco has been lobbying for more Braille services since the age of 5, and each year travels to schools teaching students about blindness and how to deal with the disability. He is responsible for convincing legislators to dedicate \$1.2 million from the State of New Jersey for additional Braille Instruction.

Frustrated as a Kindergartner, Rocco couldn't keep up with his sighted peers in the classroom, so he wanted to talk to someone about increasing Braille instruction. With the money allocated to the New Jersey Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired, each child received an additional four hours of direct Braille Instruction per week.

In 2009, with help from the local legislators, he was able to convince both the Governors of New Jersey and Pennsylvania to sign a bill officially naming October "Blindness Awareness Month." This prompted five states — NJ, PA, DE, MI and LA – to follow suit. Throughout October, there are extensive campaigns nationwide to prevent, treat and cure blindness and other serious visual impairments. It is Rocco's goal to take this campaign to all corners of the nation.

For several months prior to the event, The Star-Ledger and The New Jersey State Governor's Office on Volunteerism accepted nominations which were reviewed by a panel of judges. Winners from across the Garden State were chosen for their exceptional community service and acts of charity. You can nominate outstanding volunteers for the 2012 Governor's Jefferson Awards online.