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Posted on Mon, Oct. 19, 2009

## Boy champions NJ's first Blindness Awareness Month

By Jessica Ercolino  
Staff Writer

One local boy is proving that without sight, there is still vision.

As part of the first-ever Blindness Awareness Month, more than 60 local organizations have come together to build awareness about ways to prevent, treat and cure blindness and other serious visual impairments throughout October.

The campaign spawned from 12-year-old Rocco Fiorentino, ambassador for The Little Rock Foundation and award-winning humanitarian.

Rocco, a Voorhees resident, is blind due to premature birth and has been working for the cause since he was 5 years old.

"He was having trouble keeping up with the other kindergartners reading their print books because the level of Braille education was not enough," said his mother, Tina Fiorentino. "He was angry and frustrated."

Rocco was the first blind child to attend the Voorhees School District, she added. "We spent a lot of time researching and looking for resources," she said. "I had to teach myself how to raise and educate a non-sighted child in a sighted world."

Fiorentino and husband, Rocco, created the Little Rock Foundation in 1997 to help other families with children who are blind or visually impaired.

Over the years, young Rocco has been speaking to legislators and students across the state, hoping to spread awareness and lobbying for more services for the blind and visually impaired.

Because of him, \$1.2 million has been dedicated to Braille education and services in New Jersey, and 54 jobs were saved at the New Jersey Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired, according to [www.blindnessawarenessmonth.org](http://www.blindnessawarenessmonth.org).

Last year, Rocco approached Camden County Assemblyman Louis D. Greenwald and Assemblywoman Pamela R. Lampitt to express his hopes of creating a month focused on educating the public about eye disease, eye care and addressing the rising trend of severe visual impairment.

They sponsored the bill, and in December, Gov. Jon Corzine signed into law a measure establishing October as Blindness Awareness Month.

"We are very excited about the opportunities we will now have to share the stories of people like me who face life with the challenge of being blind or visually impaired," said Rocco.

But establishing the campaign in his own state wasn't enough: The boy pitched his campaign to Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell, who — in conjunction with Pennsylvania Association for the Blind — proclaimed October as Blindness Awareness Month, too. Rocco is currently in talks with New York Gov. David Paterson, said his mother.

Witnessing their son's success has been a "tremendous feeling" for the Fiorentinos. "As a parent, seeing your little boy's vision all come together for him — it's just amazing," said Tina Fiorentino. "Because of the dreams he has and his desire to show them what his world looks like, people are willing to help him. It's such an inspiration."

Among the more than 60 groups involved with the campaign are: Pennsylvania Association for the Blind, the NJ Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired, Seeing Eye Puppies, Fighting Blindness, Association for Blind Athletes, Wills Eye Hospital, Overbrook School for the Blind, the Free Library of Pennsylvania and the Library for the Blind & Handicapped.

"We are thrilled about the diversity of programs and awareness campaigns that are being offered this month," said Tina Fiorentino. "It is very exciting and we are most appreciative that so many organizations are working together to build a better world for the blind and visually impaired."

On Oct. 24, the Boy Scouts of America will team up with The Little Rock Foundation for "Make a Difference Day" at Camp Little Rock in Medford. For the last nine years, the site has hosted a one-week summer camp program, free to families of blind or visually impaired children.

"We'll be working to improve the campground," said Tina Fiorentino of the event. "We're going to add boardwalks and ramps to cabins so the children have access to certain activities."

Special discounts for the blind and visually impaired are available with Ride the Ducks, the National Liberty Museum and the Academy of Natural Sciences.

Goodwill Industries of Southern New Jersey is communicating with all clients and shoppers in October about the campaign and created a call center there for people who are blind.

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A full list of events and programs is available at [www.blindnessawarenessmonth.org](http://www.blindnessawarenessmonth.org). For more information, visit The Little Rock Foundation Web site, [www.tlrf.org](http://www.tlrf.org), or call 877-220-2500.

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