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Blind youth shares his talents

By **MARLYN MARGULIS**
For the Courier-Post

VOORHEES

Rocco Fiorentino does not let blindness hold him back.

For years, the Voorhees boy has been an activist for the handicapped and a speaker on behalf of the blind and visually impaired.

At age 5, Rocco asked the New Jersey Legislature for funding to cover more Braille instruction and teachers for blind and visually impaired children.

His efforts have snared an extra \$300,000 to provide additional teachers and classes, according to the New Jersey Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired.

"Reading Braille is like putting a light inside of me," said Rocco, who will be 9 in October. "I move my fingers across the dots, and a whole new world is open to me, full of opportunities. If I can't read Braille, I'm just a kid with no future."

Premature birth

When Rocco was born in 1996, he was four months premature. He weighed in at 1½ pounds, and his lungs were not fully developed. He suffered from premature retinopathy, a disorder of the retina.

After their son had been treated at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia for six months, Tina and Rocco Fiorentino brought him home.

"We brought home a child who could only see a little light out of one eye," said Tina Fiorentino, who explained that Rocco could not see shapes but could differentiate light from darkness.

"We were given no information or resources at the hospital. After getting over the initial shock, I started looking for support service.

"A year later, my husband suggested we start a foundation so that we could share the resources and services available to families of blind and visually impaired children."

The Fiorentinos established

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ON THE WEB

■ To learn more about The Little Rock Foundation, visit www.littlerockfoundation.org.



JOSE F. MORENO/Courier-Post

Rocco Fiorentino, an 8-year-old who shows signs of being a musical prodigy, plays the piano at his home in Voorhees. Rocco, who is blind, has sung the national anthem at the National Constitution Center and played the piano for vacationers aboard a cruise ship.

A musical prodigy? The signs are there

By **MARLYN MARGULIS**
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VOORHEES

It isn't surprising that Rocco Fiorentino shows signs of being a musical prodigy. His parents calmed him down when he was an infant by placing tapes of classical and jazz music in his warming bed at the hospital.

Later on, they played songs to help their son learn to identify body parts, and Tina Fiorentino took her infant son to Mommy and Me music classes.

After his teacher at Signal Hill Elementary School in Voorhees played a Mozart recording,

Rocco returned home and played the piece from memory.

The 8-year-old has studied piano for four years, plays drums and has composed three jazz tunes.

Tina Fiorentino also studied piano when she was young, and her husband played drums, but Rocco is the only family member who sings.

He has performed the national anthem, "God Bless America" and other tunes at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, Campbell's Field in Camden and at private events.

When the family went on a Caribbean cruise last January,

Rocco tickled the ivories when the regular pianist was on break and drew a crowd. He also played piano by the pool, at the piano bar and in one of the ship's lounges. Rocco played and sang "Margaritaville," "That Summer Wind" and "Walking After Midnight."

Upon meeting Rocco, the captain said, "I heard you're taking over my ship."

Rocco's talent was recognized this spring. He was recently named ambassador for the March of Dimes in Philadelphia. He was also invited to perform the national anthem in front of 3,500 people at the March of

Dimes WalkAmerica fundraiser in Philadelphia.

Sal Dupree of Linwood, who has taught voice for 35 years, acknowledged that Rocco is one of the few children who "have that special thing called 'it.'"

"Rocco has perfect pitch, something less than 1 percent of people have," Dupree said.

"I think he has a photographic mind, through his ears. He has inner confidence, and his life revolves around music. To live in his world and accomplish what he has in eight years is unimaginable. He is a blessed and gifted child who brightens my life."

CAMDEN COUNTY

Communities

Talents/Blind Voorhees boy a key fundraiser on behalf of the handicapped, visually impaired

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The Little Rock Foundation, an all-volunteer, nonprofit family resource center based within Wills Eye Hospital in Philadelphia.

The foundation's mission is to act as a resource center and help children reach their maximum potential in a friendly, caring, family-oriented environment.

"There are 2,100 blind and visually impaired children registered with the New Jersey Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired," Tina Fiorentino said, citing approximate statistics. "Out of those, 100 of them are totally blind, including my son."

The foundation, which is funded by companies and individuals, awards scholarships to blind and visually impaired students who will be attending undergraduate programs in various colleges each year. It also offers a full-scholarship, week-long camp program for visually impaired and blind children ages 7 to 14.

An accomplishment

Rocco, who has read Braille books from the New Jersey Library for the Blind and Handicapped since he was 5, recently accomplished an important goal.

"Rocco offered to read some books in order to get a pet dog," Tina Fiorentino explained. "He decided on 20 books. We found him a pet dog, and he said he wanted to name it 'Louis Braille with the curly tail,' after the man who founded the six-dot system of reading and writing for the blind."

Madge Bradley wasn't surprised about the book-reading accomplishment. An early childhood special educator and technology teacher at Kingsway Learning Center in Haddonfield, she has known Rocco since he was an 18-month old tot enrolled in Kingsway's Early Intervention Program.

"We used a computer with a specialized keyboard to develop his language and mobility," Bradley said. "He attended until he was 3. I tutored Rocco until he was 7. He's a remarkable young man who taught me many life lessons."

Rocco and his mother have begun their own outreach program.



JOSE F. MORENO/Courier-Post

Rocco Florentino of Voorhees, a spokesman for the blind and visually impaired, uses his fingers to read from a Braille book.

They demonstrate the Braille Writer and speak to elementary-school children about being blind and the Braille code. They also have given speeches about saving the lives of premature infants.

"In March, Rocco and I gave a speech about his prematurity and how children are being helped by the March of Dimes campaign," she noted.

Despite his busy schedule, Rocco has kept his focus on Braille literacy. In October, he and 26 Braille readers were honored by the New Jersey Library

for the Blind and Handicapped and the New Jersey Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired.

"Rocco is a champion for Braille literacy," said Venetia V. Demson, director of the New Jersey Library for the Blind and Handicapped. "He is a self-motivated young man whose desire to help other blind children reflects a wisdom and altruism beyond his years."

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