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A voice for change

Thursday, July 17, 2008

Rocco Fiorentino is a remarkable young man for many reasons. The most important: He is alive.



BOB BRAUN

This was not at all expected when he and his twin Michael were born four months prematurely in October 1996.

"The doctors put his chances at 3 percent," says Tina, his mother. "For weeks, maybe months, I expected every phone call to be the one that said he was dead."

Michael did not survive, but Rocco struggled on, after weighing less than 1.5 pounds at birth.

"And we wondered, if he lived, what would his life be like?" she says.

Because she could not hold him -- at one point, he had 17 IVs in his tiny body -- she asked nurses at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia if they would play music near his incubator.

"He wasn't getting any stimulation."

That may or may not account for another trait that makes him remarkable: He is a musician who sings, plays the piano, drums and sax and engineers his own recordings.

"That's my passion," he says. "That's what I want to do."

Rocco does mostly charity appearances, business conferences, and community events, although he's appeared at New York City's Birdland - he'll be there Monday night -- and has done a few television shows, including "The Today Show."

He has a presence about him, a poise and self-confidence that make him perfect for another pursuit -- representing his family's foundation and appearing before the Legislature to argue (he's not a registered lobbyist) for more money for disabled kids.

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Because there's something else remarkable about Rocco Fiorentino that, after some time with him, doesn't seem all that out of the ordinary:

He's blind.

Or, as he sums up his reaction to blindness in pre-teen idiom:

"It's kind of like, 'Yeah, whatever.'"

Rocco suffered from retinopathy, once the leading cause of blindness among children. One of Rocco's heroes, Stevie Wonder, was blinded by the same condition. Last year, in Atlantic City, Rocco got to meet Wonder and they played "You Are the Sunshine of My Life" together.

Tina Fiorentino says her family doesn't have much musical talent. She took piano lessons as a child and, after her son was old enough to sit on her lap, she played and sang to him.

"But, when he was about 2, he would reach out for the keys and start playing on his own. He had perfect pitch. He heard a note once and he could nail it," she says.

She also remembers a day, not long after, when the toddler belted out his own version of Jimmy Buffett's "Margaritaville."

"We were shocked with the power of his voice," she says.

The Fiorentinos signed him for music lessons. Rocco, a main-streamed student in the local public school, is learning the tech side of music on his own and operates a studio in his basement -- and has wired their Voorhees home for sound.

"We don't know how he learned," she says. "He can do anything electronic."

Much of Rocco's charity work revolves around the Little Rock Foundation, begun by his parents. It's aimed at helping families learn more about dealing with blindness.

The foundation operates centers at two Philadelphia hospitals, a summer camp and a scholarship program for blind college students. Rocco -- he's the Little Rock; his father, also Rocco, a Philadelphia franchise services owner, is the Big Rock -- performs frequently at foundation fundraisers.

The youngster has come up with a new idea, connecting blind children through the internet in what he calls "the Kids' Council" to find out what these children need and how to persuade government to provide it.

Rocco says he is not eager to get involved in politics, but he enjoyed talking to legislators and feels he helped get money restored for services to blind children.

"Not something I want to do," says Rocco. "It's something I have to do."

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