

Ohio's top youth volunteers of 2020 honored with \$2,500 donation for local COVID-19 response
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Actress Kristen Bell congratulates Lewis Center and Mason students at this weekend's Prudential Spirit of Community Awards virtual celebration

COLUMBUS, Ohio, May 4, 2020 /PRNewswire/ -- Ohio's top two youth volunteers of 2020, **Akhila Boda, 18, of Lewis Center** and **Rishika Jeyaprakash, 14, of Mason**, were recognized this weekend for their outstanding volunteer service during the 25th annual, and first-ever virtual, Prudential Spirit of Community Awards national recognition celebration.



In recognition of the spirit of service that they have demonstrated in their communities, Akhila and Rishika – along with 100 other top youth volunteers from across the country – were also each given \$2,500 to donate toward the local COVID-19 response efforts of a nonprofit organization of their choice. These funds come in addition to the \$1,000 scholarship and engraved silver medallion they earned as Ohio's top youth volunteers of 2020.

The Prudential Spirit of Community Awards program, sponsored by Prudential Financial in partnership with the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), named Akhila and Rishika Ohio's top high school and middle level youth volunteers in February.

"Over the past 25 years, this program has honored students spanning three generations, and the common thread between them has been the determination of young people to respond to the challenges of the moment," said Charles Lowrey, chairman and CEO of Prudential Financial. "Who better than this group of young leaders from all over the country to help identify and direct resources to community needs arising from COVID-19?"

As State Honorees, Akhila and Rishika also earned an all-expense-paid trip to Washington, D.C. for the program's annual national recognition events; the trip, however, was canceled due to COVID-19 and changed to a three-day online celebration this past weekend. In addition to remarks and congratulations from actress Kristen Bell, honorees had opportunities to connect with each other through online project-sharing sessions, learn about service and advocacy from accomplished past Spirit of Community honorees, hear congratulatory remarks from Lowrey and NASSP Executive Director and CEO JoAnn Bartoletti, and more.

"We admire these young leaders for their ability to assess the needs of the communities they serve and find meaningful ways to address them," said Bartoletti. "At a time when everyone is looking for optimism, these students are a bright light for their peers and the adults in their lives."

About the Honorees

Akhila (pictured left), a senior at Metro Early College High School, founded a club at her school that advocates for female empowerment and organizes fundraisers to support girls' education in third-world countries. "As an American with Indian parents, I've experienced two worlds that are on opposite ends," Akhila said. "In India it is not uncommon to witness a girl getting married at 14 to support her family. In the states, my parents have given me a choice to make decisions about my future." Believing that all girls should be able to make their own choices about their lives, Akhila began searching for organizations that advocate for girls' rights and discovered Girl Up, a United Nations initiative focused on gender equality. When she learned her school did not have a Girl Up club, she started one.

The club started in 2016 with only two members; today, 15 students attend meetings and plan projects addressing issues important to them. The group has met with Ohio congressmen to lobby for bills that seek to enhance educational opportunities for adolescent girls around the world, and has raised more than \$10,000 for that cause through several fundraisers. These have included a 5K "Doughnut Dash" run/walk and a doughnut sales event, the proceeds of which have enabled 21 girls in Liberia and 70 girls in India to remain in school, provided six girls in Malawi with new bicycles to get to school, and supported girls in Uganda and Guatemala.

Rishika (pictured right), an eighth-grader at Mason Middle School, started a nonprofit that organizes service projects to "plant the seed of kindness" in kids, and in the process has raised over \$8,000 for various causes and provided more than 4,500 new toys for a children's hospital. "When I was 7 or 8, I started to notice the world around me and saw many things that bothered me," said Rishika. "Something inside of me kept nagging and telling me to push away the darkness and make a difference in others' lives." In 2015, Rishika followed through on that impulse and founded a nonprofit organization, "Little Helpers," to inspire kids to help people in need.

Initially, Rishika attracted a group of friends to join her mission as she planned and promoted monthly projects via email and social media. She inspired even more participation by speaking to classrooms, school groups and sports teams, and by designing her own website. Over the past four years, Rishika's group has involved more than 500 young volunteers in over 50 service projects, such as making scarves and blankets, visiting retirement homes, sending cards to first responders and hosting toy drives. When she turned 11, she bought 44 toys with her birthday money and donated them to Cincinnati Children's Hospital. Since then, she has focused her efforts on running toy drives for the hospital and encouraging others to do the same. Rishika has set a goal of donating 50,000 toys by 2022 because "a toy is not just a toy, but a healing tool for children."

About The Prudential Spirit of Community Awards

The Prudential Spirit of Community Awards program was created in 1995 to identify and recognize young people for outstanding volunteer service – and, in so doing, inspire others to volunteer, too. In the past 25 years, the program has honored more than 130,000 young volunteers at the local, state and national level. For more information about The Prudential Spirit of Community Awards and this year's honorees, visit <http://spirit.prudential.com>. For more information about the National Association of Secondary School Principals, visit www.nassp.org. For more information about Prudential Financial, visit www.news.prudential.com.

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