

Ohio's Top Youth Volunteers Of 2020 Selected By National Program
Tuesday, February 04, 2020 02:07:00 PM (GMT)

The Prudential Spirit of Community Awards honors Lewis Center and Mason students with \$1,000, medallions and trip to nation's capital
Finalists also named in Solon, Cincinnati, Dayton, Kent, Louisville, Akron, Swanton and Wickliffe

COLUMBUS, Ohio, Feb. 4, 2020 /PRNewswire/ -- Akhila Boda, 17, of Lewis Center and Rishika Jeyaprakash, 14, of Mason today were named Ohio's top two youth volunteers of 2020 by The Prudential Spirit of Community Awards, a nationwide program honoring young people for outstanding acts of volunteerism. As State Honorees, Akhila and Rishika each will receive \$1,000, an engraved silver medallion and an all-expense-paid trip in early May to Washington, D.C., where they will join the top two honorees from each of the other states and the District of Columbia for four days of national recognition events. During the trip, 10 students will be named America's top youth volunteers of 2020.

The Prudential Spirit of Community Awards, now in its 25th year, is conducted by Prudential Financial in partnership with the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP).

These are Ohio's top youth volunteers of 2020:

High School State Honoree: Akhila Boda
Nominated by Metro Early College High School

Akhila, 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 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.

Middle Level State Honoree: Rishika Jeyaprakash
Nominated by Mason Middle School

Rishika, 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 \$7,200 for various causes and provided more than 3,000 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."

Distinguished Finalists

The program judges also recognized eight other Ohio students as Distinguished Finalists for their impressive community service activities. Each will receive an engraved bronze medallion.

These are Ohio's Distinguished Finalists for 2020:

Ethan Berkovitz, 18, of Solon, Ohio, a senior at Solon High School, regularly volunteers his time to spreading awareness of juvenile arthritis; he was a youth honoree for the Cleveland Walk to Cure Arthritis, served as a junior ambassador for the Arthritis Foundation, and has encouraged his state and federal lawmakers to support arthritis-related legislation. Ethan, who was diagnosed with the condition at the age of 8, has also raised money to benefit the Arthritis Foundation.

Grace Desserich, 17, of Cincinnati, Ohio, a senior at Wyoming High School, runs "The HeArt Auction," an annual event featuring art by children with brain cancer that has raised more than \$25,000 to benefit cancer research; her efforts include promoting the event, sending canvases and art supplies to participating children, and running in-person and online auctions. Grace started this initiative in honor of her sister, Elena, who died from brain cancer at age 6.

Jade Eilers, 16, of Dayton, Ohio, a junior at Centerville High School, regularly advocates against teenage drug use through a variety of activities; she has created informational YouTube videos, led a march to the Ohio Statehouse, spoken to lawmakers about drug-related legislation and given a speech at the United Nations. Jade, who is also an active member of B.O.L.D. (Building Our Lives Drug Free), was inspired to get involved with this initiative after losing family members to addiction.

Anna Rose Ford, 18, of Kent, Ohio, a senior at Theodore Roosevelt High School, started and runs the "Hope Tree Project," educating other young people about the impact of drug use through a presentation and "hope tree"-building craft project; she has spoken to more than 5,000 people and raised more than \$30,000 to benefit The Ohio House, which serves people fighting addiction. Anna, whose brother stayed at The Ohio House and has been drug-free for five years, started this project to share the impact addiction has on a family.

Kamaria Montgomery, 17, of Louisville, Ohio, a senior at Glenoak High School, held a pajama drive at her school to benefit the Children's Network of Stark County, an organization that helps children who have experienced abuse; her efforts include collaborating with her student council to run the drive, promoting her cause and collecting and donating 50 pairs of pajamas. Kamaria plans to make her initiative an annual event, and hopes to expand her drive to include hygiene products, as well.

Elizabeth Nichols, 17, of Akron, Ohio, a senior at Woodridge High School, regularly volunteers her time at One of a Kind Pets, a no-kill animal shelter in her community; as a "garage cat caretaker," she medicates, vaccinates and feeds the cats, replaces litter boxes and bedding, and cleans cages – all aiming to help keep the cats healthy and ready for adoption. Elizabeth grew up with pets in her home and started this volunteer activity with her mom.

Colin Smith, 17, of Swanton, Ohio, a junior at Evergreen High School, was the lead coordinator for "Color for Camo," a two-mile color run that raised money for Veterans Matter, a nonprofit that provides housing to veterans; his efforts include leading bi-weekly planning meetings, spreading awareness of the cause, securing sponsorships and donations, and coordinating day-of logistics. Through this project, Colin helped raise \$5,000 to benefit eight local veterans.

Christina Tran, 18, of Wickliffe, Ohio, a senior at Wickliffe High School, raised a puppy named Apollo as part of the guide dog training program at Pilot Dogs, which provides service dogs to people who need them; along with taking general care of Apollo, she took him to obedience classes, socialized him in new environments and spread awareness of the importance of guide dogs. Christina was inspired to participate in this program by her sister, who also helps raise future guide dogs.

"In our 25th year of honoring young volunteers, we are as inspired as ever by the work students are doing to address the needs of a changing world," said Charles Lowrey, chairman and CEO of Prudential Financial, Inc. "We hope that their resolve, their initiative and their perspectives on society's challenges move others to consider how they can make a difference, too."

"Middle level and high school students are doing remarkable things to shape the future of their communities

through volunteer service. They inspire all students and schools to drive learning with real-world challenges," said JoAnn Bartoletti, executive director of NASSP. "Congratulations to each of the 2020 honorees – it's an honor to celebrate your commitment to creating positive change."

About The Prudential Spirit of Community Awards

The Prudential Spirit of Community Awards represents the United States' largest youth recognition program based solely on volunteer service. All public and private middle level and high schools in the country, as well as all Girl Scout councils, county 4-H organizations, American Red Cross chapters, YMCAs and Points of Light Global Network members, were eligible to select a student or member for a local Prudential Spirit of Community Award. These Local Honorees were then reviewed by an independent judging panel, which selected State Honorees and Distinguished Finalists based on criteria including personal initiative, effort, impact and personal growth.

While in Washington, D.C., the 102 State Honorees – one middle level and one high school student from each state and the District of Columbia – will tour the capital's landmarks, meet top youth volunteers from other parts of the world, attend a gala awards ceremony at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, and visit their congressional representatives on Capitol Hill. On May 4, 10 of the State Honorees – five middle level and five high school students – will be named America's top youth volunteers of 2020. These National Honorees will receive additional \$5,000 scholarships, gold medallions, crystal trophies and \$5,000 grants from Prudential for nonprofit charitable organizations of their choice.

Since the program began in 1995, more than 130,000 young volunteers have been honored at the local, state and national level. The program also is conducted by Prudential subsidiaries in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Ireland, India, China and Brazil. In addition to granting its own awards, The Prudential Spirit of Community Awards program also distributes President's Volunteer Service Awards to qualifying Local Honorees.

For information on all of this year's Prudential Spirit of Community State Honorees and Distinguished Finalists, visit <http://spirit.prudential.com> or www.nassp.org/spirit.

About NASSP

The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) is the leading organization of and voice for principals and other school leaders across the United States. NASSP seeks to transform education through school leadership, recognizing that the fulfillment of each student's potential relies on great leaders in every school committed to the success of each student. Reflecting its long-standing commitment to student leadership development, NASSP administers the National Honor Society, National Junior Honor Society, National Elementary Honor Society, and National Student Council. Learn more at www.nassp.org

About Prudential Financial

Prudential Financial, Inc. (NYSE: PRU), a financial services leader, has operations in the United States, Asia, Europe, and Latin America. Prudential's diverse and talented employees are committed to helping individual and institutional customers grow and protect their wealth through a variety of products and services, including life insurance, annuities, retirement-related services, mutual funds and investment management. In the U.S., Prudential's iconic Rock symbol has stood for strength, stability, expertise and innovation for more than a century. For more information, please visit www.news.prudential.com.

***For Spirit of Community Awards program logo and medallion graphics, please visit
<https://spirit.prudential.com/resources/media>***

☐ View original content to download multimedia: <http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/ohios-top-youth-volunteers-of-2020-selected-by-national-program-300996004.html>

SOURCE Prudential Financial, Inc.

Contacts: Harold Banks, Prudential Financial, (973) 802-8974 or (973) 216-4833,
harold.banks@prudential.com

Countries: United States

Industries: Banking & Financial Services, Education

Languages: English

Primary Identifiers: PRU-US

Related Identifiers: PRU-US

Subjects: Corporate Social Responsibility, Human Interest Groups