

**Florida's Top Two Youth Volunteers Selected in 21st Annual National Awards Program**  
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**Key West and North Palm Beach students earn \$1,000 awards, engraved medallions and trip to nation's capital**

**Honors also bestowed on youth volunteers in Miami, Coral Gables, Ocoee, Davie, Winter Park and Parkland**

Sydney Hamilton, 17, of Key West and Kayla Abramowitz, 13, of North Palm Beach today were named Florida's top two youth volunteers of 2016 by The Prudential Spirit of Community Awards, a nationwide program honoring young people for outstanding acts of volunteerism. Sydney was nominated by Key West High School in Key West, and Kayla was nominated by Watson B. Duncan Middle School in Palm Beach Gardens. The Prudential Spirit of Community Awards, now in its 21st year, is conducted by Prudential Financial in partnership with the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP).

Sydney, a senior at Key West High School, started "Sydney's Hope Project" two years ago to provide games, supervise craft projects and organize special events to brighten the lives of children undergoing treatment for cancer at the Nicklaus Children's Hospital in Miami. Sydney was expected to live only a month or two when she was diagnosed with rare liver cancer before age 2, but after much treatment, was declared cancer-free. "As a 15-year cancer survivor, I have lived and endured the challenges that a child with cancer must overcome to survive," Sydney said. She was reminded of those challenges two years ago when a young family friend was diagnosed with the same cancer that she had overcome. At that point, Sydney knew she wanted to do something to help young cancer patients.

There is no pediatric oncology unit in the Florida Keys, where Sydney lives, so she decided she would make the eight-hour round trip to Miami to provide fun activities for young cancer patients there. As founder and chairperson of Sydney's Hope Project, she fundraises through social media, plans a variety of fun activities for the kids, coordinates with hospital staff to schedule a visit about every six weeks, and recruits and trains volunteers to help. In addition, Sydney won a \$20,000 grant to implement the "Bravery Beads" program at the hospital, which awards children a special bead for every procedure or event they endure during their treatment. Sydney said her mission is not only to ease the burden borne by pediatric oncology patients, but also to show young people "how each and every one of us has the ability to improve a day in the life of a child with cancer."

Kayla, an eighth-grader at Watson B. Duncan Middle School, has collected nearly 10,000 DVDs, books and other items for 81 hospitals and Ronald McDonald Houses in all 50 states through her nonprofit organization, "Kayla Cares 4 Kids." Kayla, who has juvenile arthritis and Crohn's disease, knows firsthand how boring hospital stays can be, especially for kids who are hospitalized for long periods. After a two-week stay at a hospital that had a limited DVD selection, Kayla returned home and noticed some old DVDs her family didn't watch anymore. She asked if she could donate them. "The hospital was so happy to receive just two DVDs from me," she said. "That's when I realized I could do much more."

Kayla set a goal of collecting 100 DVDs for the hospital and went to work. She made a flier and began knocking on doors in her neighborhood. Then she got her Girl Scout troop involved and asked her principal for permission to have a schoolwide collection drive, with a pizza party for the class collecting the most. After the local paper published a story on her project and her parents created a Facebook page for her, the family living room was soon piled high with hundreds of DVDs, books, video games, game consoles and electronic items. She began speaking in front of schools and business groups to promote her organization and was chosen by the Chamber of Commerce as the Young Entrepreneur of the Year. Her new goal is to donate items to every children's hospital and Ronald McDonald house in the U.S. "I've learned that no matter how small something starts out, with enough passion and effort, you can make it bigger than anyone ever dreamed," Kayla said.

As State Honorees, Sydney and Kayla 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 2016.

## Distinguished Finalists

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

These are Florida's Distinguished Finalists for 2016:

**Daniela Bond**, 17, of Miami, Fla., a senior at School for Advanced Studies, co-founded "The Girl Print," a nonprofit organization dedicated to inspiring girls to become leaders in their communities, and has raised \$4,000 hosting vendor fairs and other events since October 2014 to benefit the United Nations campaign Girl Up and the Lotus House women's shelter in Miami. Daniela, who along with her three co-founders is passionate about women's rights and equal access to education, is currently planning events and managing the organization's social media presence as the president of the organization.

**Aurora Cosio**, 15, of Coral Gables, Fla., a freshman at Carrollton School of the Sacred Heart, was invited in 2014 to help implement CODELLA, a girls-only coding, STEM and tech entrepreneurship project for Hispanic girls under the poverty level, and has since helped to create a promotional video that resulted in a \$50,000 grant to fund the program. Aurora, who serves as a teaching assistant and mentor, helped create partnerships with tech companies and apply for \$33,000 in additional grants, and works with the students to develop websites and apps via weekly in-person sessions and a live, online tech and coding presentation.

**Jacob Crabtree**, 17, of Ocoee, Fla., a senior at Ocoee High School, helped his family found the "Jimmy Crabtree Cancer Fund" in 2011 in his father's memory, and has since helped to raise \$100,000 to support 18 families struggling with the effects of a cancer diagnosis. Jacob, who is a member of the organization's board of directors, has helped the organization put together a slate of annual fundraising events including a poker tournament, golf tournament and bowling tournament.

**Ruben Martinez**, 16, of Miami, Fla., a senior at John A. Ferguson Senior High School, founded his school's Key Club in 2013 and since then has served the club as secretary, webmaster and event coordinator, while also serving in leadership roles at the district level as the Florida District Lieutenant Governor for Division 26A and Florida District Service Chair. In addition, Ruben founded "The LEAD Project (Let's End All Discrimination)" in an effort to educate youth about prejudice, sexual abuse and bullying.

**Benjamin Morales**, 16, of Davie, Fla., a junior at West Broward High School, raised \$20,000 in 2014 with a Schoolstarter campaign to build a primary school in his sister's native country of Guatemala, which opened in July 2015. Benjamin, who helped to build the "Benjamin Morales School," also raised \$1,500 with the "Share A Book Project" to help fund school supplies and backpacks for the 56 students enrolled in the school, and is currently raising funds to build another school and an agricultural center.

**Baxter Murrell**, 17, of Winter Park, Fla., a senior at Winter Park High School, founded "Baxter's Bags" in 2013, raising \$18,250 in funds and in-kind donations to provide backpacks stuffed with basic essentials for 400 men, women and children who are homeless. Baxter, who spent 24 hours on the streets speaking with people to determine the true needs of those who are homeless, coordinated publicity, corporate donations and partnerships, and recruited 100 volunteers to help stuff and distribute the bags.

**Elias Rosenfeld**, 18, of Miami, Fla., a senior at Dr. Michael M. Krop Senior High School, founded "United Student Immigrants" in 2012, an organization for which he has raised \$18,000 to support its mission to assist undocumented students in applying for scholarships and colleges. Elias, who was identified as undocumented at 11 years old after his mother died, has helped more than 100 students, and partnered with numerous like-minded organizations to lobby legislators to support the DREAM Act, which would grant certain rights to undocumented immigrants.

**Amanda Weinstein**, 17, of Parkland, Fla., a senior at North Broward Preparatory School, founded the "Family Central Teen Advisory Board" in 2013 and has encouraged 50 teens to share in her mission to help the parent organization Family Central, a nonprofit that helps children and families in need. Amanda, who had been volunteering with Family Central for 10 years, organizes toy, food, clothing and school supply drives, and has also created a tutoring and mentoring program.

"Prudential commends each of these young volunteers for using their creativity and compassion to bring positive change to their communities," said Prudential Chairman and CEO John Strangfeld. "We hope their stories inspire others to consider how they can make a difference, too."

"We are pleased to honor these students not only for their exemplary acts of service, but for the powerful example they've set for their peers," said JoAnn Bartoletti, executive director of NASSP. "Congratulations to each of the 2016 honorees."

### **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 HandsOn Network affiliates, 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 2, 10 of the State Honorees – five middle level and five high school students – will be named America's top youth volunteers of 2016. These National Honorees will receive additional \$5,000 awards, gold medallions, crystal trophies and \$5,000 grants from The Prudential Foundation for nonprofit charitable organizations of their choice.

Since the program began in 1995, more than 115,000 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 on behalf of President Barack Obama.

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](http://www.nassp.org/spirit).

### **About NASSP**

The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) is the leading organization of and voice for middle level and high school principals, assistant principals, and school leaders from across the United States and 35 countries around the world. The association connects and engages school leaders through advocacy, research, education, and student programs. NASSP advocates on behalf of all school leaders to ensure the success of each student and strengthens school leadership practices through the design and delivery of high quality professional learning experiences. 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 Association of Student Councils. For more information about NASSP, located in Reston, VA, visit [www.nassp.org](http://www.nassp.org).

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**Editors: For full-color pictures of the Spirit of Community Awards program logo and medallions, click here: <http://bit.ly/Xi4oFW>**

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Contact:

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

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