

2016 Prudential Spirit of Community National Honorees



KAYLA ABRAMOWITZ, 13, of North Palm Beach, Fla., 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.

JUNGIN ANGIE LEE, 17, of Naperville, Ill., a junior at Metea Valley High School in Aurora, co-founded a nonprofit organization that has generated nearly \$200,000 over the past nine years through annual fundraising events to help find a cure for her rare neuromuscular disease. When she was 15 months old, Angie was diagnosed with spinal muscular atrophy (SMA), a genetic disorder that causes debilitating and often fatal muscle weakness. In second grade, she made friends with a girl who, upon learning that Angie would never be able to walk, wanted to do something to help. So together they started a nonprofit called "Angie's Hope" to raise money for SMA research.

The two friends first set out to raise \$200 with a penny drive. Then, every year they organized another fundraising event, including garage sales, pasta parties, and most recently a "big ball" soccer tournament. Thirty teams of 8-12 players each compete in this wheelchair-friendly tournament, which also features a disc jockey, photo booth, concessions, cheerleaders, a capella groups, raffles and a silent auction. In addition to coordinating and playing in the tournament, Angie has sought support from local businesses, created promotional videos, and managed a website. In 2015 alone, Angie's Hope raised nearly \$40,000 for the national organization Cure SMA. These efforts demonstrate "how huge a difference individuals can make when they combine efforts," she said, and have become "a way for our small community to unite to make a change."

CLARE SZALKOWSKI, 10, of Dubuque, Iowa, a member of the Girl Scouts of Eastern Iowa and Western Illinois and a fifth-grader at Hoover Elementary School, started “Clare Cares” over two years ago to “build friendships and make our community a better place” by organizing projects that benefit bullied children, homeless and hungry people, and others in need of assistance. Clare was inspired to start her project after her older sister had an epileptic seizure at school. “This ‘friend’ made fun of her,” said Clare. “Then she recruited others to make fun of her. That’s when I knew I needed to do something about bullying because, unfortunately, bullying has touched nearly everyone’s life, and that makes me sad.”

Her initial goal was to provide a “buddy bench” on her school’s playground to promote friendship and discourage the isolation that bullied children often feel. Today, every elementary school in her region has a Clare Cares Buddy Bench on its playground – more than 30 benches in all. Clare also formed “kid committees” and scheduled “buddy events” to work on projects supporting the missions of local nonprofits. She and her fellow volunteers have made blankets for children experiencing trauma, created greeting cards for nursing home residents, and filled a Santa’s sleigh for Toys for Tots. They also have provided 22 complete birthday packages to celebrate the birthdays of children in a homeless shelter, filled the shelves of a local food bank with more than a ton of food, and provided bag lunches every Monday for homeless men.

GRACE DAVIS, 11, of Louisville, Ky., a fifth-grader at Greathouse Shryock Traditional Elementary School, has helped raise more than \$140,000 over the past four years to care for babies born prematurely by distributing piggy banks to students in her community and encouraging them to fill them up. One day Grace had an idea. What if every child in her school filled a piggy bank for a good cause, she thought. “As a kid, it is hard to think about raising money, but I knew this idea would take off,” said Grace.

With the help of her first-grade teacher, she took her idea, called “Piggies for Preemies,” to officials at Kosair Children’s Hospital, whose neonatal unit would be the beneficiary of the program. A local bank agreed to donate 604 piggy banks, one for every student in Grace’s school, and as an incentive for filling those banks, offered a chance to win a \$500 scholarship. The students were encouraged to think of creative ways to raise money, said Grace. Some had yard sales, some sold baked goods, others operated lemonade stands. Grace created fliers to advertise the program throughout the community and the bank provided piggy banks at all of its Louisville branches to anyone who wanted one. The media and the hospital’s website further spread the word, and it wasn’t long before students at other schools in her district and beyond began filling piggy banks. The program continues to grow; Grace’s banking partner has announced it will distribute piggies at branches across the state. “It is so exciting to see piggies all around our city raising money and awareness for all preemies,” said Grace. “People just love these pigs!”

CONNOR ARCHER, 17, of Stillwater, Maine, a senior at Old Town High School, works to educate the public about autism and the challenges faced by people with autism like himself, and has raised more than \$12,000 for organizations that help people with special needs. Connor was diagnosed with autism when he was 3 years old. Luckily, he said, his parents were tireless advocates for him and searched until they found a preschool that could help him develop his full potential. As he grew older, he wanted to give back to the school that had helped him so much, so he created “sensory learning gardens” for the children there. In 2014, Connor decided he wanted to do more for kids with special needs and founded “The Courageous Steps Project.”

The project’s initial event was a walk-run fundraiser to benefit local schools that help children with special needs. The first one raised nearly \$4,000, and a second one brought in more than \$6,000. Other fundraising activities, such as a benefit dinner at a local restaurant, have pushed Connor’s total to more than \$12,000. Much of that money has been donated to benefit organizations that have played a key role in Connor’s own

development, and other groups that work with kids with autism. Connor also has awarded scholarships to three graduating seniors who have overcome their own challenges, purchased iPads and a sound system for his former preschool, and conducted two drives to collect supplies for area schools. “Strong communities begin with individuals who have the support to take their own courageous steps,” he said.

MARIA KELLER, 15, of Plymouth, Minn., a sophomore at Orono High School, founded a nonprofit called “Read Indeed” when she was 8 years old, and has since collected more than 1.7 million books for children in need in 50 states and 17 other countries. An avid reader who couldn’t imagine going to sleep at night without a bedtime story, Maria one day asked her mother why some of her classmates didn’t read much and was told that perhaps it was because their parents couldn’t afford to buy them books. “I became aware that there are children throughout the country and beyond who have never owned a book,” she said. Maria set out to change that.

With her parents’ help, she formed her nonprofit and began organizing book drives in her community, which she publicized through the news media and a website. Her goal was to collect one million books by the time she turned 18, a number she exceeded five years early. Initially, people would leave piles of books on her front steps and Maria would store them in her garage, but it wasn’t long before the books outgrew her house. Today, Maria has warehouse space to store her books and leads more than 250 volunteers – mostly young people – who twice a month help her sort, box, and distribute them to hospitals, orphanages and schools in the U.S. and abroad. She also has recruited corporate sponsors, applied for grants, and raised more than \$80,000 in individual contributions to purchase new books and cover shipping costs. She estimates that her organization has touched the lives of 800,000 children. “I am determined to continue getting books to kids who need them the most,” Maria said.

JAMES LEA, 17, of Las Vegas, Nev., a junior at Faith Lutheran Middle School and High School, helps brighten the holiday season for children who have recently lost a parent by surprising their families with an anonymous gift each day for 12 days, tied to the theme of the song “12 Days of Christmas.” In 2008, when James was 9 years old, his father died from a sudden heart attack. “It was hard on my brother, my mom, and me,” said James. “Even though we would laugh at times, the pain never went away.” Then one day in December, a mysterious gift of pears appeared on the family doorstep. And for each of the next 11 days, James and his family found another gift left for them. It turned out the family’s church was behind the surprise, though they didn’t know it at the time. “By the twelfth day, we were so excited and happy,” said James. “We couldn’t believe that we could feel so normal again.”

Wanting to pass along the joy their family had experienced, James and his brother started ringing the doorbells of other grieving families, leaving gifts, and running away. Soon after, they helped their mother found a nonprofit called “In12Days” to expand the effort. The family built a website and began reaching out to individuals, other charities and companies for support. Every year, they recruit 12 companies to donate \$5,000 each to cover the cost of the surprises. To identify families suffering from loss, they contact schools, religious groups and civic organizations. Surprises include things like a basket of fresh pears, an inflatable pool turtle filled with Dove chocolates, a French hen meal, and a wreath of “calling birds” containing airline or sporting event tickets. So far, In12Days has touched the lives of more than 7,000 people in Las Vegas, Chicago, and San Francisco, said James, and now has over 1,000 volunteers supporting its mission.

ZACHARY RICE, 13, of Long Valley, N.J., an eighth-grader at Long Valley Middle School, initiated an annual 5K run/walk that has raised more than \$50,000 over the past three years to provide gaming systems and other

fun distractions for young patients at Goryeb Children's Hospital in Morristown. Zach spent a lot of time in the hospital during fourth and fifth grade due to a painful hip infection and a subsequent debilitating bone condition. His father, however, made it a little easier for him by bringing his gaming system from home. "I quickly learned how important being distracted from pain can be to a child in the hospital," said Zach. When he returned home, he announced that he wanted to buy gaming systems for all the kids in the hospital.

Zach and his mother agreed that a good way to do that would be to raise money with a 5K race. They mapped out a route, set a date, reserved a park and put together sponsorship packets for local businesses. Zach also secured donations of food and refreshments, and held a contest for kids at local schools to determine the design of the event's official T-shirt. Zach had to undergo surgery just a month before the race, but despite having not walked in seven months, he managed to walk the entire course on race day, crossing the finish line to cheers and tears. More than 250 people participated in the event, and enough money was raised to purchase gaming systems for every room at the children's hospital. Zach's "Action for Distraction 5K" has been staged twice since then, raising more funds for other forms of distraction at the hospital, such as art and music programs, as well as for upkeep of its gaming systems.

ALISHA ZHAO, 17, of Portland, Ore., a junior at Lincoln High School, created a club at her school to provide services to local homeless people, and then founded a nonprofit organization called "Kids First Project" to expand her efforts and focus on the needs of homeless youth. While volunteering at a homeless shelter several years ago, Alisha realized that the families there were not getting the help they needed to escape the generational cycle of poverty. "I met youth who were capable of becoming doctors, dancers, and even presidents, yet did not have the resources to achieve their dreams," she said. It quickly became a passion of hers to help supply those resources.

As a freshman, Alisha started the Hope for Homeless Club, which, over the following two years grew to include more than 300 members and conducted projects serving 500 families and an additional 200 individuals. Then, Alisha decided to form a nonprofit that could deliver educational and recreational programs to homeless youth through multiple organizations and shelters. She recruited an advisory board, a board of directors and volunteer leaders, and began organizing activities to help homeless kids reach their potential, including arts and crafts projects, games, tutoring, peer mentoring, life skills classes and donations of school supplies. In recognition of her leadership, Alisha was appointed by Portland's mayor to be the first young person to ever serve on the city's Human Rights Commission.

JACKSON SILVERMAN, 10, of Charleston, S.C., a fifth-grader at Advanced Studies Magnet-Haut Gap Middle School, persuaded a local food bank to let him start a youth volunteer program there in 2013 that has by now packed more than 14,000 weekend lunch bags for kids in need. "One in four kids go hungry in my community, but kids can't change their lives all by themselves," said Jackson. "That is why I wanted to help them." He remembered how fun it was to pack bags of food for the hungry at his church when he was a little boy, and knew his local food bank prepared meal bags for kids who got free lunches at school, but had little to eat on weekends. But when he offered to help, he was told the food bank didn't accept volunteers of his age.

Jackson started his own nonprofit organization called "I Heart Hungry Kids" and, after a little persuasion, got the food bank to agree to a kid volunteer program. He invited his friends to get involved, talked to a newspaper reporter, built a website and Facebook page, and designed a T-shirt to raise money. At Jackson's first food bank "packing party," 25 youngsters packed 150 bags of food. Now, 175 kids are packing 1,500 bags a month. "It makes me feel incredible that all these kids want to work together to make other kids' lives better," said

Jackson, who also has spoken to more than 2,000 people at schools, churches and clubs about the problem of childhood hunger.