

# **TOP YOUTH VOLUNTEERS IN EACH STATE SELECTED IN 17th ANNUAL NATIONAL AWARDS PROGRAM**

## **CONGRATULATIONS to the Prudential Spirit of Community Award Alaska State Honorees and Distinguished Finalists for 2012**

**State Honorees will receive \$1,000, an engraved silver medallion and an all-expense-paid trip to Washington, D.C., May 5-8 for several days of national recognition events. Ten of them will be named America's top youth volunteers for 2012 at that time.**

- **Teressa Baldwin - Top High School State Honoree**

Teressa Baldwin, 18, of Sitka, Alaska, a senior at Mt. Edgecumbe High School, started a nonprofit organization that encourages Alaskan high school student councils and community leaders to implement free suicide prevention programs in their schools. Originally from a village in Alaska's Arctic region, Teressa has lost several family members and friends to suicide. "A suicide there would affect the whole community, but never was a surprise," she said. When she moved to Sitka, "I thought I would get away from the enclosed feeling of being face to face with this subject. But I was wrong. This issue affects all corners of Alaska."

Teressa soon realized that she was not the type of person who could just stand by and watch it happen, so she began sharing the story of how suicide affected her life. Last year, she was appointed by the governor to a statewide suicide prevention council, and then decided to create a program called "Hope4Alaska" that schools can use to educate their students about the warning signs of suicide, and how to help a peer at risk. This program can be implemented through assemblies, retreats or training sessions, and usually includes a community event and a presentation by Teressa. She is currently working with 18 schools and estimates that more than 4,000 Alaskans have benefited from her program so far.

- **Keefer Brown - Top Middle School State Honoree**

Keefer Brown, 13, of Wasilla, Alaska, a seventh-grader at Teeland Middle School, raised more than \$3,500 to help rehabilitate sick and injured seals at the Alaska SeaLife Center in Seward by making and selling candles and other items decorated with shells and seaweed that he collected on the beach. During a school field trip in 2010, Keefer learned that he could "adopt" an animal at the SeaLife Center for \$50. "I chose a harbor seal because I like their playful attitude, soulful eyes and intelligent nature," he explained.

After discussing the idea with his parents, Keefer raised the \$50 by selling candles decorated with items he collected on the beach. "I spend a lot of time during the summer at my grandparents' cabin in Seldovia and like to walk the beach and collect shells and other items

washed up during high tide," he said. He spoke with many tourists and local residents about his candles and his fundraising goal, and ended up raising \$1,300 that first summer. The next summer he sold decorated picture frames, mirrors and wreaths, in addition to candles, earning another \$2,300 for the SeaLife Center. To show its appreciation, the center honored Keefer at a gala in Anchorage, and allowed him to name a baby seal and attend the release of two harbor seals into the wild. "It was a great day," said Keefer, adding that he is now inspired to do even more to "help the declining population of harbor seals."

**Distinguished Finalists will receive an engraved bronze medallion.**

• **Regan Fitzgerald – High School Distinguished Finalist**

Regan Fitzgerald – High School Distinguished Finalist Regan Fitzgerald, 18, of Anchorage, Alaska, a senior at West Anchorage High School, collected money to provide more than 200 diapers and pacifiers to moms living at the Clare House, a temporary shelter for abused women and their children. Regan also collected more than 100 toys for children at Clare House, and plans to continue raising funds and awareness to support the project she calls "Promising Pacies."

• **Courtney Stroh – High School Distinguished Finalist**

Courtney Stroh, 15, of Kenai, Alaska, a sophomore at Kenai Central High School, developed an environmental awareness project known as "R.O.C. the Kenai," which stands for Respecting Our Community and the Kenai River. Courtney has worked with local environmental and government groups, and local fishermen and residents, to encourage personal efforts and government regulation to keep the Kenai coastline clean of fish remains following summer dip net fishing season.