

# Boy, 11, wins Heart of Buffalo Grove Award

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Alex Randell (left) and his mother Ilyce hug Max Randell, who has Canavan Disease. Alex won a Heart of Buffalo Grove Award for his work with his family's foundation. | Courtesy Ilyce Randell

At age 11, Alex Randell is learning the trumpet and how to wrestle, and wants to be a medical researcher when he grows up. He also is a public speaker, experienced fundraiser, and now, a recipient of a Heart of Buffalo Grove Award.

Alex dedicates some of his free time to stuffing envelopes and making calls for Canavan Research Illinois, the non-profit foundation his mother, Ilyce Randell, created to help find a cure for Canavan Disease.

Alex's brother, 16-year-old Max, was born with the genetic disorder, which was once considered fatal. Advances in research, however, have helped extend Max's life.

For setting that example, the Buffalo Grove Area Chamber of Commerce named Alex its 2013 recipient of the Youth Volunteer Award. He beat out the entire Scout pack of Saint Mary, the other finalist in that category.

Alex said his older brother is the greatest joy of his life.

**Q: Most of this year's winners, it took them 40 or 50 years to earn a Heart of Buffalo Grove Award; you did it in 11. How does that feel?**

**A:** This is the first time anything like this has happened. I'm just a little surprised that this is happening.

**Q: Knowing that the majority of your classmates have siblings that are generally healthy, what has it been like to live with a brother who was born with a genetic disorder?**

**A:** Well, a lot of their houses have more than one story. Because of Max's wheelchair, stairs aren't accessible for him, so our house is one story.

**Q: You have participate in extracurricular activities, but you also spend some of your free time stuffing envelopes and making calls for donations. What made you want to work for your family's foundation?**

**A:** I'd been hearing phone conversations with my mom and Dr. Paola Leone, a medical researcher who works at a lab in New Jersey, so I've gotten a backstage pass on what goes on. Ever since I've been really young, I wanted to be a medical researcher. I obviously haven't graduated college yet, so the least I can do is help fundraise. I'd definitely prefer to benefit other people, than benefit my own entertainment.

**Q: There is more to Max than his illness; what is your brother like?**

**A:** There's way more to him. He's hilarious. He's one of those people that, if you're having a bad day and you just see him, he makes you feel better. He has these special healing powers. We don't know where they came from. If someone in our family is sick, we ask Max to use his powers, and then he starts laughing like crazy, and within a couple of hours, that person feels better. It's a real thing.

**Q: You've given speeches. What's it like for a young man to address doctors and scientists?**

**A:** My grandmother, Peggy Shapiro, was an actor, so it's a natural thing that I don't have much stage fright. And I used to ice skate, that got me used to performing. And wrestling, that helps me a lot.

**Q: How close is the medical community to a cure?**

**A:** I personally don't really know, but we're not taking it as one big thing at one time. We're just taking baby steps, and so far, we've made a lot of advancements. Gene therapies have helped us get toward the cure. Slowly, we're definitely helping the kids with Canavan get a lot better. It really is a hopeful reality.

**Q: Another reality is that you might lose Max. Have you thought about life without your brother?**

**A:** I try not to think about it, but when it pops into my head, I just imagine my entire life just being so much more dull and boring. He just lightens everyone's day. Like I said, he has the healing powers.