

# Hawaii Prep student's volunteer efforts recognized with prestigious award

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Megan "Meimei" Nakahara hopes to see the Hawaii green sea turtle be removed from the endangered species list one day.

The eighth-grader at Hawaii Preparatory Academy is humble when talking about the commitment she made four years ago to study and help with the recovery effort of this

native species. Nakahara's remarkable volunteer work made her stand out amongst the more than 40,000 middle and high school students nominated for the 2008 Prudential Spirit of Community Awards.

The 14-year-old honoree received \$1,000, a silver medallion and an all expense paid trip with her parents to Washington, D.C. There Nakahara was personally congratu-

lated by Sarah Ferguson, the Duchess of York, at the 13th annual award ceremony and gala dinner reception at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History.

Ferguson addressed more than 100 top youth volunteers, of which two were from Hawaii, at the ceremony, telling them how important

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Hawaii Preparatory Academy eighth-grader Meimei Nakahara measures the body depth (thickness) of a juvenile green turtle at the Mauna Lani Bay Hotel and Bungalows. HPA

## ▶ NAKAHARA: HPA student says she will donate half of her \$1,000 winnings to research and conservation program

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their volunteer work is and commending them on their commitment to making a difference in the world.

Nakahara enjoyed her visit to the nation's capital, calling it exciting. She was impressed and inspired by the work by the other award winners she met. Many of her peers had done cancer research, helped animals, coached people with disabilities and even donated sports equipment to underprivileged children.

"There was a lot of camaraderie and good work. I learned we all shared similar views when it comes to

volunteering," she said. "We do it as a passion or for an opportunity to give back to our communities, not for money or rewards. Through volunteering, you also learn about others and a lot about yourself."

Nakahara plans to donate half her prize money to HPA's Sea Turtle Research and Conservation Program, which she volunteers with. Her work is supervised by Marc Rice, director of HPA's program, and George Balazs, leader of the Marine Turtle Research Program at NOAA.

"I am really grateful to everyone who has helped me and the opportunities

given to me at HPA," she said. "I owe this award to them."

Nakahara played a lead role in a monitoring project that collects data on Hawaiian green sea turtles and raises public awareness about the plight of this endangered species. A school field trip in the fourth grade sparked her interest in the turtles.

"There was something inside me that sparked," she said. "I just felt like giving back and getting involved."

Two years later, she encountered an opportunity to volunteer with a turtle-tagging group. Nakahara first had to learn about tur-

tles so she could help educate the public about the project. Soon she was going on regular data-collection trips, carefully measuring turtles' width, length, thickness and weight so that their growth could be tracked over time.

Nakahara has participated in more than 20 such trips, and along with others in her school, has been working with the NOAA and the Mauna Lani Bay Hotel to improve turtle research.

"Working with live animals is special because you realize that they have no voice, so humans really need to take care of them," she said.