



**Braille Institute of America, Inc.**

*For Immediate Release*

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**Contact:** Courtney Goines, Media Relations Manager, (323) 663-1111, Ext. 3176

## **California Student Wins At National Braille Challenge Competition**

(Danville)—Sixteen-year-old **Caitlin Hernandez** of **Danville**, took home the grand prize at the only national academic competition for blind students in the United States —**the 6th Annual National Braille Challenge™**. **Caitlin**, who was born totally blind due to an eye disease called Leber's congenital amaurosis, won first place in the Varsity level of the competition, which was comprised of the top blind and visually impaired students in grades 10-12, from across the U.S. and Canada. She was awarded a \$5,000 savings bond and a trophy, and thanks to a generous donation from the Freedom Scientific Corporation, she also received a portable braille device called a PacMate—the world's first accessible pocket PC with a braille display—which is valued at more than \$7000. Her name will be forever engraved on a perpetual trophy at Braille Institute of America's headquarters in Los Angeles.

This year's participants competed in a series of challenging categories that required them to transcribe, type and read braille using a device called a Perkins Braille. The competition was designed to test their braille skills in several areas—reading comprehension, braille spelling, chart and graph reading, proofreading and braille speed and accuracy. The students were divided into five levels of competency based on their age and grade level. **Caitlin** placed among the top contestants in each age group. More than 300 blind students from across the United States and Canada completed preliminary

testing to qualify for the national competition. But only the top 60 students were selected to travel to Braille Institute's headquarters in Los Angeles to test their braille skills against the nation's best and brightest. The participants arrived in Los Angeles on June 23 for a weekend of activities, including a welcome party on the Universal Citywalk. The winners were announced at a special awards banquet held at the Sheraton Universal Hotel, adjacent to Universal Studios.

**Caitlin**, an avid braille reader and an outstanding student at San Ramon Valley High School, started learning to read braille at the tender age of 3 and hasn't slowed down since. Despite being one of the only blind students in her school, she has excelled academically. When she's not busy reading her favorite braille books, she spends her free time singing in the Contra Costa Children's Chorus. She also serves as a junior representative of the National Alliance of Blind Students and recently took a trip to Nebraska to speak to educators of the blind on behalf of the group. She is currently preparing to receive a guide dog and will be attending a training program at Guide Dogs for the Blind in San Rafael this summer. "I don't think you should underestimate a kid just because they're blind," said Caitlin's mom, Debbie. "Caitlin is such an energetic kid and she has an extremely positive attitude about life; she doesn't let anything stand in her way."

**The National Braille Challenge™**, sponsored by **Braille Institute of America**, was specifically designed to challenge and motivate blind students, while encouraging them to continue their study of braille. The competition also was created to promote braille literacy as the primary medium for children with visual impairments and serves to encourage blind students of all ages to fine-tune their braille reading skills, which will be their passport to independence in the sighted world. If you would like more information on winner **Caitlin Hernandez** or **the National Braille Challenge™**, please contact Courtney Goines, media relations manager, at (323) 663-1111, Ext. 3176.