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## HIGHLAND PARK MAN PROMOTES IBD

### His stamp of awareness

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When the Make-A-Wish Foundation granted Gideon Sofer one wish he narrowed his wish list down to three people he would like to meet: Bruce Springsteen, Michael J. Fox and Jack Potter.

Jack Potter?

John E. (Jack) Potter is the 72nd postmaster general of the United States, and when Sofer decided to meet him, to enlist him in his effort to dedicate a stamp to awareness of Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD), the person most surprised was Potter himself.

On May 25 they met in Potter's Washington office, and overnight Potter became a celebrity, if only in his own home. "He was quite flattered that he was the one person in the world (Sofer) wanted to meet. His children were impressed," said Mark Saunders, a spokesman for the U.S. Postal Service.

A 20-year-old resident of Highland Park, Sofer has spent a lifetime battling the effects of Crohn's Disease, an inflammation of the digestive tract. He founded Ibdcure.org Foundation International, an organization to promote education and research to help cure the family of diseases.

One of his missions is to convince the U.S. Postal Service to issue a stamp, raising awareness of IBD, as stamps have done for such health issues as breast cancer, AIDS and organ donation.

The day Sofer met Potter the Postal Service issued a 39-cent "Amber Alert" stamp, raising the awareness of the search for missing children.

Each year the Citizen's Stamp Advisory Committee receives tens of thousands of proposals, and whittles it down to about 20 new stamps every year.

Rep. Frank Pallone, D-6th Dist., who authored a House Resolution in support of Sofer's effort, said, "The stamp committee says 'no' 99 percent of the time, but it has met its match in Gideon."

Sofer, now enrolled in summer classes at the University of California at Berkeley, has promoted the idea on CNN, ABC News and National Public Radio. He has created a one-man speaker's bureau, under the banner: What It Means to Be Alive.

He has also received numerous awards for his activism. In 2003 he was named one of America's top 10 youth volunteers, accepting the Prudential Spirit of Community Award at the International Trade Center in Washington, D.C. He was selected from a field of 24,000 applicants.

It goes without saying he would trade all the attention for good health.

Since birth Sofer has had over 30 hospitalizations and five major surgeries. His most serious illness began three days after he graduated from Highland Park High School in 2003, sending him to the hospital for six months.

"The doctors never expected I would recover," said Sofer.

The admissions department at UC-Berkeley bent its rules to allow Sofer to enroll according to his own timing. The reason he enrolled there was because of UC-Berkeley's reputation for being accommodating to people with disabilities.

The first sign of the disease was observed when Sofer was 8 days old and his mother thought she saw molars in his mouth. What she saw were canker sores, and his battle with Crohn's Disease had begun. It is one of the family of IBD's, with no known cause or cure, affecting the digestive tract from the mouth to the rectum.

At one point Sofer's small intestine shrunk to the width of a needle, making the ingestion of a small amount of food or water painful, and growth difficult. At the age of 12 he weighed only 50 pounds. The use of human growth hormones has allowed him to grow to his present height of 5-foot-5 and "a little over 100 pounds."

His best years were during high school. Following his hospitalization in 2003 he came to recognize, "Things aren't going to be the way they used to be."

Discussing the disease is nearly as uncomfortable as suffering from it. "There's never a right time to talk about a digestive disease," said Sofer. Though given an opening Sofer is not shy about discussing it, nor is it likely he will slow down his effort to promote his idea of a stamp.