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Teen's letter to Obama comes from the heart

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(R) **Casey Mack**, 14, of Trumbull, is the only Connecticut youngster whose letter was chosen for "Dear President Obama: Letters of Hope from Children Across the Nation".

selections as they strived for geographical diversity, an assortment of concerns, or simply -- in this age of word processing -- visual appeal.

"In many cases, we reproduce it exactly as they sent it to us," Kluger explained.

But Casey's response, the only one chosen from Connecticut, made the book for its message. "It was a special letter to me, because it was at once heartbreaking and uplifting," Kluger said.

In it, Casey addresses both the issues of race and health insurance.

TRUMBULL -- The typical Trumbull eighth-grader usually doesn't have to deal with mean-spirited racial taunts, nor is he living with a difficult medical condition that severely restricts his diet. And the typical Trumbull eighth-grader certainly hasn't written a letter to the President of the United States that appears in a newly published book.

But those are among the experiences of 14-year-old **Casey Mack**, whose letter is one of 179 messages and drawings that appears in "Dear President Obama: Letters of Hope from Children Across America," compiled by New York writers Bruce Kluger and David Tabatsky.

Casey's letter was selected from among roughly 1,000 the authors received after they sent e-mails to friends and relatives throughout the country shortly after the November election, looking for letters from children that would convey a sense of what they hoped for from their new leader.

And with the initial contacts spreading the word, the authors quickly had more choices before them than they ever anticipated. "There was sort of this infectious daisy chain," Kluger explained in a telephone interview. Soon, he and Tabatsky were sorting through the responses, making the final

"I was very happy to see that someone who looks like me can be President of the United States of America. I have had some hard times at my school during the election," Casey wrote.

Like Obama, the son of a white mother and black father, Casey described how he stood up for the biracial candidate during the fall campaign, when some schoolmates attacked him by calling him terms such as "monkey." But when Casey -- who actually looks more Hispanic -- revealed his similar background to people, they called him the names, too.

"I went to my teachers who helped me find a solution," he wrote.

Perhaps even more challenging has been coping with his own needs stemming from the repercussions of a childhood viral infection, including the digestive difficulty known as interstitial cystitis. He was in and out of hospitals until he was 11, and is on an extremely restricted diet that limits his liquid intake to just water and prevents him from eating all but a few select fruits. Almost immediately after he first took sick, his brother Riley, now 8, was diagnosed with brain tumors.

Their single mother, Donna, said the double medical whammy left the family destitute and forced her to leave her teaching job. Eager to rebuild her shattered finances, she said, she targeted Connecticut because it was one of just three states where she could obtain low-income children's health insurance on a sliding scale -- rather than be cut off completely -- and was close to some family in New York. She chose Trumbull 2 1/2 years ago because she wanted a good special education setting for Riley, who suffers regular seizures despite past surgery, and praised the school system for addressing her sons' needs. Still, both boys miss their family and friends in Florida.

Despite his challenges, Casey said he's a good student. He enjoys sports -- soccer, basketball and Babe Ruth baseball -- and plays saxophone in school. At present, he's thinking of a career in architecture because he loves to build things. He said Obama's success has shown him that he doesn't have limits.

"I believe that anything is possible as long as you try hard to accomplish it," he said.

More information on "Dear President Obama: Letters of Hope from Children Across America" is available at www.obamakids.us



Casey Mack, 14, of Trumbull, right, is the only Connecticut youngster whose letter was chosen for "Dear President Obama: Letters of Hope from Children Across America." Mack wrote the letter about his and the family's difficulties having moved from Miami with his mother Donna, center, and his younger brother Riley, 8, left, so they could have healthcare coverage.